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Informational interview

Kentucky Archaeology series

WPA Archaeology

Interviewee: Dr. Lathel Duffield

Interviewer: Tom Law, Producer

Comments paraphrased by Tom Law during telephone conversation on May 30, 2000.

What was the primary motivation behind WPA archaeology in Kentucky?

WPA archaeology was a national program to combat poverty and the impact of the Great Depression. The WPA or federal government needed projects that created work and funds, but did not compete with existing labor markets or goods. Archaeology was a perfect WPA project for rural communities. It gave people work and the end product was the advancement of science. WPA archaeology laborers had a limited amount of time. They could only work a certain number of days in order to spread the work and pay around.

Why was Webb chosen to lead WPA archaeology in Kentucky?

Webb was a physics professor who pursued archaeology as a hobby. He conducted some field work and sent out a survey – a questionnaire – to locate archaeological sites through the state. He was the only person at the University of Kentucky knowledgeable enough to start such a large project. Fortunately, Webb was also a fantastic organizer and shrewd politician within the University of Kentucky.

Kentucky seemed to get a lion's share of WPA archaeology funds in comparison to other states in the Ohio Valley. Do you agree? Why?

I think Kentucky benefited more because of the amount of unemployment in the state. The extent of WPA archaeology in Kentucky is similar to that of Oklahoma where there were large-scale excavations of sites such as Spiro Mound. Oklahoma also had large numbers of unemployed.

What made Webb's approach to site excavations better than previous archaeology in Kentucky?

Scientific standards in archaeology were coming of age across the U.S. in the 1930s, led by the work of _____ Cole at the University of Chicago. The Southeastern Archaeological conference also helped refine scientific standards and served as an important forum for the exchange of procedures and forms. Very few archaeologists had any expertise. Webb was greatly aided by the standards of Cole and his interaction with archaeologists at the Southeastern Archaeological conference(s).

What was that relationship during WPA archaeology between Kentucky archaeologist and American Indian tribes from this region now based in Oklahoma?

There was almost no relationship. Archaeologists in Kentucky rarely talked with American Indians from woodland tribes so there was very little response or no response from the tribes on the excavation of sites in Kentucky. The tribes may not have known about the WPA projects in Kentucky.

From my own experience in Oklahoma, the local Cado tribe was very excited and interested in the excavations of Spiro Mound – a WPA archaeology project – because it showed the sophistication of their history and culture.

What was the impact of World War II on WPA archaeology in Kentucky?

All funding and fieldwork stopped immediately in Kentucky and nationally. Even the laboratories were shut down. In some cases, archaeologists didn't even have people to take stuff [archaeological materials] off the worktables.

What is the legacy of WPA archaeology in Kentucky?

The WPA projects gave us a great deal of information about cultural complexes, from the shell middens of Western Kentucky to the Adena mounds of central Kentucky. This information really showed the incredible diversity of ancient Indian cultures in Kentucky.

The only problem with the data and interpretation was that scholars were trying to fit everything into a 5,000 year time period, which at that time was thought to be the total time frame of prehistoric American Indian occupation. That was before the advent of radio carbon 14 dating, which gave more precise dating and nearly doubled the total time frame.

Webb and his colleagues were working with a limited framework. There was not enough time between the Adena and Hopewell. But it was very exciting to – not enough time between Adena and Hopewell. With Carbon 14 it was very exciting to see that Adena culture proceeded the Hopewell culture. That was a very exciting time.

WPA archaeology gave tremendous impetus to the establishment of departments of anthropology at universities across the U.S. The WPA collections were huge and needed an enormous amount of work and analysis in such places as the University of Kentucky. WPA projects had a major impact on the academic world.

From your experience, what is the range of opinions within contemporary American Indian tribes about the legacy of WPA archaeology?

There is not one monolithic perspective among American Indians on this or any other issue. Opinions differ from tribe to tribe and individual to individual on a case-by-case basis. Many tribes have established cultural assessment committees and are creating culture centers and museums to display non-sacred artifacts or burial goods from WPA collections. For example, at Etowah Mounds in Georgia the Cherokee and Creeks are sharing access and ownership - a shift in the title of property.

What can archaeologists learn from WPA archaeology?

The value of WPA archaeology is the collections that have been accumulated, but not completed analyzed. We may apply new techniques and procedures to learn so much more than before. There

is tremendous research potential for such subjects as the Green River Mounds. In my opinion, I'm concerned about the practice of re-burials [due to NAGPRA] because of the loss of such valuable scientific information.

For example, Louise Robinson and I have been studying population densities during Kentucky's Fort Ancient culture. Many Fort Ancient burials contained people with diseases - 40% in one area. Often trace elements such as manganese are missing. Perhaps because of too much phosphorous, which inhibits the uptake of manganese. This led to such diseases as osteoporosis. That's important information for us to use today.