

J. C. Harrington Medal in Historical Archaeology



Theresa A. Singleton

Theresa Ann Singleton is the recipient of the 2014 Society for Historical Archaeology (SHA) J. C. Harrington Medal in Historical Archaeology. The award was presented to Dr. Singleton at the SHA's annual conference in Quebec City, Canada, in recognition of her dedication to scholarship, innovative and pioneering work, commitment to mentoring students, and lifetime contributions in the field of historical archaeology.

A Path to Follow

The decision made by Theresa Singleton to pursue historical archaeology was important, as from that point forward she has quietly, yet decisively, conducted research and written many insightful works, while also serving as a trailblazing role model for generations of minority scholars. Theresa received her doctorate in 1980 from the University of Florida, having been advised by the first Harrington medalist, Charles Fairbanks. She has also been an active member of the SHA, serving as a board member (1992–1995), and also as a board member of the Southeastern Archaeological Conference (1988–1992). In April 2013, she was elected a member of the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts, in recognition of her contributions to collection, preservation, and scholarship in American history.

This review of Singleton's contributions to historical archaeology provides a means by which those interested in the field may gain a deeper appreciation of the range of her contributions, which include not only formal publications, but public museum exhibitions and quality mentoring. Collectively, these qualities are the reasons Christopher Fennell and Harrington medalist Robert

Schuyler submitted materials in 2011 reflecting support from nearly 100 of her colleagues who stood behind her nomination for the Harrington Medal, an award of rich symbolic meaning. This collective action reflects Professor Singleton's high esteem within the historical archaeology community, the importance of her scholarly contributions, and her significant role as a pioneer. Harrington medalist Kathleen Deagan, who initially taught Theresa the basics of historical archaeology field techniques wrote: "Theresa has been a real pioneer in African American archaeology, and has inspired a very global vision of that enterprise" (Fennell and Schuyler 2011:3). J. W. Joseph describes Singleton's scholarly impacts, stating:

Theresa's work in African American archaeology is extremely important and influenced the development and direction of the field. She has also developed strong museum-based public interpretative programs on African American history and archaeology that have further benefited the field and has supported and promoted African American archaeology from multiple states and forums (Fennell and Schuyler 2011:1).

Terrance Weik (2014, elec. comm.) pointed out to me that honoring Theresa with the Harrington Medal "is an important sign of diversification of archaeology and the growing presence of African American voices."

In my early years at Syracuse, when I was the only archaeologist on campus, I would regularly take refuge in the office of my senior colleague, John Langston Gwaltney, an African American cultural anthropologist and author of *The Dissenters: Voices from Contemporary America* (Gwaltney 1986). One day, Theresa's name came up in relation to the potential of historical archaeology and an event she was organizing with Fath Ruffins, John's friend and Theresa's boss at the Smithsonian Institution. John, who was always direct, blunt, yet encouraging, charged me with getting Theresa to come to Syracuse. It took some time, but with the assistance of Chris DeCorse, we convinced Theresa to join the faculty at Syracuse, where she has contributed significantly as a thoughtful colleague who never loses her cool, even when occasionally confronted by lower forms of academic politics. She is part of what makes our program so strong and cohesive, and I am glad to call her a close friend and colleague.

Formative Years: The Value of Knowledge

Theresa Ann Singleton was born 15 April 1952 in Charleston, South Carolina. She was the fifth and youngest child of William Singleton and Helen North Singleton. Helen and William met when they were teaching at the same elementary school, hence education has always been at the center of Theresa's life. Surrounded by a family that valued education, her role model was her oldest sister Rosalind, who was outgoing and excelled in everything. Theresa excelled, but in a quiet and shy manner. Theresa was positively influenced by her maternal grandmother, Serena North, the only grandparent she knew. Her grandmother conveyed to Theresa the importance of having a career doing work she enjoyed, and she inspired Theresa to develop her personal fashion style. Theresa is a big fan of *Project Runway*. Her grandmother made many of Theresa's clothes, which she cherished and wore at every opportunity.

From kindergarten to her sophomore year in high school, Theresa attended Immaculate Conception School (ICS) in Charleston, as had her mother and all of her mother's sisters. Theresa's experiences in high school were uniquely hers, but mirror the changes and conflicts of the 1960s. The Oblate Sisters of Providence taught at ICS. The Oblates were a Roman Catholic order founded by women of African descent, some of whom had come to Baltimore as part of the refugee community from Haiti during and after the Haitian Revolution. In 1968, the Archbishop of Charleston merged ICS, the predominantly black Catholic high school, with Bishop England, the predominately white Catholic high school. Here Theresa was confronted by outright racism, as some of the white students made racist comments openly, and there was no effort on the part of the school's administration to check their behavior. This was a challenging environment, but Theresa managed to graduate with honors in 1970. Theresa received a scholarship to attend Trinity College, a predominantly white Catholic college in Washington, D.C. On reflection, given her experiences,

she is not sure why she went there; she was already interested in museum studies, however, and thought that Washington, D.C., would be a good location. Moreover, her sister Rosalind lived there, as did numerous cousins—descendants of her grand-aunt, who migrated to Washington from South Carolina during the great migration of black Southerners in the early 1900s. During her first year, she took Trinity's only anthropology class and was captivated. The problem was, she was on scholarship at Trinity, so how was she going to take more anthropology? Fortunately for the field, the academic dean allowed her to create her own program of study and take anthropology classes at nearby Catholic University. She did well, graduating in 1974. In 1992, she would be asked by the president of Trinity College, Patricia McGuire, who graduated with Theresa in 1974, to give Trinity's commencement address.

Getting Started in Archaeology

In 1972, Theresa Singleton had her first experience in archaeology, a field school at the Paleoindian Thunderbird site in Virginia that was directed by William Gardner from Catholic University. She enjoyed the field experience in archaeology, but was not excited about doing Paleoindian archaeology. Theresa heard about a field course in archaeology at Oxford University. Her parents agreed to pay for it, but she had to earn the airfare and spending money. After graduating, she worked three jobs up until the time she left for the trip. While in England, she visited sites like Stonehenge, and excavated at Grimes Graves, a Neolithic flint mine not far from Cambridge. She enjoyed the experience, but was resolved not to work at anymore lithic sites. She returned to South Carolina and began teaching in a public junior high school while she applied to graduate schools. Her father died in 1974, and she was considering schools near Charleston so that she could be near her mother. Fortunately, the SHA held its annual meeting in Charleston in January 1975. She went to the conference, where she met Charles Fairbanks. He strongly encouraged her to go to Florida, and told her that he would look out for her application. She was accepted and started at the University of Florida in September 1975. She describes her first year of graduate school as "intense" and was happy to get into the field for the spring and summer quarters.

Fairbanks recommended that she enroll in Kathleen Deagan's Florida State University field school at St. Augustine so she would have training in field methods specifically for historical archaeology. Deagan also worked with Theresa to define a master's project examining a barrel well and other 16th- and 17th-century contexts at the Joseph de Leon site (Singleton 1977). That summer, Theresa applied her newfound expertise in historical archaeology to sites on Sapelo Island, one of the barrier islands along the coast of Georgia (working with Ray Crook from her graduate cohort at Florida). During the first two weeks, they conducted test excavations at a sugar mill on Sapelo. Theresa would work the next four summers and the spring quarter of 1979 on the Georgia coast. Her investigation of Colonel's Island is described in a chapter exploring changing conditions of labor in the edited volume *Archaeology of Slavery and Plantation Life* (Singleton 1985a); see also Singleton (1985b, 1987). For her 1980 dissertation, Theresa investigated sites at the Butler Island rice plantation in 1978 and 1979. At its peak, the plantation had about 500 enslaved workers living in four separate settlements. The owner of Butler Island also owned a Sea Island cotton plantation on St. Simon's Island. In the 1950s, Butler Island became part of a waterfowl management area, and the practical objective of the project was to identify, locate, and test sites that should be avoided in creating habitats for the waterfowl. Theresa's dissertation also included an examination of the ways in which slave life on a rice plantation was similar to and different from that on the Sea Island cotton plantations on St. Simon's Island (Singleton 1980, 1986, 1992c).

Broadening Scope and Conducting Defining Scholarship

Singleton expanded her studies of rice plantations in coastal Georgia and presented her findings in broader comparative perspective in "An Archaeological Framework for Slavery and Emancipation," a chapter in Mark Leone and Parker Potter's volume *The Recovery of Meaning: Historical*

Archaeology of the Eastern United States (Singleton 1988a). Over the next few years, she wrote synthetic assessments of the role of archaeology in examining African American life in Southern plantation contexts in a range of archaeological and historical venues (Singleton 1988b, 1990a, 1990b, 1991a, 1991b, 1992a, 1992b, 1992c, 1994, 1995a, 1995b).

Theresa's work at Butler Island resulted in two unexpected outcomes that would have a lasting influence upon her future research and career decisions. First, her interaction with descendants of the enslaved people in the area made her realize that it was important to include them in archaeological research projects. Second, she began to appreciate the importance of making archaeological research accessible not only to descendants, but to the general public in formats like exhibitions, films, and publications geared toward lay audiences (Singleton 1984, 1986, 1988b, 1995a). She would contribute to organizing eight exhibitions, participate in making three films on archaeology, and publish eight articles and exhibit essays for popular consumption. One of her interviewees was Rudolph Capers, who as a boy had worked on rice fields in the area. Through her interviews she learned a great deal about the lifeways of the people now referred to as Geechee, but in the late 1970s they did not openly call themselves Geechee or Gullah. While she was writing her dissertation, she was awarded a Whitney M. Young Jr. Postdoctoral Fellowship that would allow her to gain museum experience at the Charleston Museum.

The state archaeologist, Lewis Larson, put Theresa in touch with Carole Merritt, who was developing an exhibition on the African American family in Georgia. Carole and Theresa came up with the idea of re-creating the hearth of one the excavated slave quarters at Butler Island and displaying some of the excavated artifacts that would allude to the formation of African American families during slavery. The exhibition, entitled *Homecoming: Afro-American American Family Life in Georgia*, opened in 1982 at the Atlanta Public Library. Working with Carole on the exhibition reignited Theresa's desire for a career in museums. Theresa taught briefly at the College of Charleston and at the University of South Carolina, and landed her first museum position at the South Carolina State Museum in 1983. She was hired to undertake background and object research for exhibitions planned for the history hall, such as one on the textile industry, part of which she used in her contribution to an exhibition on South Carolina quilts (Singleton 1985c).

In 1985, Theresa began working at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, assembling a guide to all the historical materials related to African American life in the Smithsonian Institution's collections (with the exception of materials in the art museums). In 1988, she accepted her "dream job" as a curator in the Department of Anthropology at the National Museum of Natural History. She saw this as an opportunity to do both archaeology and museum work; unfortunately, a change in leadership at the museum combined with budget cuts eliminated her start-up funds for archaeology. While at the Smithsonian, she examined materials that had been collected at the New Orleans World and Cotton Exposition of 1885 and from the First Industrial Exposition of the Colored Citizens of the District of Columbia in 1886. She then organized the small exhibition *Industry, Skill, Ingenuity: Southern Black Expositions 1880–1915*, held in 1988 at the National Museum of American History.

While at the Smithsonian, she collaborated with Ronald Bailey, at that time the director of African-American Studies at the University of Mississippi, and together they won a National Endowment for the Humanities grant to organize a conference on African American archaeology called "Digging the Afro-American Past: Archaeology and the Black Experience," held in May 1989. This conference brought together a wide array of scholars and led to her founding the *African-American Archaeology Network Newsletter* in 1990, which is now known as the *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter* (<<http://www.diaspora.illinois.edu/newsletter.html>> and <<http://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/>>). The conference was also the impetus for the publication of the edited volume "*I, Too, Am America*": *Archaeological Studies of African-American Life* (Singleton 1999a, 1999b). Shortly after the conference, she contributed to the development of a major exhibition on slavery organized by the Museum of the Confederacy—Before Freedom Came—which opened in 1991; and served as guest curator of the exhibition "Links in a Chain": The Significance of Black Labor, at the Charleston Museum in 1991 and 1992. In 1992, she developed a

small exhibition of colonoware pottery at the Smithsonian with Mark Bograd—Pitchers, Pots and Pipkins: Clues to Plantation Life. Theresa and Mark Bograd also collaborated to compile a guide to the literature of the archaeology of the African diaspora for the SHA series, “Guides to the Archaeological Literature of the Immigrant Experience in America” (Singleton and Bograd 1995).

In 1990, she was invited to work with Lydia Pulsipher and Mac Goodwin at Galway Plantation on Montserrat, in order to collect archaeological data needed to fabricate a portion of a slave settlement on a sugar plantation for the Quincentenary exhibition. The exhibit, *Seeds of Change*, opened at the National Museum of Natural History in 1992. The work on Montserrat also whetted her appetite for working in the Caribbean, but first she traveled to West Africa.

Theresa met Chris DeCorse in 1991 at the SHA meeting in Richmond, and two years later they carried out a small survey project in coastal Ghana. Chris focused on the sites with European fortifications and Theresa on the nearby African villages. She conducted subsurface testing at one of the sites, the village of Eguafu. Two of Chris DeCorse’s doctoral students, Sam Spiers and Gerard Chouin, would later undertake additional archaeological and ethnographical research at Eguafu. On that same trip to Africa, Theresa visited several sites in Benin and later published an article, “The Slave Trade Remembered on the Former Gold and Slave Coasts,” in *Slavery and Abolition* (Singleton 1999c:150–169). Years later, the Africanist historian Robin Law told her he believes her article inspired a number of Africanists to pursue research on the memory of slavery in Africa. The article continues to be listed among the most frequently cited articles in the journal *Slavery and Abolition*.

It was the legendary archaeologist, Betty Meggers, a research associate in the Smithsonian’s anthropology department, who came to Theresa in 1993 wanting to know about the archaeology of Africans in the Americas and particularly in Latin America. This conversation sparked Theresa’s interest in the possibility of doing research in Cuba. In 1996, Theresa collaborated with an ethnographer to develop an ethnoarchaeological project focusing on Yoruba- and Fon-influenced Santería sites near Havana and in the city of Matanzas. Unfortunately, the project was slowed by political and bureaucratic issues. Theresa’s Cuban colleagues persuaded her to consider investigating coffee plantations. There were numerous coffee plantations in western Cuba, but no archaeological work had been conducted on them since the 1980s.

After a series of site visits, she began work at a former coffee plantation, Santa Ana de Viajacas, in 1999 (Singleton 2001c, 2005a, 2005c). The attraction of this site was the massive masonry wall built around a settlement of detached slave quarters known as *bohios*. The wall enclosure became the lens through which Theresa conducted a study of slavery in an area, once the westernmost portion of Matanzas jurisdiction, with a large concentration of enslaved Africans, several significant slave uprisings, and numerous short-lived maroon settlements. Her research examines the master/slave social relation in a slave society characterized by considerable violence, resistance, and negotiated coexistence. She has published eight articles and book chapters on the project, and just completed a book manuscript on the subject that is now under peer review. The tentative title is *Behind a Wall Enclosure: An Archaeology of Slavery on a Cuban Coffee Plantation*.

In 1996, Theresa joined the faculty of the Department of Anthropology, Syracuse University, initially splitting her time between the Smithsonian and Syracuse. Since August of 2000, she has been at Syracuse full-time, and during this period she conducted the bulk of her research in Cuba (Singleton 2001c, 2003, 2005a, 2005c, 2007, 2008), while continuing to address issues of broad interest to the study of historical archaeology of the African diaspora (Bograd and Singleton 1997; Singleton 1996a, 1996b, 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 2001a, 2001b, 2005b, 2006, 2010a, 2010b, 2010d, 2011, 2013; Singleton and Bograd 2000; Singleton and Orser 2003; Singleton and Torres de Souza 2009).

At Syracuse University, Theresa Singleton has served on the committees of 29 Ph.D. students who have completed their degrees. She is currently on 17 Ph.D. committees, 9 of which are her advisees. The diverse research of these students spans the 17th–19th centuries temporally, and the United States, the Caribbean, Brazil, Mexico, and Peru geographically. Theresa’s studies involve much more than archaeological investigations. She has spent considerable time learning about

coffee production, particularly the ways coffee was produced in the Spanish Antilles. Because she was unable to visit coffee farms and mills in Cuba, she visited coffee production centers in the Dominican Republic.

In 2006, she began revisiting her earlier work on the Georgia coast. She has made several trips to the Georgia coast with the intention of developing a new field project. In 2008, she was invited to participate in a conference held in Savannah entitled “The Atlantic World and African American Life and Culture in the Georgia Lowcountry,” and her contribution was published as a chapter, “Reclaiming the Gullah-Geechee Past: Archaeology of Slavery in Coastal Georgia,” in Philip Morgan’s 2010 edited volume, *African American Life in the Georgia Lowcountry: The Atlantic World and the Gullah-Geechee* (Singleton 2010c). More significantly, she has reconnected with the Geechee community. Later this year (2014) she will be participating in a homecoming celebration with the descendants of the enslaved people from Butler Island Plantation at Butler Island. To Theresa’s surprise, several descendants of the enslaved community of Butler Island Plantation have read her dissertation and some of the articles she published on it.

Beyond the Academy

All who know her will attest to Theresa’s quiet, modest, and reserved disposition. As you get to know her, you will find that she is involved in a variety of interests beyond the university and museum, including antiquing, gardening, and jazz. When she was a teenager, Theresa’s brother Billy introduced her to the jazz of Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and Mongo Santamaria. Working in Cuba and trips to the Dominican Republic revived her appreciation of jazz, particularly of Latin percussion. She has since become the number-one fan of Dominican percussionist and *rumbiero* (drummer for rumba) Victor Camilo.

Impact and Influence

Jamie Brandon emphasizes that Theresa’s “work is foundational to those of us who do research on the African Diaspora and plantation South,” and that “she has been an important role model for a new and growing generation of African-American archaeologists” (Fennell and Schuyler 2011:2). Deborah Rotman notes that Theresa’s “work on the African diaspora has been inspirational” to analysts examining other subjects of culture group identities within historical archaeology generally (Fennell and Schuyler 2011:2–3).

Similarly, Akin Ogundiran attests that “Dr. Singleton’s pioneering and trail blazing contributions in African-American Archaeology [have] helped [advance] the field of historical archaeology in general” (Fennell and Schuyler 2011:3). Martha Zierden further observes: “Besides all of her scholarly work, Theresa has always been willing to counsel archaeologists, individually and collectively, on appropriate and sensitive approaches to the field of African Diaspora studies” (Fennell and Schuyler 2011:3). Harrington medalist Merrick Posnansky points out the importance of Singleton’s global vision, stating that she “is one of the few African American scholars to work in West Africa and learn about the research there at first hand. She has been an ambassador for our discipline” (Fennell and Schuyler 2011:3).

The SHA honors Theresa Ann Singleton as the 2014 recipient of the J. C. Harrington Medal in Historical Archaeology. Theresa has established a clear and broadened path for new generations of historical archaeologists to follow, and she has provided insights deeply rooted in the value of the pursuit of knowledge. She followed her grandmother’s advice and selected a field of study that she enjoyed, and through her scholarly writings, museum exhibits, and quality mentoring has demonstrated the positive potential for diversity and creativity in the field of historical archaeology.

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