



J. C. Harrington Medal in Historical Archaeology: Charles E. Orser, Jr.

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Fig. 1 Charles E. Orser, Jr. (Photo courtesy of Charles E. Orser, Jr., 2019.)

Charles E. Orser, Jr., received the Society for Historical Archaeology's (SHA) 2019 J. C. Harrington Medal in Historical Archaeology at the 52nd Annual Conference on Historical and Underwater Archaeology in St. Charles, Missouri, in January (Fig. 1). He received this

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award both for his foundational work on southern U.S. plantations and for his success in internationalizing historical archaeology and moving it well beyond its initial home in North America. His lifetime of enduring scholarship in and dedication to the field of historical archaeology make him an ideal recipient of the J. C. Harrington Medal.

Charles Edward Orser, Jr., was born in 1950 in Wyandotte, Michigan, just south of Detroit. His father worked on the line at one of the General Motors plants in Detroit and then became a tool-and-die maker at General Motors for most of his life. Chuck thus developed an early appreciation of capitalism, unions, and how to navigate one's labor. Elizabeth Scott remembers him saying that he understood very well the "speed-up" and the "slow-down," and marveled to watch him adapt that, day in and day out, to a professor's job at a university.

Chuck first saw historical archaeology as a boy on a family vacation in 1959. They visited Fort Michilimackinac in northern Michigan, and he saw excavations taking place there, where Lewis Binford was Moreau Maxwell's assistant. There was a wooden wall surrounding the huge excavation area, and Chuck remembers looking through the little windows that were spaced along the wall, thinking it was cool. And thus a kernel of interest in historical archaeology was planted.

Chuck did his undergraduate studies at Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti, majoring in history with minors in geology and English literature. He graduated with his B.S. in 1972. He then went to Wayne State University to work on his master's degree in

anthropology. His major professor was Arnold Pilling, and Gordon Grosscup was on his committee. He received his master's degree in 1975, and his thesis was entitled, "The Kolmer Site: An Eighteenth-Century Michigamea Village" (Orser 1975).

Chuck had a variety of fieldwork experiences while he was an undergraduate, including working at the Zimmerman site, but he held his first field-director positions working for Margaret Brown in southwestern Illinois in the mid-1970s. He conducted excavations at Fort Kaskaskia and at Fort de Chartres; these were some of the first systematic excavations of French colonial sites in the middle Mississippi Valley.

It was also there in 1974 that he met Janice Krebel, his lifelong partner, whose family lived not far down the road from the Fort de Chartres site. Scott recalls him saying that, right away, he was taken with the "cute redhead with the beer," as she was bringing beer out to the crew. Now, we are not sure about this, but we are guessing this was a case of southern Illinois hospitality, with local farmers taking pity on these poor young folks out digging in the hot sun (not even for a crop!) and sending out a daughter with some welcome refreshment.

At any rate, it has been a match made in heaven. They were married in 1975. While sometimes getting involved in the nitty-gritty of archaeology, Janice has always been an integral part of all of Chuck's fieldwork projects as the organizer/budget director/arranger extraordinaire, as anyone who has taken one of Chuck's field schools knows very well.

They then moved to Carbondale, Illinois, where Chuck undertook his doctoral studies at Southern Illinois University. He was influenced by the historian Gary Nash's book *Red, White, and Black*, and decided that, over the course of his career, he wanted to do archaeological research on all three groups (and so it has come to pass). His dissertation research continued his interest in historical-period native groups, and Jon Muller was his major professor. His 1980 dissertation was entitled *An Archaeological and Historical Socioeconomic Analysis of Arikara Mortuary Practice* (Orser 1980). While at Southern Illinois University he also worked closely with Jerome Handler on research into slavery.

It seems like a logical progression, then, that Chuck shifted his focus to African American slavery and postbellum tenancy. After a year as the assistant state archaeologist in Michigan, working with John Halsey in the Michigan History Division, he next obtained a multiyear archaeological project with the National Park

Service at Millwood Plantation, which straddled the border between South Carolina and Georgia. This resulted in the 1988 publication of *The Material Basis of the Postbellum Tenant Plantation: Historical Archaeology in the South Carolina Piedmont* (Orser 1988b). This was the first major publication in historical archaeology that dealt with the postbellum period and was a significant reminder to the field that plantation archaeology was not confined to the antebellum period.

After subsequent temporary teaching positions at Loyola University of Chicago and the University of South Dakota, Chuck landed a tenure-track job at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. He and Janice and their three daughters, Erin, Emily, and Christine, moved to a cultural and physical environment completely new to them: Louisiana. Between 1983 and 1989, Chuck conducted fieldwork at multiple plantations in Louisiana, including Oakley Plantation and Magnolia Mound Plantation, as well as the Tabasco Property site on Avery Island, continuing his interest in African American archaeology.

Between 1984 and 1995, Chuck published 25 articles and book chapters concerning the archaeology of enslaved Africans, tenancy, and the workings of plantations in the U.S. South. These were some of the first publications in historical archaeology framed in Marxist theory and explicitly replacing, as one title put it, status and caste with economics and power.

This early fieldwork on antebellum and postbellum plantations in Louisiana, Georgia, and South Carolina was instrumental in moving the field toward a critical perspective on racialization and systemic racism. Using historical materialism, he pulled aside the "Spanish-moss curtain" and revealed the economic underpinnings of capitalist plantation slavery, archaeological evidence of the daily lives of enslaved Africans, and the persistence of this racialized system into the postbellum period (Orser 1984, 1987, 1988a, 1988b). He introduced network theory to historical archaeology in this earlier work as well, something he elaborated upon later in his 1996 study, *A Historical Archaeology of the Modern World* (Orser 1996), and *A Primer on Modern-World Archaeology* (Orser 2014).

His publications on plantation archaeology initiated a more rigorous and critical archaeology in the discipline that emphasized the larger economic context of which an individual plantation was a part. Chuck's research on southern U.S. plantations, tenancy, and racialization informed his subsequent work with Pedro Paulo Funari

on maroon settlements in Brazil (Funari et al. 2005), as well as his work on tenant farmers in 19th-century Ireland. His 1998 *American Anthropologist* article on the challenge of race to historical archaeology (Orser 1998), and his books *Race and Practice in Archaeological Interpretation* (Orser 2004) and *The Archaeology of Race and Racialization in Historic America* (Orser 2007) brought this earlier work in plantation archaeology to bear on his analysis of Irish and Chinese immigrants in American society. Chuck's research and publications on plantation slavery and racialization have had an enormous impact on the practice of historical archaeology and continue to do so.

Much of his work is devoted to dealing with how people come to be despised, usually by being seen as belonging to biologically inferior groups (Orser 2004). This is racialization properly divested from biology, and is correctly seen as a mutable weapon that is best described as a frame of mind. Racialization requires a hierarchical social structure in which production identifies immigrants as incapable of social movement or of accumulating social capital, which is often called respect. Chuck argued and showed that in a racializing social structure, such as Southern plantations before and after the Civil War and in the Irish farming lands taken by the British, the need for cheap labor makes the racial category: African Americans equal Chinese equal Irish in this calculus.

Chuck moved to Illinois State University in 1989 and by 1999 had been named distinguished professor. There his research focus shifted once again, to the "White" of Nash's book title. Chuck's most extensive international fieldwork projects have included more than 20 years of research and teaching in the Republic of Ireland. Archaeology in the republic has largely avoided the 19th century and its aftermath and remains much more firmly grounded in a European archaeology that focuses on material description. Chuck did not avoid the Famine period, instead excavating a number of Irish-farm family houses, firmly establishing through ceramic analysis that the native Irish were not the dark, hopeless brutes painted by British colonizers' narratives.

To this picture Chuck added a model for seeing the poverty that comes from colonial expropriation and the racism that allows people to blame the poor for their own condition. He does all this to focus on the explicit, deliberate creation of poverty, which he points out has no finite limits within certain capitalist agricultural systems. Moreover, he is wise enough to use local leaders who sorted

out genetics from colonial rapaciousness at the time and for us. John Mitchel, an 1860s Irish leader, said: "The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the famine" (Mitchel 1860:219). He argued that

a million and a half men, women, and children were carefully, prudently, and peacefully slain by the English government. They died of hunger in the midst of abundance, which their own hands created; and it is quite immaterial to distinguish those who perished in the agencies of famine itself from those who died of typhus, ... which in Ireland is always caused by famine. (Mitchel 1868:596)

A Historical Archaeology of the Modern World (Orser 1996) is one of the settings in which Chuck has championed historical archaeology as a field that is uniquely well-positioned to illuminate the last 500 years of everyday life. For instance, his 1995 textbook *Historical Archaeology* (Orser and Fagan 1995) advocated for a synthetic material analysis of colonial expansion and exploitation. The 1995 study, originally coauthored with Brian Fagan, has since gone through two very ambitious revisions under Orser's authorship alone, the most recent version appearing in August 2016 (Orser 2016). The book clearly favors a Marxian reading of capitalism's emergence and is a work with genuine theoretical ambitions; nevertheless, it very clearly respects archaeology's long-established systematic methodological analysis of concrete assemblages.

His work in Ireland became an essential building block in his research on international racism, which Chuck has championed as an especially central topic for historical archaeology. He has written two books, *Race and Practice in Archaeological Interpretation* (Orser 2004) and *The Archaeology of Race and Racialization in Historic America* (Orser 2007), that take racism and materiality as their focus. The rapid growth of archaeologies of race examining the African diaspora, overseas Chinese, and Irish immigrants bears a significant debt to Chuck's systematic examination of race that he began in American plantation contexts before extending his work to Ireland and Brazil.

In Brazil, Chuck formed an intellectual partnership with Pedro Paulo Funari, Brazil's leading historical archaeologist, and both excavated at the maroon community of Palmares and published the results of their work there. Chuck tried two initiatives in Brazil, as he did in Ireland. First, he partnered with historical archaeologists

and brought Funari more closely into the North American fold, thus internationalizing a North American endeavor that had already spread to Brazil, but was unrecognized by North American historical archaeologists. Second, he studied a community that sustained an independent critique of capitalism and moved away from class by rejecting exploitative colonialism. Palmares endured for nearly 90 years. This work was noted widely and forms part of Chuck's determination to broaden the field far beyond North America and into a level of understanding class, race, and the other effects of worldwide capitalism.

His founding of the *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* in 1997 (which met with some resistance at the time) aspired to encourage a host of archaeologists working outside the continental U.S. and North America. The journal today has published essays on virtually every part of the world in which archaeology has examined colonial and contemporary life. The journal is used widely as a benchmark publication accompanying tenure cases in many departments of anthropology. It is routinely linked as a peer to our field's main journal, *Historical Archaeology*, which continues to be the most prominent publication of North American historical archaeology. The appearance of increasingly more international case studies in *Historical Archaeology* is itself a testament to the way the *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* has contributed to global scholarly networks and the growth of SHA itself. His effort has been one of the main mechanisms to promote the spread and uniform scholarly integrity of worldwide historical archaeology.

After leaving Illinois State University in 2007, Chuck held positions with the New York State Museum and with Vanderbilt University. His most recent research project is being carried out in conjunction with the University of Central Lancashire, excavating at 17th-century Malkin Tower Farm, also known as Pendle Hill, in Blacko, Lancashire. His latest book, *An Archaeology of the English Atlantic World, 1600–1700* (Orser 2018), provides the context for this research.

Having trained many professionals and having influenced many more, Chuck continues to be interested in and engaged with colleagues' research, visiting excavations, such as Kathryn Sampeck's field school in Cherokee, North Carolina, and Chris Matthews's and Brad Phillippi's field schools on Long Island, New York, and participating in invited seminars and workshops.

After deciding to retire from teaching, he is now set to begin work on early 19th-century urban African American sites in Toronto, Ontario, in his new position at Timmins Martell Heritage Consultants in London, Ontario. He will be engaged in the study of the "Ward" in Toronto, as well as African American settlement in western Ontario, between Toronto and Windsor. The Ward (Toronto's area that is like the Five Points in New York City) was an historical "slum" that was the terminus of the Underground Railroad; most early Black residents were escaped slaves (as Chuck says, this is also a way to understand maroonage). He is also affiliated with the Department of Anthropology and the Museum of Ontario Archaeology at the University of Western Ontario.

While at Illinois State University, Chuck founded a master's-level program dedicated strictly to historical archaeology, and it was Scott's great pleasure and honor to work with him there. However, he has trained a number of students elsewhere and has influenced scores of colleagues throughout the field. His publications are enormous in number and scope, and he stands among the most widely cited historical archaeologists in the world. He continues to command deep respect from historical archaeologists around the world and is a model of scholarly and professional integrity.

We are very pleased to present Charles E. Orser, Jr., as a recipient of the J. C. Harrington Medal. We have seen this award given many times over many years, and we realize that the spouse and family are sometimes mentioned and are always appreciated, usually as background and supports. However, neither of us feels that Janice Orser is support only. Chuck always felt incredibly fortunate that Janice never begrudged him the time he spent doing research and writing, and that she, in fact, encouraged him. We acknowledge here that she is an integral part of Chuck's professional life, including his writing, his fieldwork, and his capacity to endure several jobs that were less than ideal. It is true that this medal only goes to one archaeologist. It is just as true that, in this case, it goes to two people, implicitly, if not by inscription.

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