
Urbanization and Its Archaeological Study in the United States

URBANIZATION IS A RELATIVELY NEW process in the United States, and urban archaeology is an even newer way to study it. Here we begin with a brief overview of the history of urbanization in the United States. Then we discuss the beginnings of urban archaeology. Finally we discuss the present state of urban archaeology—how archaeologists study America's cities today.

Urbanization in the United States

Europeans first settled in what was to become the United States during the early part of the colonial endeavor, when newly formed European nation-states began to appropriate resources around the world to enrich themselves in the nation-building process. The main European players in early colonial North America were, first, the Spanish (who arrived in the sixteenth century), and, then, the French and English, who, along with other powers such as the Dutch and Swedes (who played important but relatively short-lived roles), arrived in the seventeenth century. As part of the colonial enterprise, many of these powers established fortified settlements to protect their interests against other European countries and to serve as entrepôts in the Atlantic trade with Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean, as well as with other parts of coastal America. Some of these settlements went on to become the earliest modern cities in the United States.

There was only a handful of cities in the colonial United States, including (earliest of all of the continuously occupied cities) Spanish St. Augustine in Florida (1565); Santa Fe, New Mexico (1609); New York, founded as Dutch New Amsterdam in 1626; and the English cities of Boston (1630); Charleston,

South Carolina (1670); and Philadelphia (1682). Most of them were port cities, perched on the edge of the continent. During the early part of the colonial era, Boston was the largest port, but it was soon eclipsed by Philadelphia, which in turn was overtaken by New York in the 1790s. New York continued to fill that role until the mid-twentieth century (Wall 1994, 2). Almost from the beginning of the European settlements, the colonial powers brought in captive Africans to provide a labor force for the colonies. Although most lived on Southern plantations, there was a sizable African presence in the North and in several cities, particularly Charleston and New York, in the eighteenth century.

The extractive economy of the colonies was based on harvesting, processing, and exporting products from the interior—agricultural produce, of course, but also others, such as lumber and furs (which were obtained in trade with the Native Americans). Most of the population lived in small towns or rural areas. Before the 1820s, less than 8 percent of the European American population lived in cities (Abbott 2007, 853; Teaford 1998, 841). As might be expected, this figure is far below those for contemporary Europe, although the European figures vary widely by area. As early as 1622, for example, well over half of the population of the province of Holland in the Netherlands lived in cities, while as late as 1700 only a fifth to a quarter of the population of England could be said to be “urban” (Merwick 1980, 77).

The growth of colonial cities was extremely slow. But economic development accelerated over the century after the Revolutionary War, as the economy shifted from one based on merchant capitalism to one based on industrial capitalism. This change had a profound impact on urban growth as the Northeast particularly became more of a core and less of a peripheral area (see Paynter 1982). Whereas in 1820 only 7 percent of the American population lived in cities, a century later more than half of the population were city dwellers (Teaford 1998, 845; Abbott 2007, 853). Factors such as inter- and intra-city transportation systems and patterns of immigration influenced urban growth in the course of that century. Before the Civil War, the most important form of inter-city transportation was by water, first by sail along the rivers and the shore, and later by canal and steamboat. New cities began to appear along the waterways of the interior. For the first time, they grew up in the Midwest, on the Great Lakes and in the valleys of the Mississippi and its larger tributaries. Almost all were in the north (New Orleans and Charleston were the largest cities in the south) and east of the Rockies—San Francisco was the only large city on the Pacific (Teaford 1998).

After the Civil War, railroads became the most important way to transport

goods from city to city, a factor that influenced the location of new cities. Some, like Albuquerque, Baltimore and Atlanta, eclipsed older ones like Santa Fe, Annapolis and Savannah when the latter were bypassed by the railroad. Chicago, which began as a lakeside city, grew enormously after it became a rail hub. Manufacturing replaced commerce as the principal source of urban prosperity (Teaford 1998, 843), and many cities specialized in producing particular kinds of goods: clothing and shoes in the eastern cities, meat and meat products in Chicago, flour in Minneapolis, and steel in Pittsburgh (Abbott 2007, 853).

Industrialization called for a large urban labor force, and immigration helped swell urban populations, leading to the unprecedented growth of industrial cities in the Northeast and Midwest. During the 1830s and 1840s, most of the immigrants came from Ireland and Germany. Many of the former had little money and settled in the eastern cities of Boston and New York, while many of the latter, somewhat better off, either bought land in rural areas or migrated to interior cities like Cincinnati, Milwaukee, and St. Louis. Later in the century, most of the immigrants came from southern and eastern Europe. These newcomers, many of whom were Catholic or Jewish and some of whom were politically radical, did not fit in well with the native-born middle class, who were predominantly Protestant and descended from northern Europeans, and class and ethnic tensions intensified. These tensions erupted in strikes and other forms of political action, some of which, like the Haymarket Riot in Chicago in 1886, were extremely violent. By century's end, 40 percent of the population was foreign born and the same percentage of the population was urban.

The changing economic and social structure of the city was expressed in its changing landscape. The English colonial cities of the eastern seaboard had been walking cities, integrated across class, with employers living at their workplaces where they also housed their journeymen, apprentices, and slaves. But with the hardening of class lines in the early nineteenth century, employers and employees alike began to move their homes away from the workplace and establish new residential neighborhoods that were becoming segregated by class and structured by changing gender relations. Working class neighborhoods, regarded by the middle class as "slums" (Mayne 1993), were located close to the workplaces of the urban core, where their residents were subjected to the sights, sounds, and smells of industry but could walk to work. Many of these neighborhoods included ethnic and racial enclaves and were home to African Americans, who were gradually being emancipated throughout the North, with most becoming members of the urban working class. Richer folk moved their

homes out to the edge of the city, away from disease and the poor, and the middle class settled somewhere in between (Wall 1994).

Horse-drawn omnibuses began to appear in the eastern cities in the 1830s. Catering first to the wealthy as seen by their high fares, they were replaced in the 1860s by horse-drawn street cars which ran on iron tracks, enabling horses to draw many more cars at once, and these in turn were replaced in the 1890s by electric streetcars. Fares became relatively cheaper over time, allowing access to the working class, and these transportation innovations allowed cities to grow spatially and people to live farther and farther from the urban core and still commute to work there. The phenomenal growth of cities in the nineteenth century exacerbated urban problems. Disease and hygiene became important issues, and cities began to institute public health measures along with a clean water supply and adequate drainage and sewerage. Indoor plumbing arrived gradually, beginning with the rich and only later appearing in poorer homes.

By the 1920s, urban dwellers in the United States outnumbered those who lived in small towns or the country. And between then and the 1970s, the process of urbanization was transformed again. First of all, the automobile allowed a new, individual means of transportation (Abbott 2007, 853) for all except the poor, and this enabled a new wave of suburbanization, drawing the rich and members of the middle class farther away from the central parts of cities. (Teaford 1998, 1847) Fueled by the development of air conditioning, people began to build cities in new places, in the South and the Southwest. Miami, Los Angeles, Oklahoma City, Houston, and Phoenix all grew enormously, anticipating the term *sunbelt* that would become common parlance in the 1970s.

The people who moved to cities also changed. In the 1920s laws were passed restricting immigration from overseas, so most of the new arrivals in urban areas were migrants from rural parts of the United States. Some European Americans left the plains for California, while others moved from Appalachia to the cities of the Midwest. Many African Americans, in an effort to find jobs for themselves and educational opportunities for their children and to escape the Jim Crow laws of the South, moved from south to north between World War I and 1970, a movement often referred to as the Great Migration. First, they flocked to the cities of the Northeast and Midwest, where they founded African American centers such as Harlem in New York and the South Side of Chicago. Then, they went to western cities for jobs in the defense industry. Many Puerto Ricans, too, began their own migration to New York, particularly with the growth of inexpensive air travel in the middle of the century. They had become American citizens in the 1920s. Later, in 1965, new immigration leg-

isolation removed restrictions on the national origin of immigrants, and since then cities have seen the arrival of many more newcomers from Latin America, Asia, and Africa.

Several scholars have pointed out that since 1970, the growth of urbanization has slowed enormously (Teaford 1998; Abbott 2007). In 1970, a total of 74 percent of the population was “urban,” while at century’s end only 79 percent were so designated, a mere 5 percent increase (Abbott 2007). And not only was that increase small; the experience of these so-called city dwellers was very different from that of their predecessors. Most were not living in core urban areas, but instead in the outer parts of greater metropolitan areas, and many worked there as well. There has been phenomenal growth in these decentralized areas; most residents of today’s metropolitan areas do not experience life in truly urban cores like Manhattan and San Francisco (Teaford 1998). Furthermore, many of these cities have to compete globally for their economies to thrive. New York and Los Angeles vie with London and Tokyo for their places as investment and information capitals. Many smaller towns have become weekend and summer retreats for rich city-folk. Today, only a tiny portion of the population of the United States lives in rural areas, a transition that coincides with the decline in the number of people engaged in agriculture (see Groover 2008).

Urban Archaeology in the United States

In 1973, when urban archaeology was barely in its infancy, Bert Salwen (often referred to as the “father of urban archaeology” in the United States) made a distinction between two different kinds of urban archaeology: archaeology *in* the city and archaeology *of* the city. He defined archaeology *in* the city as the excavation of sites that are located in modern cities today, but which may or may not reflect the development of those urban centers. Port Mobil, a 10,000 year old Native American Paleo-Indian site located in what is now New York City, is an example of an important urban site that does not reflect the history of its city (Cantwell and Wall 2001, 40–42).

Archaeology *of* the city, in contrast, is the study of sites that relate to the development of the city in which they are located. It examines the city as an artifact and looks at how it developed and the functions of its various parts, and it explores how these relate to each other, to the city’s history, and to the events that took place within it, and how it has changed with the development of modern global processes. Until relatively recently, most archaeological studies *of* the city focused either on ancient cities—like Teotihuacan or Ur—or on the deep