

# A

## American Pioneers and Traditions

David M. Carballo

Department of Archaeology, Boston University,  
Boston, MA, USA

### Introduction

The Americanist tradition of archaeology is defined by cross-cultural comparative research that draws heavily on an innovative tradition of regional-scale fieldwork (Willey and Phillips 2001[1958]; Willey and Sabloff 1980). Many early pioneers worked in multiple culture areas of the Americas, seeking direct connections between the archaeological record and living or historical indigenous peoples, and fostering close ties with anthropology as a result. This brief overview covers seminal developments in stratigraphic excavation, regional survey, and other field methods within their historical and geographic context.

### Definition

Pioneering archaeological efforts across the globe are often lauded for their early attention to stratigraphy and the association of geological or cultural strata with change in human societies over time. In the Americas, as in other parts of the globe, such attention was often the result of nonsystematic

excavations into mounds of anthropomorphic origin. This was the case along Peru's arid coast, where immediately following the conquest Spaniards began excavating in adobe temples (known as *huacas*) in search of gold left by pre-Inca cultures such as the Moche and Chimú. A couple centuries later, a few early naturalists and proto-archaeologists began defining construction layers within such structures. A notable effort is part of a nine-volume record of the natural and cultural history of the region surrounding Trujillo, Peru, by its bishop, Baltasar Jaime Martínez Compañón, compiled in the mid to late eighteenth century (Pillsbury and Trever 2008). Among remarkable watercolors and line illustrations of site maps, structures, and artifacts is a rendering of a labeled stratigraphic cut through Huaca Tantalluc, located near Cajamarca. It was made in 1765 by one of Martínez Compañón's predecessors, the magistrate Miguel Feyjoo, following a Spanish Bourbon dynasty mandate to explore and document its provinces. It may represent the first stratigraphic archaeological illustration in the Americas, before Thomas Jefferson's more widely known efforts in the US. Jefferson's excavation was undertaken in the 1770s or 1780s, with 1783–1784 being likely, and involved trenching through a burial mound near Monticello to understand its composition and correctly attribute its builders to the ancestors of the native peoples of the region (Milner 2004). Yet it took the systematic works of nineteenth-century scholars such as E. G. Squier, Edwin Davis, and Cyrus Thomas to

completely dispel the “myth of the moundbuilders,” which through prejudice and ignorance held that mounds of the eastern USA were built by peoples other than Native Americans.

Though pioneering, the attention to stratigraphy of a Feyjoo or Jefferson would not match our contemporary understanding of stratigraphic excavation. This began in the Americas in the early twentieth century, some two decades after its initial development in Europe, but then quickly became part of standard archaeological practice. The stratigraphy of the Emeryville shellmound, near San Francisco, was explored by the German archaeologist Max Uhle in 1902 and by the American Nels Nelson in 1906 (Nelson 1909; Uhle 1907). The Mexican archaeologist Manuel Gamio was a foundational figure in Mesoamerican archaeology and may be seen as the first person to link stratigraphic levels to cultural materials in developing a regional chronological sequence. Together with Franz Boas, his graduate advisor at Columbia University, Gamio developed a chronological sequence for Central Mexico in 1911 (Gamio et al. 1921). This work involved ceramic collections at six sites surrounding Mexico City and Gamio’s excavation of nearly six meters of superimposed cultural layers at Azcapotzalco. Two years later, Nelson participated in stratigraphic excavations at the Palaeolithic cave site Cueva de El Castillo, Spain, and returned to New Mexico convinced of the importance of the methodologies he learned there, which he then applied to Southwestern archaeology through his work in the Galisteo Basin (Nelson 1914). The pace of stratigraphic work in these culture areas accelerated rapidly and spread elsewhere. Direct successors within these two regions include George Vaillant’s excavations of nine Central Mexican sites, while a curator at the American Museum of Natural History, and Alfred Kidder’s 15 years of investigations at Pecos Pueblo, sponsored by the Peabody Museums of Harvard University and of Phillips Academy (e.g., Kidder 1924; Vaillant 1937). Both projects were critical for establishing cultural sequences and served as benchmarks for future excavations in Mesoamerica and the Southwest.

Part of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal put Americans back to work during the Great Depression by offering jobs as laborers on archaeological survey and excavation crews led by trained professionals (Fagette 2008; Lyon 1996). This boon to US archaeological research resulted in investigations in 36 states and included the widespread adoption of methods such as excavation by horizontal stripping, spraying sediments for better visibility of features and strata, plotting the post molds and pit features of perishable structures (Fig. 1), and the circulation of manuals on field and lab methods. New Deal archaeology also saw the professionalization of historical archaeology in the USA. Whereas earlier excavations had focused primarily on architectural restoration, J. C. Harrington’s 1934–1941 investigations at Jamestown, Virginia, included excavations targeted especially at areas lacking architecture in order to document the ditches and fence lines that defined property boundaries, and the collection of all artifacts with special attention to context (e.g., Harrington 1955). Several pioneering women in archaeology also began their careers around this time (see Claassen 1994), including Elizabeth W. Crozer Campbell, who studied California desert cultures while at the Southwest Museum; Hannah Marie Wormington, who made significant contributions to Paleoindian research and was the first woman elected president of the Society for American Archaeology; and Betty Meggers, whose research in South America ranged widely during a long career at the Smithsonian Institution.

Gordon Willey (Fig. 2) launched the field of regional archaeology (aka landscape archaeology) with his 1946 survey of Peru’s Virú Valley while working for the Smithsonian Institutions’ Bureau of American Ethnology (Willey 1953), followed by over two decades of settlement research in Central America and Mesoamerica. His work transformed global archaeology by demonstrating that sites cannot be understood in isolation, nor should archaeologists focus exclusively on large or architecturally conspicuous sites; rather sites must be viewed holistically, as parts of ecological and cultural landscapes. Field methods in the Virú Valley included the production of site maps from

**American Pioneers and Traditions, Fig. 1** WPA trowelmen at work, Thompson Village Site, Tennessee. Image courtesy of the Frank H. McClung Museum, University of Tennessee (62HY5[B])



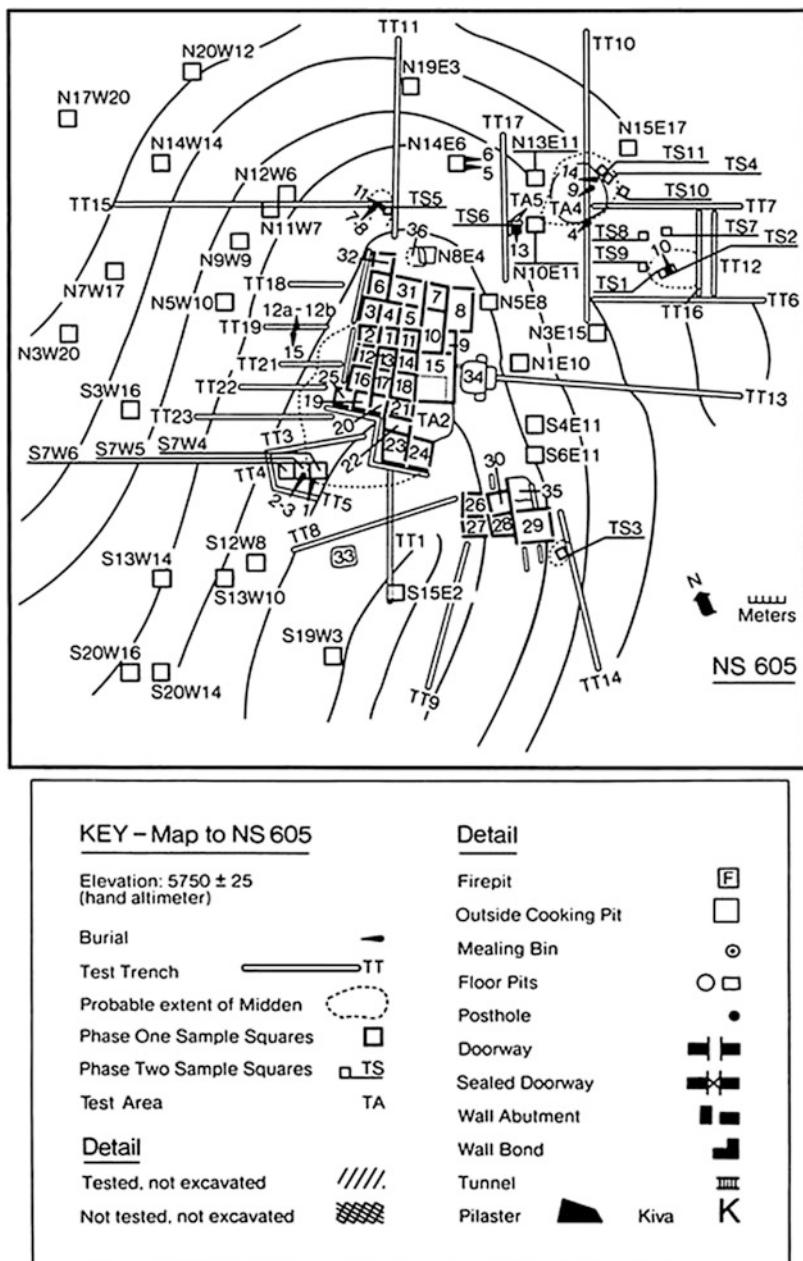
**American Pioneers and Traditions,  
Fig. 2** Gordon Willey at Tula, Mexico. Gordon Willey Slide Archive, courtesy of William L. Fash



aerial photos, “ground-truthing” these maps in the field using a compass and measuring chains, recording details of site setting and architecture, and plotting all sites on a valley map made by the geographer F. W. McBryde. In North America, Willey’s long-time collaborator Philip Phillips developed a similar approach during his 1940–1947 survey of the Lower Mississippi Valley, undertaken with James Griffin and James Ford, the latter of whom worked with Willey in Virú (Phillips et al. 1951). The greater use of test

pits in the Mississippi Valley reflects the differences in surface cover and visibility between the arid coast of Peru and temperate woodlands of the eastern USA, and full test pits or shovel test pits are much more common in surveys of densely vegetated regions of the Americas such as the Eastern Woodlands, Maya Lowlands, and Amazon Basin, compared to drier regions of western North America, and the highlands of Mesoamerica and the Andes.

**American Pioneers and Traditions, Fig. 3** Site sampling by squares and trenches at the Joint Site Pueblo, Arizona (Hanson and Schiffer 1975: Fig. 5). Image courtesy of the Field Museum



The regionally oriented and stratigraphically deep research of Stuart Struever in the Lower Illinois Valley during the 1960s was highly influential for its use of multiscale sampling strategies (within sites, ecozones, and regions) and of flotation as a means of recovering small ecofacts and artifacts (e.g., Struever 1968, 1971). Field sampling methods were further developed by projects

such as the Chevelon Archaeological Research Project, directed by Fred Plog (1974), the New Survey of the Southwest Archaeological Expedition of the Field Museum (e.g., Hanson and Schiffer 1975), and the Prehistory and Human Ecology in the Valley of Oaxaca Project, directed by Kent Flannery (1976) and later codirected with Joyce Marcus. These projects emphasized the

importance of some element of randomness in the placement of test units in order to minimize biases based on initial assumptions of the patterning of subsurface remains and to derive statistically significant samples upon which to build social interpretations. The choice of squares or trenches as sample units might be determined by the depth of deposits – as was done by Flannery and colleagues, who found trenches to be more efficient for deep sites in Oaxaca, thereby avoiding “telephone booth” style pits – or the strategies could be integrated at the same site, as was done by Hanson and Schiffer at the Joint Site Pueblo (Fig. 3).

### **Key Issues/Current Debates/Future Directions/Examples**

The Americanist tradition of cross-cultural comparison drawing on regional archaeological datasets is exemplified by work such as Flannery's and by Robert McC. Adams's (1966) comparative study of urbanization in Mesopotamia and Mesoamerica. Building on this base of pioneering researchers, methods in American archaeology continue to develop, today increasingly incorporating new geospatial technologies and material sciences in the field. This is not only true of archaeology sponsored by universities and museums but also of Cultural-Resource Management (CRM), which is currently the public face of archaeology and the largest employer of archaeologists in the USA.

### **Cross-References**

- [Archaeology in the Enlightenment](#)
- [Binford, Lewis \(Theory\)](#)
- [Cultural Heritage Management and Native Americans](#)
- [Early Excavations Around the Globe](#)
- [Excavation Methods in Archaeology](#)
- [Flannery, Kent](#)
- [Gamio Martinez, Manuel](#)
- [Historic Jamestowne](#)
- [Indigenous Archaeology: North American Perspective](#)

- [Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act \(NAGPRA\), USA](#)
- [North American Standard Classification: Strengths and Weaknesses](#)
- [Schiffer, Michael Brian \(Theory\)](#)
- [Society for American Archaeology \(SAA\)](#)
- [Stratigraphy in Archaeology: A Brief History](#)
- [Surface Survey: Method and Strategies](#)
- [US National Park Service and World Heritage](#)
- [Uhle, Max](#)
- [Willey, Gordon](#)

### **References**

- Adams, R.M. 1966. *The evolution of urban society: Early Mesopotamia and prehispanic Mexico*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Claassen, C., ed. 1994. *Women in archaeology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Fayette, P. 2008. *Digging for dollars: American archaeology and the new deal*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Flannery, K.V., ed. 1976. *The early Mesoamerican village*. New York: Academic.
- Gamio, M., A. Best, and F. Boas. 1921. *Álbum de colecciones arqueológicas*. Mexico City: Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Historia y Etnografía.
- Hanson, J.A., and M.B. Schiffer. 1975. The joint site – A preliminary report. In *Fieldiana. Anthropology*, Vol. 65, Chapters in the prehistory of Eastern Arizona, IV, 47–91. Chicago: The Field Museum.
- Harrington, J.C. 1955. Archeology as an auxiliary science to American history. *American Anthropologist* 57 (6): 1121–1130.
- Kidder, A.V. 1924. *An introduction to the study of Southwestern archaeology with a preliminary account of the excavations at Pecos and a summary of Southwestern archaeology today*. New Haven/Andover: Yale University Press/Phillips Academy.
- Lyon, E.A. 1996. *A new deal for Southeastern archaeology*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.
- Milner, G.R. 2004. *The moundbuilders: Ancient peoples of eastern North America*. New York: Thames and Hudson.
- Nelson, N.C. 1909. Shellmounds of the San Francisco Bay region. *University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology* 7 (4): 319–348.
- Nelson, N.C. 1914. *Pueblo ruins of the Galisteo Basin, New Mexico*, Anthropological papers 15. Vol. 1. New York: American Museum of Natural History.
- Phillips, P., J.A. Ford, and J.B. Griffin. 1951. *Archaeological survey in the lower Mississippi alluvial valley, 1940–47*, Papers of the Peabody Museum. Vol. 25. Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum.

- Pillsbury, J., and L. Trever. 2008. The king, the bishop, and the creation of an American antiquity. *Ñawpa Pacha: Journal of Andean Archaeology* 29: 191–219.
- Plog, F.T. 1974. *The study of prehistoric change*. New York: Academic.
- Struever, S. 1968. Flotation techniques for the recovery of small-scale archaeological remains. *American Antiquity* 33 (3): 353–362.
- Struever, S. 1971. Comments on archaeological data requirements and research strategy. *American Antiquity* 36 (1): 9–19.
- Uhle, M. 1907. The Emeryville shellmound. *University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnography* 7 (1): 1–106.
- Vaillant, G.C. 1937. History and stratigraphy in the valley of Mexico. *Scientific Monthly* 44: 307–324.
- Willey, G.R. 1953. *Prehistoric settlement patterns in the Virú Valley, Peru*, Bureau of American Ethnology. Bulletin 155. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution.
- Willey, G.R., and P. Phillips. 2001[1958]. Introduction. In *Method and theory in American archaeology*, ed. R.-L. Lyman and M.J. O'Brien. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.
- Willey, G.R., and J.A. Sabloff. 1980. *A history of American archaeology*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: W.H. Freeman.