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Introduction

The Archaeology of Academia

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Some years ago, when I was an undergraduate at the University of Florida, an article appeared in the campus newspaper, the \textit{Alligator}, announcing the discovery of two large anchors lying beneath the shrubbery surrounding one of the older buildings. Apparently no one had known of their existence at the time, and the appearance of these large and rather conspicuous artifacts seemed as unexpected as the unearthing of an Egyptian tomb. Within a day’s time an explanation arose. The anchors had been placed there in association with the building’s former use, and, perhaps because their size made them too difficult to move, they disappeared beneath the fast-growing subtropical vegetation. And that was that: consultation with knowledgeable authorities had revealed a logical explanation for a misplaced assemblage belonging to the recent archaeological record. But the mystery surrounding this accidental discovery has a significance beyond this minor lapse of memory. Its occurrence speaks to a larger phenomenon that is far from unique to this time or place: the absent, or at least the unconsciously suppressed, collective memory of institutional histories and the resulting ignorance of their past.

I suspect that those of us who have attended large institutions of higher learning since the 1960s have at one time or another felt ourselves swallowed up by the enormity of an organization that seems not only anonymous but timeless as well: a place with no past, no future—only an uncertain and sometimes anxious present that revolves around courses and activities in the here and now. Each class is different; each term is separate; people come and go. Only after we have been there a while do we find formal and informal groups with whom we share interests and among whom we feel comfortable. Devoted to service, social activities, or discipline-based interests, these organizations form the basis of our social networks during our residence and often afterward. As satisfying as these associations may be, they do not seem
to bring about a similar connection with the larger academic institution; nor do they provoke a knowledge of its history. When we acknowledge that such a collegiate past exists, it is usually portrayed in vague, distorted terms: as a false, almost Disney-like reality, populated by peculiar objects and quaint people associated with events that are far removed from our own experience with which we find it difficult if not impossible to identify.

Why does this perception prevail? What is it about a university that isolates its residents from their institutional past? Perhaps this derives from the transiency of our presence and the perception that we are here only as a step on the way to a future somewhere else. Or maybe the rapid expansion and diversification of university programs and the growth of their physical infrastructure in the last half of the twentieth century made their earlier existence and the material things associated with it irrelevant to those who had no connection with them. It seems that the past of the university is often only the past that we remember, not the past belonging to those who came before us.

Our reticence to inquire into the pasts of large academic institutions may also be derived from the manner in which they are represented in popular culture. Colleges, universities, and secondary schools have long been the setting for popular fiction, and images from novels, movies, and television programs have shaped our notions about academic life and the people, activities, and traditions associated with them. We are all familiar with portrayals as varied as Tom Brown’s Schooldays, The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis, The Paper Chase, and National Lampoon’s Animal House. As comforting or unsatisfying as we may find them, these stories, like our own experiences, are set in time. They are tales of people, not of places; the institution more often than not provides a static and sometime stereotyped setting, a backdrop for more important actors. In themselves, schools do not seem to be that interesting.

Despite the general lack of awareness of institutional history, the collection of information about the academy’s past has not been neglected by scholars and other writers of nonfiction. Most colleges and universities have been the subject of one or more official histories detailing their progressive growth, celebrated events, the development of programs and policies, and the influence and accomplishments of notable people associated with the institution. Often they are handsomely published volumes, released with a great fanfare; yet they seldom become best-sellers. Perhaps their lack of wide popularity lies partly in the nature of the phenomenon they set out to examine. Institutional histories are not accounts of attempts to achieve simple, straight-
forward, clearly defined goals, such as winning an athletic contest. Instead, they offer an encyclopedic account of the unfolding of many concurrent and intertwined efforts whose course is difficult to follow; consequently they fail to capture and maintain the attention of readers. These efforts directed at multiple goals lack the excitement of sport, and their successes are often difficult to recognize. Therefore the achievements of institutional endeavors frequently go unnoticed; the results derived from them are taken for granted and remain unappreciated. Although unsung, these achievements are worthy of note. Identifying them and explaining their significance, however, requires that their stories be told in a manner that will allow us to recognize and showcase the elements that shaped the course of academic institutions within the anonymous complexity of the organizations. Such an approach should attempt to construct integrated topical analyses that focus on the roles of key institutional elements relative to issues whose importance extends beyond their boundaries.

Investigating academia’s past requires more than an account of policies, personalities, and places. If we are to understand an institution’s development, we cannot examine these elements by themselves. They can be approached only as components of larger phenomena that serve as topics that evoke questions. Exploring such questions requires that we recognize the place of the research topic within the broader institutional milieu and be aware of those processes that affect it. In addition, it is also imperative that we acknowledge the physical structure in which all the activities of the institution take place. It forms a larger spatial context that is more than just the place where events occurred. It is also a record of the activities that took place and their chronological arrangement, as well as a reflection of the motives and ideas that led people to engage in them. The histories of colleges and universities are recorded in the arrangement and composition of the artifact assemblages, buildings, thoroughfares, monuments, and decorative plantings as well as the spaces between them. Collectively these elements form a landscape that constitutes a physical record of the institution’s past and the influences that shaped its evolution.

The elements of academic landscapes provide an unwritten record of activities associated with the populations that resided on colleges and universities or used their facilities. If we assume that these activities reflected the functions of the settlements that encompassed them and that their patterning shaped the larger landscape, then we may anticipate that the form, layout, and composition of the landscapes of an academic institution will not only identify its function but provide a record of the processes that affected it
over time. The elements of landscape are, of course, easily discernible on the surface, in the presence and arrangement of dormitories, classroom buildings, laboratories, gymnasiums, offices and service structures, sports complexes, sidewalks, and gardens. Their architecture and arrangement identify the nature of the institution as well as the activities they house. Their size, prominence, and state of repair reflect factors such as their relative order of construction, their roles, and their importance. The landscape also reveals change in response to the continuous modernization of campuses. Much of the evidence of this landscape is no longer visible above ground and may be accessed only through excavation. Consequently, an examination of the archaeological record is an important part of reconstructing and analyzing landscape history.

When we observe the landscapes of academic institutions, we are immediately struck by their size and the need to adopt the scale of our inquiry to the elements of the landscape appropriate to our questions. As archaeologists, we are limited in how we can carry out our work. We cannot dig anywhere or everywhere. The nature and cost of archaeology place further limits on the extent to which excavations can be conducted. As a result, almost all archaeological investigations are a compromise between what we would like to do and what we can. But lack of access to the entire site of a building or insufficient time or funding to examine it completely does not mean that these features cannot be investigated or that we cannot ask meaningful questions about the past on the basis of material evidence. Rather, it obliges us to frame our questions on a scale suitable to the data at hand. The authors of the following chapters were faced with the need to tailor their work in response to constraints imposed by outside factors, yet all overcame these obstacles by identifying research questions and constructing research designs that could be implemented under the existing conditions.

The chapters in this volume do not attempt to construct the histories of institutions; these questions are too broad and perhaps more suitable to other forms of inquiry. Instead, the authors have chosen to focus on problems related to more specific issues, such as the nature of student life and accommodations, architectural form and function, medical ethics, sanitary reforms, social control, “forbidden” activities, the construction of sport facilities, and the power of images of the past in constructing present reality. Answering these questions will not replace traditional institutional histories, but it will oblige us to see them in a new light. The scale of the inquiry does not equate with the significance of its results.
The studies presented in this book explore different aspects of the academic past through an examination of the sites of structures and activities associated with academic institutions across the United States. The projects from which these works emerged resulted from different circumstances. Some were carried out as a result of research or to preserve or interpret campus features, while others assessed the impact of construction or other modern acts of disturbance. These chapters are diverse in their geographical distribution as well as their scope. We have organized them according to three general themes that encompass the broad range of topics approachable through an analysis of the material record. The first group examines the nature of the archaeological record of sites occupied by literate societies. The studies included here ask basic questions about what the record consists of, how it is configured, what condition it is in, and how it can identify the components of academic settlements. But they address larger questions about how analyses of that record can inform us about past events and lifeways and the processes that link them to its creation. They also introduce the topic of archaeology in a campus setting and speak to the larger issue of the university’s role in historic preservation.

The second group contains studies of past life at academic institutions. Employing archaeological research, the authors of these chapters examine material evidence of life on college campuses in times past. Ranging from seventeenth-century Harvard to twentieth-century William and Mary, material remains and their arrangement in space are shown to be a key element in shedding light on aspects of student life of which we are otherwise only vaguely aware.

The final group explores the role of archaeology on campus and how it relates to the university as an evolving institution. The authors also address the role of archaeology in defining the university’s position in the larger community. Archaeology has many products and can serve numerous constituencies. The discipline fulfills its normal research function on campus; but because the past of its parent institution is the subject of investigation, archaeology also takes on a wider responsibility of interpreting that past within the context of existing traditions and practical demands dictated by present circumstances and future needs.

The contents of this volume make it clear that the archaeology of academia is hardly a coherent research topic with a fixed research agenda and a single theoretical stance. This was not our intent. Rather, we hope to present it as an additional arena in which to explore the kinds of questions that ar-
archaeologists have begun to ask about the recent American past. Since the colo-

nial period, academic institutions have been an integral part of life in what

became the United States and reflected the evolution of the larger society

that gave rise to them. Examining their material remains has the potential
to let us observe the broader, rapidly changing, increasingly complex, and

often unstable milieu in microcosm and examine how it manifested itself

through its institutional organization and structure. These studies illustrate
directions for such research and provide examples of its potential.