

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN NEVADA

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Introduction

Nevada's dry caves and virtual lack of soil deposition in low areas have made the state a target of archaeological studies, beginning early in the twentieth century. Most of these studies contributed information important to archaeology in general, as a science applied all over the United States. For instance, radiocarbon dating of materials was thoroughly tested as a new technology to be used by archaeologists during the years of research at the National Register-listed Tule Springs site in Clark County. In other cases, nationally-renowned archaeologists conducted research in Nevada, lending these archaeological sites importance in terms of their role in establishing these celebrated professional careers. This document will discuss the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) eligibility of Nevada's archaeological sites in terms of knowledge gained by the research community, as well as sites' associations with important individuals in the field of archaeology.

Early Research 1900-1940

As with any regional history and/or study of "culture areas," a cultural historical model was the first established by researchers in the Great Basin. The interest in establishing these culture areas, usually defined as a geographically-bound region in which specific traits and subsistence strategies occur, began in North American archaeology around 1900 (Fowler 1986:15). This was also the same period archaeology transitioned from a hobby interest to an academic pursuit (Fowler 1977:15). Some of these first university-trained scientists cut their professional teeth in Nevada.

The first archaeological excavation in Nevada was at Lovelock Cave in 1912. A guard at the University of California, Berkeley, L.L. Loud, salvaged cultural materials discovered by bat guano miners in the cave outside the town of Lovelock. This was the beginning of decades of research at Lovelock Cave and a legacy association between the dry caves of Nevada and archaeology students at University of California, Berkeley. A virtual treasure trove, the cave produced some 10,000 artifacts, 3,300 of those considered organic, or perishable (Loud and Harrington 1929).

Archaeologist Mark R. Harrington (who, at the age of 19 in 1900, was dubbed 'the boy wonder of the archaeological world,' and described as a 'young man who gives promise of becoming an authority on all matters affecting Indian research'; see Harrington 1985:24-25), then led the next excavations at Lovelock Cave in 1924. Accompanied by L.L. Loud, Harrington excavated the cave further and surveyed some nearby open sites in the Humboldt River basin (Fowler 1977:17). The 1924 excavations led to the discovery of the tule duck decoys, hallmarks for the later-described "Lovelock Culture," on display at our national heritage museum, the Smithsonian Institution.

Harrington then turned his attention elsewhere in Nevada, beginning excavations at Virgin Branch ancestral Puebloan ruins of Lost City in 1925. For the next two years, the Museum of the American Indian, the Heyes Foundation of New York, and the State of Nevada sponsored Harrington's work at Lost City, the only large-scale settlement attributed to ancestral Puebloans to the west of the Colorado River (Harrington 1985:144). During these two years he also excavated at Paiute Cave and Mesa House in southern Nevada. . In 1930, Harrington began his seminal work at Gypsum Cave, and in 1933-1935 he returned to Lost City (Fowler 1986:17-18) to direct pre-inundation "salvage" work at Lost City in anticipation of the creation of Lake Mead. Although inundated by Lake Mead in the 1930s, the work at the Lost City site is important for various reasons (See "Resource Types" below).

The research focus in these dry caves of both northern and southern Nevada in this early period of archaeology is clear: to locate very ancient artifacts that would pre-date the recent finds at Clovis and Folsom, New Mexico (Jennings 1986:114). In the 1920s and 1930s, the search for "Early Man" consumed a lot of archaeological thought and energy. The work at Gypsum Cave, sponsored by the Southwest Museum (and others) and directed by M.R. Harrington is a good example of this research focus (as well as instructive for archaeologists to be cautious when they find "exactly" what they're looking for). Called 'one of the most interesting and informative ever analyzed' (Strong 1969, in Harrington 1985:207), Gypsum Cave excited many minds with its reported early tools found in association with Pleistocene-era megafaunal remains. Regional newspapers carried frequent reports of the excavation and several research institutions partnered efforts in this important project (Harrington 1985:212-214). This was the first cooperative project between archaeologists and paleontologists in the region, if not the U.S. (Harrington 1985:209).

As radiocarbon dating methods were developed, the materials from Gypsum Cave were tested, negating the initial association of the ancient fossil remains with the cultural items excavated from the cave. However the cave is a type site (Gypsum points), important paleoenvironmental data was obtained through analysis of ground sloth dung (Mehringer 1986:31), it illustrates how archaeological field methods and models changed through the twentieth century (research resumed at Gypsum in the 1960s), and unexcavated areas of the cave still exist.

Early on, researchers in Nevada made assumptions in their culture histories that archaeologists are still struggling with today. Alfred V. Kidder (1924:78-79, in Fowler 1986:20) was the first to propose that Great Basin cultures were peripheral outposts of a core ancestral Puebloan society. In a sense, this model deemed prehistoric groups of the Great Basin as marginalized, on the fringes of a core culture area. To a lesser degree, Great Basin cultures were also considered peripheral to Californian cultures (Fowler 1977:18; Fowler 1986:16). This model corresponds with three assumptions pointed to by Don Fowler (1986:16) made by archaeologists working in the Great Basin during the 1900-1940 period:

- Similar to linguistic models, culture traits diffuse from 'centers of invention' out to peripheral areas, the 'center' being the most 'complex' and outliers more 'rudimentary' (note how this could easily describe Great Basin prehistory),
- If acceptable chronologies could not be established for a region then one could deduce antiquity by how far and wide spatially, a culture trait is distributed (called the age-area hypothesis; see Wissler 1923, in Fowler 1986:16)

- The development of ‘trait complexes’ making up a culture system could be identified if one knew the geographical and temporal limits. In this way culture areas could be mapped, and researchers noted that often these correspond with specific ecological niches (Fowler 1986:16).

This last concept was the foundation of the next period of research in Nevada and the Great Basin. Catherine Fowler (1977:19) delineates the 1940-1955 period of Great Basin archaeology as the “Trail Models and Distribution Studies” period but by then Julian Steward had completed his “classic theoretical work,” *Basin-Plateau Aboriginal Sociopolitical Groups* (1938), changing Great Basin archaeology irreversibly and importantly. For purposes of this discussion, the next period of research in Nevada is the 1940-1980 period, dominated by cultural ecology, developed and promoted by Steward, and the systems theoretical approach.

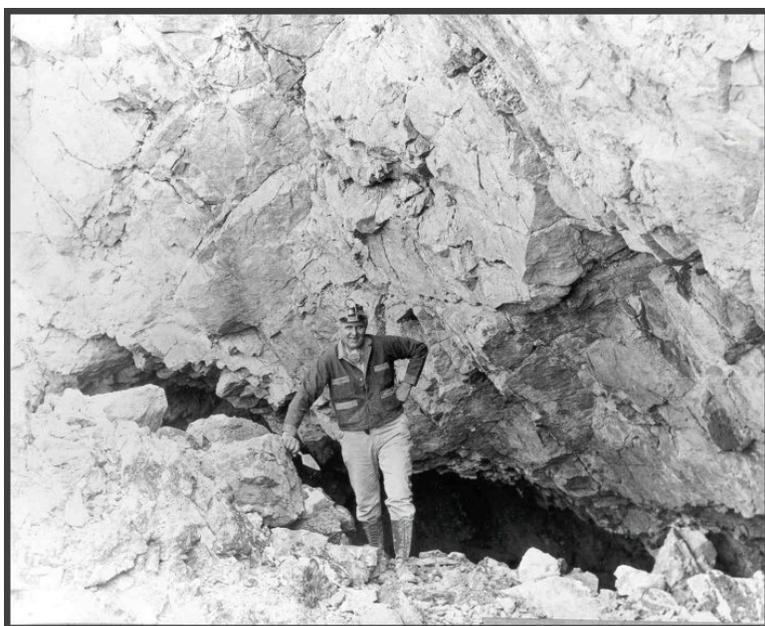


Figure 1. M. R. Harrington at Gypsum Cave, 1930.

Ethnographic research in the Great Basin flourished in the 1930s. This surge of work was due in part to Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier’s Indian Reorganization Act of 1934. The IRA, or “Indian New Deal,” called for the study and encouragement of traditional cultural and religious activities (Clemmer and Stewart 1986:546). The research fell under Alfred Kroeber’s University of California Culture Element Distribution Survey of Western American Indians (Fowler 1986:25). This survey helped complete long lists of “culture traits” (see Kroeber

1935) and the presence/absence of each for particular bands and tribes. Julian H. Steward (1933, 1934, 1938) and Omer C. Stewart (1937, 1939, 1941, 1966) conducted these surveys for Northern Paiutes.

Beginning with explorers, many have wondered how aboriginal societies existed in such a “harsh” environment like Nevada and much of the Great Basin (Alley 1986:20). This fascination with what was perceived as bare survival, apparently factored into archaeological and ethnographic studies here. Further, because Nevada-based Native American groups were some of the last in the United States to have day-to-day interactions with Euroamericans (thanks to a lack of interest to settle this “miserable” region), this was an area that researchers integrated ethnography with archaeology. For instance, Northern Paiute leader Gilbert Natches consulted with Loud in 1924 on functions of artifacts excavated from Lovelock Cave (see Fowler 1977:17). For this reason, research in Nevada and the Great Basin has always had a slightly

different orientation than archaeology in other regions of the United States. This also relates to Steward's decision to use Nevada and the Great Basin as the trial balloon for his cultural ecology model, prior to its application in other areas of the U.S. (Fowler 1977:22).

Cultural Ecology/Systems Models 1940-1980

A brief discussion of the importance of Julian Steward's work to subsequent researchers in Nevada is warranted. In his 1938 *Basin-Plateau Aboriginal Sociopolitical Groups*, Steward did not necessarily offer a culture history or ethnography of the Western Shoshones he consulted with for years, so much as a model of transhumant societies and their relationship to their environments, through the use of ethnographic observations (Fowler 1977:19). "Of all American ethnologists," Trigger writes (1989:280), Steward was the one who quickly recognized the true potential of archaeological data in attempts to understand enduring cultural traditions. This has been critical for archaeologists in Nevada and the Great Basin ever since. Because Steward held an "explicitly materialist" opinion of human culture, he led the way for subsequent researchers to focus their attention on the role the environment played on "prehistoric sociocultural systems" (Trigger 1989:279). Again, it is difficult to avoid making the connection of the region Steward worked in most, the models of prehistoric behavior he developed, and ample opportunities for ethnographic analogy for artifacts and historic traditions. Several authors (Aikens 1985; Fowler 1977; Fowler 1986; Hardesty 1985) have noted that once the cultural ecology model was "out of the bag," Great Basin archaeologists literally ran with it and never looked back. Hardesty writes (1985:137):

Virtually every statement of theoretical perspective is grounded in Stewardian cultural ecology interpreted within a systems framework The concepts of cultural adaptation and adaptive strategies, environmental and cultural systems, are pervasive.

The cultural ecology model emphasizes the integral link between humans and their environment. "Environment" in this sense can include other cultures, and the relationships Steward envisioned prehistoric humans to have, involved cultural adaptations to ecological settings in a multi-evolutionary fashion.

Within this theoretical framework, there are many questions of prehistory to explore. Robert Heizer, who spent his childhood in Lovelock, Nevada, became one of Nevada's preeminent archaeologists in this cultural ecology period, shedding light on several aspects of Nevada's pre-contact cultures. Beginning with survey of the Humboldt River basin rockshelters in the 1930s, Heizer published a much-needed synthesis of rock art sites in Nevada and eastern California (Heizer and Baumhoff 1962), pioneered the use of radiocarbon dating in archaeology in the 1950s, and then trace element analysis of obsidian in the 1960s, used coprolite analyses for the first time on materials excavated from Nevada caves, developed the "Humboldt Culture" model from his findings at Hidden Cave in Churchill County, and many other interdisciplinary projects (for a detailed biography, see Hester 1982). Perhaps most remarkably, Heizer established the University of California Archaeological Survey in 1948, training literally hundreds of students in Nevada's dry caves and low basins. In combination, he began the *Reports Series* to publish the findings of the survey. His publications, often co-authored with former or current students,

totaled over 500 items. The list of caves that Heizer excavated in Nevada is too exhaustive for this document. His research and instruction of students at Hidden Cave, Humboldt Cave, Lovelock Cave, Wagon Jack Shelter, Eastgate and Southfork Shelter is just a sampling of the contribution he made to the science and to Nevada's database. At the minimum, Heizer is a significant individual in the history of archaeological research in Nevada and the region.

During this period of research Jesse Jennings initiated the Great Basin Archaeological Conference (soon thereafter changed to the Great Basin Anthropological Conference), in 1953. At this time Jennings was also developing his broad "Desert Culture" model, now known as the Desert Archaic (Jennings 1986:114). This model of early prehistory is applied regularly by Nevada's archaeologists, and indeed, aspects of the Desert Archaic are applied by archaeologists throughout the continent (Aikens 1970:202, in Fowler 1977:25). Jennings' Desert Archaic has a distinct cultural ecological focus, rooted in Steward's earlier work. "While I am not an environmental *determinist* (emphasis added)," as Jennings (Danger Cave 1957:7) claimed, he saw environment as a "limiting" factor on culture.

Interestingly, although Great Basin archaeology was founded in the belief that the prehistoric cultures of the region were peripheral, and therefore necessarily connected to, Basketmaker and ancestral Puebloan culture, (indeed contemporary and comparative studies continued to follow that connection), Jennings' Desert Archaic actually predates the Basketmaker II period.

Early application of the cultural ecology model in the Great Basin was attractive to the group of "New Archaeologists" intellectually led by Lewis Binford, who defined their theoretical position in 1968. Cultural ecology is often used in environmental determinist discussions; that is, the environmental conditions within which a people live will determine how their culture is formed. "New Archaeologists," (Binford and Binford 1968) or processualists, are interested in finding "regularities" in the archaeological record, and environmental data provides just that. Beginning in the 1960s, researchers from outside the far western U.S. became interested in testing the New Archaeology in Nevada and the Great Basin.

One of the most exhaustive settlement pattern studies completed in the region was by David Hurst Thomas of the American Museum of Natural History, of the Reese River and Monitor valleys during the 1970-1983 period. During this large scale sample survey, Gatecliff Shelter in central Nevada was excavated, giving Thomas the tools he needed to develop a refined projectile point chronology (Thomas 1981) for the entire western Great Basin (Elston 1986:135). This chronology is still relied upon today. Thomas is another individual researcher that has made significant contributions to Nevada archaeology, by completing a large scale settlement pattern study of an entire river drainage in central Nevada (a scale of study that Jennings (1986:116) believed archaeologists should aspire to), developing a critically useful projectile point chronology that has "the finest resolution" (Elston 1986:135), instructing students at Nevada sites over two decades (Thomas 2000:33), and publishing popular literature of his findings and ruminations for the general public.

One research question has divided Nevada archaeologists into two main camps. Lamb's (1958) hypothesis that Numic speakers (Northern Paiutes, Southern Paiutes, and Shoshone groups) migrated into the Great Basin from southern California, fanning out and displacing the area's

indigenous groups roughly 1,000 years ago, has adamant supporters and detractors. Other researchers suggested Numic groups migrated into Nevada from elsewhere (Swanson 1972) or “devolved” from the Virgin Branch Ancestral Puebloans and Fremont cultures (Gunnerson 1962, in Fowler 1977:29). Not only are the archaeologists divided on the issue, but the model outrages the very Numic speakers whom it deals with, who claim the Great Basin as their aboriginal homeland, the place where they originated. Since Lamb proposed his model, others have proposed different, at times opposite (Goss 1977), other times complimentary (Bettinger and Baumhoff 1983) ones. But of course, associating material culture with linguistic groups is problematic at best (Elston 1986:145-146; Fowler 1977:34). Sites that are at the core of this debate should be considered significant in the history of Nevada archaeology.

Resource Types

Significant archaeological research must have occurred at the property. This can be at the local, state (consider this as regional), or national level of significance. A few of the caves and rockshelters that were excavated mid-twentieth century have been listed in the National Register, namely: Leonard Rockshelter, Last Supper Cave, Gatecliff Shelter, and Lovelock Cave, but some of these need to be updated for their role in the history of archaeological research. Type sites, such as Gypsum Cave, Hidden Cave (“Humboldt Culture”), Lovelock Cave and Humboldt Cave (“Lovelock Culture”), according to the National Register Bulletin *Guidelines for Evaluating and Registering Archeological Properties* (NPS 2000:23), are usually eligible under Criterion A, because they define cultural complexes or chronologies and are thus “directly associated with the events and broad patterns of history.” Gatecliff Shelter is also therefore eligible. Although the Tule Springs Site did not yield much in the way of cultural materials, important paleo-environmental data was produced, and the radiocarbon dating methods, now ubiquitous in research today, was first tested during the Tule Springs 1962-1963 project.

Many archaeological sites in Nevada may be eligible due to the importance of data gained (on a local, state, or national level) and additionally, because of the sites’ roles in the history of the development of anthropology, archaeology, or related disciplines (Siebert personal communication 2004). Type sites are also usually eligible under A, even if they have been 100% excavated. Sites widely used to educate students may also be eligible for listing under the “Education” Area of Significance. However, a modern reexamination collections and archaeological materials housed at a curation facility do not make the site eligible under Criterion D, although potentially new information about the site may be gained from a reanalysis of those materials. If a site was integral to the development of a well-known researcher’s career, such as Gypsum Cave was to M.P. Harrington’s or Lovelock Cave was to Heizer’s, the site may be eligible under Criterion B for its association with that individual’s notoriety. In considering Criterion B for eligibility purposes, one must be able to establish a link between the researcher’s work at the site and the researcher’s importance in the scientific community.

Data Gaps

Many archaeological resources that have been researched or evaluated for eligibility for listing—

Table 1. Nevada-Based Significant Properties for their Role in Archaeology*

Archaeological Site	Significance
Lovelock Cave (NR listed 1984)	Type site, first excavation in Nevada, Harrington, Heizer, education (decoys in display at Smithsonian adds to significance)
Lost City	Harrington, Virgin Branch Ancestral Puebloans, CCC, Architecture (trading, agriculture also)
Last Supper Cave (NR listed 1975)	Type site (chronology), changing technology
Gypsum Cave	Type site, Harrington, paleoenvironmental, history of research
Tule Springs (NR listed 1979)	Radiocarbon dating methods, paleoenvironmental, Willard Libby (C-14 pioneer)
Eastgate	Heizer, type site
Gatecliff Shelter (NR listed 1979)	Western Great Basin projectile point chronology, D.H. Thomas
Humboldt Cave	Type site, Heizer (“Western Archaic” model)
Hidden Cve	Type site, Heizer, science (coprolite analysis), education
Leonard Rockshelter (NHL, listed 1985)	Heizer, type site (chronology), paleoenvironmental
Alta Toquima	Type site (first data on alpine Great Basin site), D.H. Thomas

* This is not meant to be an all-inclusive list of National Register-eligible properties in Nevada, nor a complete consideration of all significant roles these properties played in our history

usually a product of the National Historic Preservation Act’s Section 106 process—should be reevaluated in light of the role the properties played in the history of this region’s research. Most of these are pre-contact era sites. However, archaeologists have been researching and evaluating historic-era resources in Nevada for over 30 years. Now may be the time to entertain reflexive thought on how historical archaeology in our state has changed and developed, especially in light of specific properties that altered the course of research, in terms of methodology, theoretical orientation, or data, and reevaluate those resources for NRHP eligibility. In the immediate term, we must begin to evaluate historic archaeological resources in terms of 1) importance of the data gained, and 2) the property’s role in the history of the development of anthropology and historical archaeology (Erika Martin Seibert personal communication 2004).

Future Needs

All archaeological resources and history of archaeological research in Nevada need to be synthesized into a single published volume. Many western states have such a volume. A published synthesis would provide researchers a gauge for level of importance when considering

previously-studied resources. Oftentimes researchers are new to the region, especially while Nevada continues to be the fastest-growing state in the Union. Conversely, researchers may spend their entire careers in a specific region, focused on that region's data and research development, without an eye on a more holistic archaeological horizon. For these reasons, a synthesis of Nevada's archaeological research is desperately needed. Finally, many high-profile sites were not completely, 100% excavated. Those that still have intact deposits may be eligible under Criterion D, for their informational potential, especially in light of the time lapse since the original research was completed (in many cases), and new technologies, methodologies, and theoretical approaches that have developed.

Research Questions

Research questions should be considered when evaluating for NRHP eligibility under Criterion D (where intact deposits are present). In general, the property should contribute understanding in terms of 1) it records and assists in the reconstruction of past lifeways, 2) new hypotheses can be tested with the potential data, and 3) the property can help reinforce, or change, the direction of research and scientific assumptions about the past (Little and Seibert 2000:29). If nominating a property under Criteria A, B, or C, research questions need not be proposed within the nomination.

Reference Material

Nevada State Museum Papers, University of California Archaeological Survey Reports, contemporary newspaper accounts (local and regional), National Geographic Magazines and other archaeological journals should be consulted. The Nevada State Museum, Nevada's university libraries, and the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley have many hard-to-find reports on research conducted in Nevada. Also, biographies of researchers may help in evaluating the contributions to the field by certain individuals. Although significant ethnography was completed in Nevada, evaluating particular sites where this research took place will be difficult, if not impossible.

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