The Archaeology of North American Farmsteads
Mark D. Groover
University Press of Florida, Gainesville, 2008. 160 pp., illus., index. $24.95 paper.

This slim volume will prove invaluable to professionals pondering the archaeological significance of America’s farmsteads, one of the country’s more ubiquitous historic property types. Varied research questions, multiple analytical scales, interesting analytical methods, and regional and temporal farmstead variation are addressed in the context of academic research and cultural resource management (CRM) assessment. Groover’s book will be a useful supplemental teaching text, and students will find the case studies informative. This book does not purport to cover all regions of the United States or all types of agrarian sites. For the regions and time periods discussed there is a wealth of comparative information on farmsteads.

Farmstead archaeology is a burgeoning field in historical archaeology, in part because, as Groover writes, there are “thousands” (millions) of agrarian homestead sites across the landscape. Groover’s goal is to illustrate to students and professionals possible ways to frame site-specific, regional, and even national research questions. He offers up case studies and iterates throughout that there are myriad additional questions that can be asked and methods that can be applied in this field. He sees that the “challenge for historical archaeologists is to systematically define the range of material characteristics and conditions that rural farm families experienced” over time and space (p. 10). He addresses broad cultural processes of industrialization, migration, consumerism, colonization, and modernization, and how they are differentially expressed at the regional and local levels. He hopes to stimulate formation of a structured network of farmstead specialists to exchange data and theories, paralleling dynamic plantation and African diaspora archaeology interchanges.

Groover addresses the biggest challenge for advocates of farmstead archaeology in the realm of CRM and research—their great numbers and the fact that many farmstead sites date from the 20th century. He uses census data to mark numerical trends in U.S. farms. A basic figure shows the number of farmsteads peaking at the turn of the 20th century. Groover notes this process is in itself worthy of study. It underlines the rise of corporate farms at the expense of family ones as well as demonstrating the influence of 20th-century urbanization and migration patterns on rural culture. After introducing the case studies, Groover describes and compares their respective material trends, landscape changes, and household lifecycles. Three regions are investigated: the Northeast, Southeast, and Midwest; and three time periods within each region: colonial, antebellum/federal, and postbellum/20th century. Substantive questions are asked in each of the case studies, and interesting cultural parallels and differences are found. Groover is unapologetic about this cultural history and cultural region organizational scheme, as he finds it quite useful.

Chapter 2 provides a thorough overview of past and present farmstead archaeology research topics. Groover discusses the maturation of studies such as those focusing on socioeconomic factors, portable material culture, and landscape. He explains how simplistic notions about the relationship of wealth and agrarian material culture display have been dispelled in the decades since the 1980s. Groover also discusses the foci of various kinds of investigations such as socioeconomics, with questions centering on the interaction of economic position (poverty, middling income, wealth), tenure (laborer, tenant, renter, owner), race or ethnicity (African American, European American, Native American, mixed), and their varying expression in settlement pattern, architecture, midden, and portable material culture. This chapter has a straightforward summation of potential primary documents to aid potential researchers. It also has a nice section on basic CRM procedures, especially in light of significance determinations at the site and

Permission to reprint required.
district levels. He emphasizes that sites have to be judged within a research agenda but also in light of their physical condition, rarity, and other archaeological qualities.

A research design guides creation of contexts and subsequent significance determinations. Research designs also are necessary for long-term academic research programs. Research design and context, Groover argues in chapter 2, is provided by taking a number of key steps. He begins by using world systems theory as a theme connecting farmsteads to broad socioeconomic processes such as colonization. He recommends developing a detailed, regional-specific historic context. Historic contexts are constructed from geographical, archaeological, and historical sources outlining major regional trends. He mentions that state historic preservation offices often have partial or completed contexts (he calls them a synthesis) for their state regions. Regional cultural and archaeological data are aids in developing pertinent site-specific questions and interpretation. Groover advocates that regional analysts consider cultural and economic processes such as mercantilism transformations to capitalism, as occurring at “medium-scale time” (p. 20). Long scale must be along the lines of prehistoric farming. Archaeologists use a multiscaled analysis of the farmstead, area, and region, and consider results in light of events and time scales. In a smaller scope, he reminds researchers that different types of crops and livestock often required specialized outbuildings, lot layouts, and landuse and labor patterns. Region, time, household lifecycle, wealth, tenure type, gender, personal tastes, and other factors also influence archaeological site signatures.

The case studies explored in chapters 3 through 5 are varied and detailed enough to be interesting. The figures are simple but clear, and archaeological descriptions easy to follow. Before discussing individual farmsteads Groover provides a rich discussion of broad patterns of time-specific traits, such as architectural styles and primary consumption patterns. Groover draws attention to the uniqueness of many of the farms and their inhabitants while at the same time illuminating regional themes and commonalities. For example, he compares and contrasts colonial midwestern French farmers and their lots to English patterns at Kingsmill in Virginia. It is an effective demonstration of the approach he advocates. Groover showcases other archaeologists’ research designs and successful projects as well as his own. In the last chapter Groover reiterates major points. He does tend to repeat himself throughout the book, but most will find it a useful tactic. He effectively illustrates that farmsteads are cultural resources that should continue to be investigated in historical archaeology.

LINDA F. STINE
DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO
436 GRAHAM
GREENSBORO, NC 27412