Independent Study: Savannah River Site Internship

This summer, I completed a two-month long internship with the Savannah River Site doing field work in archaeology. Prior to this, I had completed several anthropology courses and a few in archaeology (Archaeology & Underwater Archaeology) but had little hands-on experience with any kind of fieldwork. My only previous experience doing archaeological fieldwork came from a day of job shadowing in my sophomore year of high school, where I shadowed a family friend on an ongoing dig just outside of Columbia, South Carolina. While I did not plan on going into archaeology after that day, it piqued my interest in learning more about what archaeologists do on a day-to-day basis, especially since my archaeological knowledge at that point was limited; all the information I had on archaeology in early high school came from talking about it with my mother, who majored in anthropology in college, and watching *Indiana Jones.* Thankfully, that family friend now works for the Savannah River Archaeological Research Program and provided me the opportunity to be an intern and temporary field crew member for the program this summer. Through this, I gained important skills that I can utilize in future careers and learned what being an archaeologist is truly like.

Savannah River Site

The Savannah River Site (SRS) was created in the 1950s to house facilities and reactors that produced materials used in nuclear weapons. Today, it is owned by the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) and is primarily used for nuclear waste disposal, waste management, and development of environmental safety technologies. It covers over 300 square miles in the counties of Aiken, Barnwell, and Allendale in South Carolina, and because of its massive size and proximity to the Savannah River, many archaeological sites, both prehistoric Native American and historic, exist within its borders. To ensure that SRS follows federal

archaeological laws and properly protects and documents archeological sites on its land, the Savannah River Archaeological Research Program (SRARP) was created in the 1970s and works continuously with SRS and the U.S. Forest Service's Savannah River sector on land use projects. Survey areas for the SRARP include areas where SRS plans to complete a project that will alter the physical land in some way, areas where logging activities are planned to occur, or areas where there are pre-existing archaeological sites that require revisiting.

Internship Overview & Field Crew

My primary role during my time at SRARP was being a member of the field crew. When I started, there were only two permanent members of the field crew, but about halfway through my internship, another intern joined to make a field crew of four on the two days per week that we both worked. The field crew's focus depended on the day, but we would typically complete archaeological surveys on log decks (areas intended for logging activities) or larger archaeological sites. Each morning, we would spend time preparing any necessary equipment for fieldwork, reviewing the projects we had to work on that day, and then traveling around SRS to the designated survey areas. While we were in the field, we would sometimes spend a full afternoon working on one site, while other days we would drive to several different log decks for survey. The environments and soil types we studied in varied greatly, ranging from dense, rainy forests with compact clay soil to open fields with sandy soil and extreme heat. The environment often impacted the amount of work we could do in a day, the depth of our shovel tests, and the artifacts we could recover for each site. Even though the full workday lasted from 8:00am to 4:00pm, we were usually only in the field from 9:00am to 2:30pm or less depending on the weather and how far away the survey area was from the SRARP office. After we left the field, we would spend any remaining time at work updating maps, filling out site forms, and washing

artifacts. Other than the field crew, there were also several curators and other archaeologists within the office that directed or assisted with our survey work.

Sites Studied

In the weeks that I worked this summer, around half of the time we studied log decks and smaller survey areas, and the other half we spent working on larger sites. The site we spent the most time on was 38AK0106, an existing prehistoric archaeological site discovered by an earlier SRARP field crew. The current field crew was tasked with revisiting the site because SRS was planning a project on the land, and it ended up requiring over 300 new shovel tests due to the high volume of artifacts still concentrated there, even after the initial survey and excavations done several decades ago. Another site we worked on titled 38BR1348 was also surveyed because of a planned SRS project, this time a fence-building project, but this site was accidentally discovered while we were doing shovel tests along the fence line. The discovery of the site required us to halt our progress on the project, but since it was small, we were able to quickly survey the area and continue moving forward once we stopped having positive shovel tests. The last major site, which never got an official site number in my time there, was discovered while testing log decks and covered significantly more area than we initially expected; though, its presence was unsurprising when we looked into the location and saw there were two existing sites nearby. It was also the most difficult site of the three to do shovel tests on, as the soil consisted mostly of wet clay and the vegetation was incredibly dense, both of which contributed to us eventually stopping our survey there. Working on these three sites, although they took up a large portion of my internship, allowed me to get valuable experience working on larger projects in varying environments.

Skills

My internship with SRARP both improved my basic archaeological fieldwork and observation skills and allowed me to gain entirely new skills. Most of the new skills I gained were a part of the day-to-day fieldwork and survey process, primarily the ability to mark, complete, and analyze shovel tests. This process included creating and putting up tags listing the location and number of each shovel test, digging to the proper width and depth, sifting through the soil to locate artifacts, and listing the details of each shovel test in a field notebook. Any artifacts found in a shovel test had to be categorized in the field and recorded in my field notebook with information on what type of artifacts were found, at what test and depth they were found, and whether they were historic or prehistoric. That information also had to be listed on paper tags that were kept in the artifact bags later brought back to the office. Through both the fieldwork and the teaching sessions we had on days we couldn't go into the field, I also learned a lot about commonly found artifacts at both prehistoric and historic archaeological sites, how to differentiate them, and which of their characteristics were archaeologically significant.

Another essential part of the internship was being able to navigate within and between sites. I learned how to navigate using various methods, including compasses, paper maps of SRS, digital maps on Avenza Maps, and a Trimble handheld. While surveying, I often alternated between using a compass and the Trimble to space out shovel tests; I also used the Trimble to digitally record each shovel test's location so that the information could be uploaded to SRARP's ArcGIS data system. I used paper and digital maps in situations where the Trimble or compass were not convenient, especially when directing the team to and between sites. Navigation was also important for completing shovel tests, as we had to map out the test locations in relation to one another in our notebooks, which required using the compasses along with pacing techniques

to properly space out the tests and constantly updating our location and progress in the Trimble. For larger sites, we would typically map out each shovel test in our notebooks first, and then create and update a full, more detailed site map after returning to the office. While at the office, we'd also fill out transect and delineation forms for each site with information on the shovel tests completed there before cleaning and organizing any artifacts found in the field that day, all of which I learned how to do during my internship.

Reflection & Career Intentions

Although I gained useful, tangible skills from this internship, the way it altered my career intentions affected me the most. Going into the internship, I was looking forward to working in the field and getting hands-on experience in archaeology. However, even though I didn't mind working in nature or surveying sites, it quickly became physically demanding to a point where I often had to sit down and take medication just to get through the workday due to my arthritis flaring up. This made the work less enjoyable and forced me to stop helping with the shovel tests towards the end of my internship, making me realize that even though I enjoy archaeology, doing fieldwork wouldn't be sustainable for me long-term due to my physical limitations. I also found myself enjoying the more tedious work of cleaning, identifying, and categorizing artifacts rather than the fieldwork. Because of this, I could see myself going into curatorship and/or working in a museum setting so that I could still study archaeology and work with artifacts without the risk of worsening my physical health. Museum studies and curatorship also fit my personality more and would allow me to specialize in a certain culture or field of study such as linguistics or Native American studies. I am currently looking into doing an internship at a museum this summer to hopefully discover if curatorship is the right career path for me or not, much like I did with this internship.

References

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