

# THE VALUE OF NON-ACADEMIC ARCHAEOLOGY

July 24, 2015    ArchaeoAD    Commercial Archaeology, Explore Posts, Public Archaeology    Commercial archaeology, CRM, transportation archaeology

I'm a PhD candidate at a major research university. I'll be defending my NSF-funded dissertation this fall and – finally! – graduating with that long-sought doctorate. And like most freshly-minted PhDs, I'll be navigating the job market over the coming months and hoping for validation of the blood, sweat, and years I've put into earning this degree. But unlike many of my colleagues, I got my start in cultural heritage management (CRM) archaeology, and I currently work for my state government as a transportation archaeologist. This post is all about why the non-academic, contract-based (but still professional!) work – the sensitivity assessments, the pre-construction field surveys, the endless negotiations with engineers, developers, land owners, and bureaucrats, and the reports (oh, the reports!) – is every bit as important to our field as the comparatively glamorous work of research-focused archaeology (which, I won't hesitate to admit, has the potential to be a lot more exciting a lot more often).

First of all, CRM exists for a very good reason – the National Heritage Preservation Act (1966) and the Archaeological Resources Protection Act (1979) were both enacted in recognition of the fact archaeological and cultural resources are put at risk whenever developments (new construction, re-alignment or renovation of existing infrastructure, etc.) occur. CRM firms, and state and federal archaeology programs, fulfill the mandate of those acts to protect tangible and intangible cultural resources in the face of development.

Beyond this well-known reason, though, lies another facet of non-academic (or “mitigation”) archaeology: it's inherently public. Public archaeology, as a practice within academia, has gained increasing attention of late for its engagement of local communities, its usefulness as a “face” for our discipline, and its contribution of alternative perspectives on both history and prehistory. It is, in part, the answer to the complaint that academics only talk to each other. Federally-mandated professional mitigation archaeology, on the other hand, has always been outward-facing. Those endless negotiations with engineers, developers, land owners, and bureaucrats – taxing as they can be – mean we are constantly talking about what we do and why we do it to non-archaeologists of many stripes.

As a transportation archaeologist, I might get sent anywhere in the state for any number of kinds of projects, I have to be ready to interface with construction workers, residents of soon-to-be-developed land (who may be soon forced out of their homes), tribal representatives, fellow state employees, curious passers-by, you name it. My job description might not state, per se, that I am required to “sell” the value of archaeology to anyone, but it's built in to what I do. And beyond just acting as (hopefully) good PR for our discipline, I get to hear what non-archaeologists think of our work and of the past that we study. I don't always want to hear person X's theory on why aliens built the pyramids (ugh) – but I never get tired of being told how fascinating the past is. I never get bored with being reminded of how unusual and how extraordinary an archaeologist's work is. More importantly, I get to be a part of cross-disciplinary dialogue, even if on a small scale. And if there's one thing I never tire of, it's talking to people about archaeology.