

Author's Commentary on "The Case of the Over Eager Collaborator"

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Archaeology differs from most social and behavioral sciences in that living peoples are often not the direct subjects of archaeological research, particularly when dealing with the past in North America before European contact. However, as recent research in the field and this case both demonstrate, archaeologists often must negotiate between several groups of living peoples in order to complete their research in what is becoming an increasingly complex political landscape. Substantial research has gone into exploring the relationship between archaeologists and Native Americans who are the living descendants of the people archaeologists study (Dongoske et al., eds. 2000; Swidler et al., eds. 1997). While this relationship plays a role in this case study, the main focus is the broader relationship between archaeologists and other groups that have an interest in the past, also called stakeholders in archaeological research.

Every archaeological project has to deal with multiple stakeholders who have varying levels of power and authority over the research itself. A typical project run by a professor at an American university may have several stakeholders, including the granting agency that provided the funding for the project, the land managing agency or landowner who owns the land upon which the research will be conducted, the university the professor works for, the facility in which the artifacts, notes, and reports from the project will be curated, the Native American groups who claim cultural affiliation with the area of study, the communities local to the area of study, and the archaeologist who is conducting the research. Some of the relationships between these stakeholders and the archaeological research are codified in law; for example, land managing agencies will only allow research after legally required permits are obtained. Other relationships are not quite as formalized, such as the relationship between archaeologists and the archaeological record. While archaeologists do have some legal responsibilities to the archaeological record under state and federal permitting requirements, archaeologists are mostly guided

by several codes of ethics developed by professional societies in the discipline (American Anthropological Association 2005; Register of Professional Archaeologists 2005; Society for American Archaeology 2005; World Archaeological Congress 2005). For the most part, these codes of ethics do not explicitly prohibit specific actions, but instead attempt to encourage archaeologists to think and act responsibly towards the archaeological record.

The Society for American Archaeology's Principles of Archaeological Ethics is probably referred to the most often when dealing with ethical dilemmas in archaeological research. However, one of the main pitfalls of the Principles of Archaeological Ethics is the assumption that the scientific value of archaeological research takes precedence over all other ways in which the archaeological record can be valued. In the case presented here, this system that values archaeological research for its scientific value, under which the protagonist, Millie, operates is pitted directly against other value systems that emphasize the commercial value of artifacts and the less tangible connections that landowners and communities feel to the past through the archaeological record. Most if not all archaeologists would argue that the scientific value of the archaeological record far outweighs the commercial value, but archaeologists often falter when trying to explain why this is the case to other stakeholders, especially in a way that resonates with the general public.

The situation presented in this case is challenging, as all potential courses of action have negative consequences. Clearly, Millie initiated her research alongside an effort to educate the local community and the owners of archaeological sites about why archaeologists value the scientific research potential of the archaeological record in order to prevent pothunting from occurring on the archaeological sites in her study area. However, it is less clear whether Millie adequately took into account other ways that people, specifically landowners, value archaeology. The landowner in this case had an obvious interest in learning more about the archaeological record, but may have felt that the best way for him to learn was to have a tangible link to the past through artifacts from a site. Situations like this one are not uncommon in archaeological research, and archaeologists should carefully consider their actions and try to effectively take preventative measures to avoid such value conflicts in their own research.

References

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