

“The Stones are Speaking”

Unearthing one of the earliest occupation sites in the Americas

PETER ANICK

Archaeology has always been a major interest for NEARA members. We often invite archaeologists to speak at our conferences and fund archaeological work which contributes to our research objectives. For those who have the time, there are even opportunities to participate in excavations through local archaeological field schools. Usually consisting of a few weeks on a site during the summer, these inexpensive training sessions teach archaeological methods from digging shovel test pits to setting up meter squares, troweling for artifacts, and recording finds.

One of the best field schools in New England is the New Hampshire State Conservation and Rescue Archaeology Program, affectionately known as SCRAP. Around fifteen years ago, our New Hampshire state NEARA coordinator Donna Thompson attended their field school, which at the time was investigating Paleoindian campsites in the White Mountains. Her tales of finding “channel flakes” and “fluted points” diagnostic of the earliest inhabitants of New England strongly tempted me to get involved as well. But what finally motivated me to make the long drives up to the SCRAP lab in Concord, New Hampshire was her mentioning that the team was planning to dig at a site in Texas known as the Gault Site. This was perhaps the premier Clovis site in the country, with artifacts dating back to 13,500 years ago.

I remember asking her, “The *Gault* Site? The famous Clovis site in Texas?” Yes, she confirmed. It turned out that Dick Boisvert, the New Hampshire state archaeologist, was a friend of the principal investigator at the site, Michael Collins. Dick had been bringing a group of trained volunteers there each spring to assist in an ambitious multi-year excavation which was seeking to uncover evidence for an even earlier, older-than-Clovis occupation. Such evidence would bolster the then controversial contention that the initial peopling of the Americas had occurred much earlier than the long-held “Clovis First” theory of nomads crossing the Bering Land Bridge through an ice-free corridor around 14,000 years ago.

I had already missed the summer field school that year but throughout the winter I spent many a weeknight at the SCRAP lab doing lab tasks and training my eye to recognize worked flakes among heaps of tiny stone fragments known as “kibble” due to their resemblance to bits of pet food. It was harder than I expected to distinguish tiny pieces of debitage (debris from tool making) from natural bits of stone with sharp edges or even deceptive slivers of wood. But over time I got the hang of it and Dick, sensing my sincerity, gave me permission to join the Gault team that year.

The Gault Site is located in Florence, Texas, on ranch land about an hour’s drive north of Austin. Our home for the two weeks would be a tiny bunkhouse a short walk from the excavation site. As we settled in, we were warned about the local hazards. “Check your shoes for scorpions before putting them on. There’s an owl nest with a protective mother hovering near the back door, so be sure to keep your distance. And for those pitching tents outside, try to avoid the fire ant nests.”

The dig site itself was protected from the elements by a large dome-shaped covering which kept out the cattle, sun, and rain but not the humidity or an occasional snake or flustered bird. Previous digs elsewhere on the property had yielded a butchered mammoth skull and what appeared to be a rectangular cobblestone floor, which would make it part of the oldest excavated “building” in the Americas. Sadly, the property had been open as a dig-for-pay site for years prior to its purchase by Michael Collins. The grounds were strewn with discarded artifacts exposed by random digging. Any artifacts unearthed without a detailed record of their context contribute little to the scientific understanding of a site.



Arriving at the domed tent covering the Gault Area 15 excavation.

The current project at Area 15 had begun in 2007, planned as a 48-square-meter excavation footprint which would step down to a 12-square-meter area at bedrock. Although the objective was to probe the deepest and potentially “older than Clovis” soil layers, intact archaeological finds in upper strata, including a hardy cluster of Archaic stone ovens, had delayed progress. Everything found in undisturbed soil needed to be meticulously excavated and recorded.

When we arrived in 2011, most of the digging activity was still concentrated in younger Archaic and Clovis strata. Troweling was done within meter-square units divided into four sections, allowing for two people to work together on each unit. As a novice, I was assigned to a shallower layer and paired with an experienced (and patient) mentor. The hard clay soil was difficult to scrape through and required a special technique. On the plus side, there were no roots to contend with and nearly every stone encountered was likely to be a worked artifact. So we took care, especially when striking what might be part of a larger object, to dig around it rather than dislodge it in order to enable recording and photographing it “in situ” (precisely in the position where found). The heavy clay still managed to conceal artifacts and all dirt was dumped into location-labeled buckets for screening. Screening was done by emptying the buckets onto screens and then spraying the dirt away with fire hoses. It was a highly efficient method but took some experience to avoid getting drenched in the process.



Dick Boisvert and Michael Collins observing the SCRAP team preparing the site for the day's excavation. The piles of stones in the center are the remains of earth ovens (2011).



After 5 cm of excavation, each meter square was drawn and photographed. A grid helps in locating stones and artifacts when doing the drawing.



Teams alternated between excavating and screening. Bookkeeping was just as important here as in the pit.

I returned with the SCRAP team the following year, which fortuitously coincided with a visit by Bruce Bradley, co-principal investigator of the site and world-renowned flint knapper. His demonstrations of knapping technique and the thought process involved in planning each strike made clear the high level of skill required to produce a series of long, thin blades or shape an elegant Clovis point out of a large round chunk of chert. Any error in the thinning process could render the tool unsalvageable. My own freshman attempt at knapping was cut short by a painful blow to my thumb.

By the following year, 2013, most of the site had finally been excavated down to the bedrock, nearly three meters below the ground level. A relatively sterile stratum with few artifacts had been found to lie beneath the Clovis level. But deeper down, just above the bedrock, was another artifact-rich level with many scatters of debitage. Digging within this critical layer required even more meticulous attention than in the upper levels. Instead of using a trowel, we dug with thin bamboo splinters so even the tiniest flakes could be recovered in situ and measured for their angle and orientation. A pump ran constantly to remove ground water seeping in.

A visit to the lab gave us a chance to see some of the artifacts previously found within the earliest layer. Surprisingly, fragments of spear points showed little resemblance to the later Clovis technology, suggesting a cultural discontinuity. We also got to examine a collection of incised stones found at the site over the years. Dating to Paleoindian and Archaic time periods, the small chert and limestone slabs with their finely incised and sometimes very intricate geometric patterns are some of the earliest examples of portable “art” on the American continent.

I learned very quickly that excavation is not for the faint-hearted or impatient. You have to contort your body into uncomfortable positions to access your own meter square while avoiding those of your neighbors. You have to tolerate the shrill beeping of laser rods used to measure the depth of each artifact found. You have to keep all your data straight in your head as you record the exact location and depth of each artifact on multiple forms. And you have to be very careful picking up discoidal cores so that you don’t cut your thumb open on a razor-sharp edge last used some 5000 years ago. I learned that lesson the hard way.

Creature discomforts aside, I enjoyed the zen-like focus on the task at hand. Each stroke of the trowel was filled with anticipation, even if only occasionally rewarded with a diagnostic artifact (as opposed small flakes, which were abundant). We looked forward to visits from Mike Collins who, sporting his iconic cowboy hat and suspenders, would expound on our latest finds or recount personal anecdotes. One morning, he rushed over to warn us to shut down the site immediately. A fast-moving thunderstorm was on its way and we could be trapped here if the creek flooded.



Michael Collins (standing) and Bruce Bradley (kneeling) discussing finds in the Clovis strata during the 2012 season.



Working with bamboo splinters in the older-than-Clovis level (2013). Note the cluster of stones embedded in the far wall. Orange tags indicate where OSL dating samples were taken.

With the excavation phase finally completed, the hard work of classification and analysis of artifacts in the lab commenced. Over forty formal artifacts and thousands of flakes provided ample evidence of early human habitation. There was even a small, unexplained cluster of cobbles in one corner of the excavation. OSL dates for the lowest layer ranged between 16 and 20 thousand years ago, well before the 12 to 13.6 thousand-year-old dates for the Clovis assemblage. The OSL dates were corroborated with diagnostic artifacts corresponding to known strata. Work on a monograph detailing the site's history, finds, and insights is ongoing.



One of over 100 incised stones found at the Gault Site.

In 2021, I chanced upon a Facebook post from documentary filmmaker Olive Talley seeking photos and videos of the Gault excavation. She was working on a project to tell the story of Michael Collins, who, having recognized the potential significance of the site, led a long, difficult campaign to rescue it for scientific research and finally saw his vision of an older-than-Clovis occupation of the Americas vindicated. I offered her my collection of photos and videos from my weeks working with the SCRAP team.

Four years later, her project has come to fruition as an award-winning documentary entitled "The Stones are Speaking." The well-crafted storyline presents a touching portrait of a true hero of American archaeology. A shortened version has been created for public television and can be viewed on the PBS website at www.pbs.org/show/the-stones-are-speaking/. A longer director's cut is available for streaming on Amazon and Google Play. Visit gaultfilm.com for more information on the making of the film, where to watch, and how the Gault site and film are contributing to public awareness of America's deep history.