

BELOW THE SURFACE:  
AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL DISCUSSION ABOUT THE DEEPER SIGNIFICANCE  
OF SURFACE FOUND ARTIFACTS.

HONORS THESIS

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by

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Most Sincerely,

Anna

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## I. **Introduction:**

### *Background and Rationale:*

This thesis reports my study of a “*surface archaeological collection*,” a common, but often denigrated, archaeological category because it lacks the informative contexts of buried archaeological assemblages.

The collection studied is the Colonel Charles M. Fergusson, Jr. Native American Artifacts Collection, housed at the Center for Archaeological Studies (CAS), Texas State University, San Marcos. This collection was donated to the Texas Prehistory Research Project at Texas State University for preservation in the manner the institution saw most fitting. In general, we study avocational collections to retrieve information that may otherwise be lacking. This benefits the holder of such collections (as for example, a curation facility) and it affords research opportunities for scholars. At this point, I have analyzed this collection and with the collaboration of CAS, have created a goal for it. This end goal will be the creation of a reference base for Texas projectile points. Essentially meaning, there will be a subset of artifacts pulled from the collection that will serve as a guide for morphological characteristics of projectile point types. A tangible reference such as

this will be beneficial for students and interested individuals alike. This reference will also serve to highlight one of the manners in which surface found collections can be a meaningful resource in the field of archaeology. The other ways in which a collection such as this can be important is conveyed through the scientific, as well as the cultural data obtained from it-- these areas are ones which will be discussed in this thesis. The purpose of this thesis will be to convey the importance of surface found artifacts based on aspects of anthropological study, both scientific and cultural in nature.

## **II. Theoretical Framework:**

“Surface collections” are archaeological assemblages based solely on the accumulation of surface found artifacts. More commonly created by archaeological enthusiasts than by professional archaeologists, these collections are often poorly documented. Due to this, much of the archaeological context has been lost. To some this renders the artifacts collected anthropologically useless. But, I hope to highlight just how untrue that assumption proves to be.

There are multiple driving forces behind surface collecting ranging from an innate psychological need to claim these unique and

beautiful pieces of history, all the way to the opposite standpoint, which is fueled simply by greed. The individuals who are psychologically tied to these objects usually vary on a spectrum from expressive collectors to passionate ones.<sup>1</sup> The expressive collectors are usually individuals such as land owners who enjoy the initial hunt and subsequent thrill that comes along with collecting artifacts. Also, this type of collector often develops a connection and appreciation for the artifacts that they are acquiring. And, due to this appreciation, they may join collector groups, visit museums, or study literature and other archaeological information as well. These attributes make this type of collector easy to work with for archaeologists, because they seem to understand the importance of the context of these artifacts. The stark contrast to this type of collecting would be the passionate collectors -- individuals who take an obsessive and severely emotional stance in collecting.<sup>2</sup> More often than not, collectors who are this enthralled about the objects they desire are willing to do whatever it takes to obtain them, engaging in trespassing and destruction of sites

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<sup>1</sup> McIntosh, William D. and Brandon Schmeichel. "Collectors and Collecting: A Social Psychological Perspective." *Leisure Sciences*, vol. 26, no. 1, Jan-Mar2004

<sup>2</sup> Belk, R. W. *Collecting in a Consumer Society*. New York: Routledge. 1995. Web. October 2017.

for examples. This makes passionate collectors more detrimental to the archaeological community than helpful. This is because these collectors are more concerned about adding to their collection than any context they may be destroying. Also, passionate collectors often participate in the buying and selling of "looted" artifacts-- perpetuating the destruction of archaeological sites and the loss of pieces of history.

Although these forms of collecting may seem unconventional, the overall concept is actually similar to what archaeologists do. In general, the concept of collecting stems from a psychological want to categorize things and this need has been a driving force for cultivating what archaeology is today. Individuals such as Christian Jürgensen using this psychological want to create the three age system helped establish the foundation of a systematic approach to archaeology we still use today.<sup>3</sup> The similarity of accumulating artifacts to display for both collectors and archaeologists has been the epicenter for debate between the two for many decades. The argument on the side of collectors is that archaeologists are essentially doing the same or

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel, Glyn Edmund. *A Hundred and Fifty Years of Archaeology*. Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1976., 1976



worse as them by excavating these artifacts, only to turn around and display only a selection of them--sometimes placing the rest in inadequate storage.<sup>4</sup> While archaeologists are more concerned with the lack of systematic excavation these collectors may utilize and the overall loss of potential information they could be gaining from artifacts that are housed in personal displays. And, since the arguments of both sides are deeply rooted in belief systems, it is also understood by archaeologists that a compromise is necessary for the greater good of preservation and progress. Due to this, over previous decades some archaeologists have formed amicable relationships with collectors in hopes of achieving two things: 1. That the relationship will give collectors a feeling of enough security to share what they know with archaeologists, without fear of adversity, subsequently allowing archaeologists to accumulate data that would otherwise be lost to them. 2. That archaeologists can also use the relationship to better inform collectors about the practices of correct excavation, documentation and curation techniques-- in hopes that it will

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<sup>4</sup> Milanich, Jerald T. "Homeless Collections." *Archaeology*, vol. 58, no. 6, November/December 2005, pp. 57-64.

minimize as much as possible the amount of site degradation done, if they choose to continue artifact hunting.<sup>5</sup>

Understanding how the symbiotic relationship developed between collectors and archaeologists sets the framework to further understanding how a collection such as the Colonel Charles M. Fergusson, Jr. Native American Artifacts Collection came to be donated to, and held by, CAS. And, how more often than not, even surface collections possess archaeological relevance.

### III. **Methodology:**

In order to accomplish the desired goal of this thesis multiple means will be utilized, among them being:

- Use of scholarly texts to establish a typology of the collection.
- The analysis of literature to obtain information pertaining to the significance of surface found material.

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<sup>5</sup> Pitblado, Bonnie L. "An Argument for Ethical, Proactive, Archaeologist-Artifact Collector Collaboration." *American Antiquity*, vol. 79, no. 3, July 2014,

- In depth analysis of the artifacts themselves, focusing on the morphology of the projectile points to understand not only the functional purpose, but the cultural ones as well, such as their ages.

Before we can fully comprehend how exactly a random assemblage of artifacts can hold any archaeological value, we must first understand the tasks employed to achieve that value. For the Colonel Charles M. Fergusson, Jr. Native American Artifacts Collection, I employed both procedural and contextual methods to achieve my current archaeological understanding of this collection.

The first step was the initial cleaning of the artifacts. More often than not these artifacts are seen as an art-form and as a result, collectors will glue them to boards and display them for others to see - as was the case with this collection. After much use of acetone, and multiple rounds of having my hands covered in glue, I eventually completed this tedious but important step of the process. One reason this step was vital to the project was because it allowed me to get an initial catalog and artifact identification for each artifact, which had been completely absent. This means that there was not only a more precise count of the artifacts present, but also that I labeled them in a

manner which would allow for referencing back to them whenever necessary. Another benefit of detaching the artifacts was that it facilitated the side-by-side comparisons between specimens that one makes in the classification effort. This also eliminated the bulky frames and made it practical to curate the collection.

After this, came the initial cataloging of artifacts based upon morphological characteristics, meaning that while looking at aspects such as width, size, base shape, and other physical features, I was able to separate the artifacts into groups on a broader basis. The reason for this was to gather an initial idea of how the morphological grouping of artifacts can differ from the contextual one. By that I mean, in order to understand the grouping of artifacts, the archaeologist must first understand what question is being asked. At the beginning, these artifacts were arranged in frames according to aesthetic sizes and shapes with no regard to the scientific attributes of typology.

To explore this concept further, we must venture into our third step of the process, which is the actual “typing” of the artifacts. As stated above, in the process of typing artifacts, groupings are relative and exist in direct association with the research question being posed. But

more than this, for archaeological contexts there are three components which classically make up an adequate taxonomy<sup>6</sup>

1 Each type should be able to exhibit a coherent geographic distribution.

2 Each type should help differentiate the temporal span.

3 Each type should be representative of the various forms present.

Since for our purposes the question being asked is “How can this collection which was found completely out of context be typed in a manner that holds archaeological value,” we can approach the collection with the classic form of taxonomy. Although this seems like a contradiction given the lack of data on hand, the reason for this is that we do not know the archaeological context in which these artifacts were collected, but we do have resources in the form of references that can partially make up for this lack of information.

These resources include field guides, such as *A Field Guide to Stone Artifacts*<sup>7</sup>, and other scholarly texts which yield the overarching

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<sup>6</sup> Krieger, A.D. 1944 The Typological Concept. *American Antiquity* 9(3):271-288

<sup>7</sup> Turner, E. S., & Hester, T. R. *A field guide to stone artifacts of Texas Indians*. Houston, TX: Gulf Pub. Co. 1999. September 2017.

typology of artifacts within the archaeological community based on decades of research and case studies. With these resources, I am able to properly identify each artifact and obtain their temporal, as well as their geographical areas, based solely on their morphological features. Although I have this reference which serves as a guide to keep the groupings objective, we must also remember that making a judgement of which projectile point fits in which category is ultimately a subjective venture in terms of an individual's personal judgement. Due to this, there are other aspects an archaeologist must familiarize themselves with in order to try and keep the descriptions as scientific as possible. Some specimens are difficult to satisfactorily classify, whereas a majority can be placed in established types with confidence.

The aspects employed in achieving a correct and objective typing of artifacts include understanding the technology which goes into creating these artifacts, being familiar with the concept of use-wear, and lastly, consulting experienced colleagues within the field to benefit from their scientific knowledge on the matter. First, when an archaeologist is looking at an artifact for typing purposes, often they will first be observing the manner in which the artifact was created.

Essentially this means looking at aspects such as flake scarring, retouching, and even telling the type of parent stone material the artifact was made from, which can all be useful in proper typing of an artifact. Flake scarring for instance occurs from the application of force on the chert core during manufacture and more often than not, they are unique to certain projectile points, depending on the force applied. Percussion and pressure are the two major kinds of force used in shaping a flaked stone artifact. This is similar to refurbishing, which occurs when an artifact has been used for a while and has become dull or damaged, so the user will “retouch” the artifact on the tip and edges to make them sharper; this is usually done through pressure flaking. Furthermore, in terms of looking at parent material, this can give the archaeologist an indication of what geographical area the artifact has come from, based on where the geological material occurs. But, archaeologists must do this while also accounting for the circumstances where individuals would collect the chert and take it with them to other regions. With this information, all of these aspects make up the technology of the artifacts and are vital in understanding that there is no “ideal” form when we discover points; only what we find. Archaeologists must be aware that artifacts have been subject to

attrition from usage, which can have a large effect on their look, size, and shape.

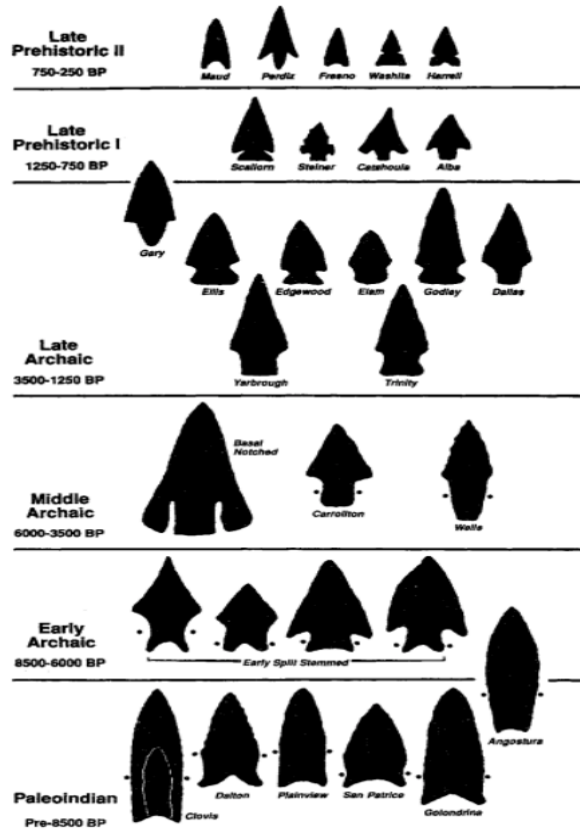
This brings us to the next topic, which is the way that use-wear plays a large part in the proper typing of an artifact. By obtaining knowledge over a long period of time about how these artifacts were created, archaeologists are now also able to understand how they were utilized. This understanding comes from scholars experimentally replicating stone artifacts and subjecting them to various tasks and then recording the modifications that result from use. Most of this modification is microscopic in scale, but can be quite informative, and it has allowed for a more complete understanding of how these artifacts functioned prehistorically.

Furthermore, this more finite association gives an even deeper understanding of the cultural context of the time-period. But, even with these methods which should make the typing of an artifact less strenuous, sometimes a point can be made in such an odd manner or used for such a long period of time-- that making the differentiation can still prove to be ambiguous. A circumstance such as this is where the reliance on multiple skilled and specialized colleagues becomes important. Unfortunately, a definite truth cannot be found. But, the



multiple opinions of these individuals can help to place the artifact in the type where it most likely belongs.

All the methods listed above have been utilized in my own research and have aided me in differentiating the artifacts into multiple artifact groupings. From this, I have obtained the temporal and vague geographical context of the artifacts. My research and scientific application to these artifacts has produced about 75 arrow point types and about 50 dart point types. From the thousands of artifacts overall, I have taken a sample of 2-4 projectile points from each type that will be used in the CAS reference collection. The importance of having more than one example is to exemplify the variation that occurs amongst projectile points of the same type. Subsequently, by understanding the typology the artifacts fit into-- I have also gained insight into the period and geographical areas of Texas where these types prevail.



**Fig. 1:** Depiction of the temporal context archaeologists can gain from typing projectile points. <sup>8</sup>

#### IV. Discussion:

<sup>8</sup> Turner, E. S., & Hester, T. R. A field guide to stone artifacts of Texas Indians. Houston, TX: Gulf Pub. Co. 1999. September 2017.

These aspects also show that the research question initially posed, which was, whether these surface artifacts could prove to be of any archaeological use without context—such as provenience. And, through the explanations given above it can be stated that they do. Artifacts such as these still yield technological, temporal, and educational value, which cannot be diminished just because it was not found “in situ” (in place). Furthermore, artifacts such as the ones in this collection will assist in educating future archaeology students by allowing them to properly and scientifically identify artifacts. Providing each student, a tangible example of not only the initial artifact creation, but also the often overlooked aspect of use-wear.

## **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, by understanding the background of collecting and the driving factors that cause collectors to focus on acquiring artifacts. Along with, understanding the overall need for artifacts to go undisturbed in an archaeological context. The symbiotic relationship established between archaeologists and collectors can be understood. From this, by utilizing anthropological resources that have been verified through time and research, surface found artifacts such as the projectile points in this collection, can find their

relevance. These points of relevance take form in morphological, temporal, geographical, use-wear, and educational contexts. Further achieving the answer to the initial thesis question posed-- which is that archaeological assemblages collected out of context, such as surface finds can still yield archaeological value. On a personal level, this exercise has afforded me an appreciation of artifact classification and typology, and the experience gives me a valuable career skill that I will use long into the future.

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