

# MISSISSIPPI COAST ARCHAEOLOGY AND ETHNOHISTORY IN THE WPA HISTORICAL RECORDS SURVEY

by

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## ABSTRACT

The Historical Records Survey, one of many national make-work projects administered by the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s, contributed significantly to the preservation of local history at the county level. Although largely unknown to anthropologists, the HRS also contains important archaeological and ethnohistorical information. This paper describes a Mississippi Gulf Coast case study, in which the anthropological relevance of HRS county archives is explored.

*This is a working draft. Your comments are welcome.  
Please do not quote it without checking with me first ('cause it may have changed).*

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## INTRODUCTION

Archaeologists and ethnohistorians must contend with many data problems that affect the validity and reliability of their interpretations of the past. Archaeological research, for example, is hampered by the chronic lack of site survey information. As large as statewide site files have grown to be in many states, the coverage is still only a small fraction of what is needed to answer many classes of problems. Anything we can do to increase the coverage of our statewide site files cost-effectively will therefore contribute directly to better research. For their part, ethnohistorians must often ferret out usable data from a veritable mountain of otherwise irrelevant information. As a group, however, they tend to lack local-level data sources that are directly comparable over an entire region or state. The U.S. Census exemplifies both problems. For a given ethnohistorical question, much census data may be dross, but every researcher would welcome more systematically collected data sets like it.

My objective here is to demonstrate the research potential of a heretofore untapped data source, the Historical Records Survey (HRS) of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which offers researchers fresh site survey information and systematically collected data of considerable ethnohistorical interest. The HRS was part of Federal One, a national arts program that employed white collar workers during the Great Depression of the 1930s (McDonald 1969). Economic stopgaps though they were, these and other New Deal era programs made significant contributions to the arts, to history, and to the nation (Mangione 1972; McDonald 1969; Penkower 1977; Smiley 1958).

The HRS saved the archives and historical records of thousands of United States counties from destruction by benign neglect, recorded and transcribed tens of thousands of interviews with ordinary citizens, and inventoried the official records of countless towns, municipalities, and churches (McDonald 1969:751-827; Noggle 1981; Rainwater 1939; Smiley 1958). A closely related program, the Federal Writer's Project (FWP), researched and published the *American Guide* series of state handbooks (Mangione 1972; Penkower 1977) (two of which [Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration 1938, 1939] focused on Mississippi [Douglass 1939]), compiled a vast archive of American folklore (Botkin 1939, 1944; McDonald 1969:704-720), and conducted oral history interviews with thousands of former slaves (Botkin 1945; McDonald 1969:720-724; Rawick 1972-73; Yetman 1967). Nevertheless, these and other Federal One programs were never more than make-work projects in the eyes of their political sponsors. Their successes were judged less by the quality of their products than by the extent to which they contributed to the national effort to rebuild the economy.

Among the extensive records and files of the Federal One Programs, the vast HRS archives offer an unique, detailed record of local history and lifeways in each county of the 1930s United States. At its best, these records offer an untapped vein of outstanding interviews and documents on many topics of archaeological and ethnohistorical interest including descriptions of previously unreported archaeological sites; known sites prior to their destruction; Native American place names; ethnic minorities; and folklore. Given the

local or county focus of the HRS records, much of the anthropologically relevant information is probably not represented in other archives.

Relatively few anthropologists have exploited the research potential of this ethnographic and ethnohistoric material. For ethnohistorians it is surprising because the HRS and the FWP have been extensively mined for slave narratives and folklore. In the case of archaeologists, it is much more surprising in view of the important contributions that New Deal era federally-sponsored archaeological projects made to the post-WWII development of United States archaeology (Haag 1985; Patterson 1986; Peebles 1988). The HRS and New Deal Era archaeological programs share many characteristics. They were both national make-work programs, and in many cases were sponsored by the WPA or similar federal agencies. In any given project, there were a few trained supervisors and many unskilled and semiskilled workers. Both programs also produced results that have yet to be completely sorted out and adequately curated.

The differences between these programs help to explain why New Deal era archaeological projects contributed to the mainstream of anthropology and the HRS/FWP have not. First, New Deal Era archaeology attracted relatively little public notice or criticism because its very nature limited it to rural areas where it was effectively invisible to the public eye. Similar make-work programs, such as the HRS and the FWP, which were directed towards urban white-collar workers, were very visible by comparison. Its visibility, combined with the public image of Federal One as a hotbed of American communism and do-nothing pen-pushers (Mangione 1972:3-26, 117, 119, 289-326) helped to send all of these programs to an early New Deal grave.

Second, there's the nature of the product. New Deal era archaeological projects left a visible legacy in the country's museums--boxes of artifacts, skeletons, drawings, notes, and photographs from scores of excavated sites. The product, however, was organized in discrete units - sites - that were important, manageable units of analysis. For its part, the HRS/FWP produced tens of thousands of reports in triplicate, the surviving copies of which are now curated by the Library of Congress and state and regional archives (Banks and Carter 1985). The Mississippi Department of Archives and History, for example, holds about 1.5 m<sup>3</sup> (49 ft<sup>3</sup>) of WPA files and records (Henderson and Tomlin 1977:54-55), most of which have not been indexed or cross-referenced.

Finally, there's the disciplinary blinders created by the words "history" and "writer" in the names of the HRS/FWP programs. While the HRS/FWP archives contain much material of great interest to historians, it is unproductive to limit them to the domain of any single discipline. These projects were too large, too broadly conceived, and too original in their design to ever fit neatly in the traditional divisions of American academia.

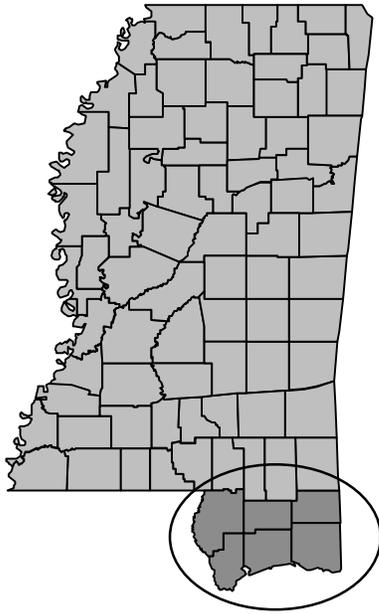


Fig. 1. Mississippi Coast Study Area.

## Objectives

Over the past two years, I have transcribed and analyzed the HRS microfilms for the six southernmost Mississippi counties: Hancock, Harrison, Jackson, Pearl River, Stone, and George (Figure 1). The primary goals were to identify previously unreported archaeological sites, to assess the impact of shell mining on coastal shell middens, and to identify previously unrecorded Native American place names. To accomplish these goals, I also had to identify and solve major methodological problems associated with the transcription, coding, and analysis of HRS data.

The remainder of this paper reports the results of the Mississippi Coast study. First, I describe the essential characteristics of the Mississippi HRS archive as an anthropological data source. Second, I describe the immediate substantive results of this project.

## METHODS

I focused my research only on the Historic Records Survey in order to construct a data set that had been collected within the constraints of a single systematic framework. Also very important for my purpose was that the Mississippi HRS project did far more than merely inventory county records. The HRS project planners set out to research, write, and publish 82 separate histories, one for each county in the State. It was an ambitious and utterly unrealistic plan. Although a few of these county histories were eventually written and fewer were actually published, most of the county history source material, which consumes 87 rolls of microfilm, was never worked up for publication. It was hastily filed and forgotten as the country prepared for World War II. These reports, which have not been indexed or cross-referenced, are filed by county, agency, or topic.

Given the unique *county* focus of the HRS files, the Mississippi Coast project examined six contiguous coastal counties rather than sample all of southern Mississippi. I also decided not to reach beyond Mississippi and incorporate HRS data for the coastal counties in Louisiana and Alabama. Neither samples of counties nor samples stratified by regions could capture the rich details that give the HRS records most of their anthropological and historical value.

The important point of this discussion is that the Mississippi Coast data are a case study, not a probability-based sample. The main advantage of this approach is enhanced data comparability. Each state interpreted the federal HRS guidelines to suit local conditions and then collected these data within the constraints of a single systematic

framework. In principle, therefore, the data collected from any two counties within a single state should be comparable. The same cannot be said about comparisons between two counties in different states, and this points to the study's major weakness--the low generalizability of its results. Without external evidence, for example, one cannot infer that patterns delineated in the analysis of the Mississippi Coast are also true of the neighboring coasts of Alabama or Louisiana. Such patterns must be demonstrated independently.

### **Database Construction**

After defining the study region, microfilms of the HRS records for each county were screened at UIUC and transcribed to computer text files. All information had to be typed in by hand since the paper copies of the records were impossible to scan by machine.

None of the HRS files were transcribed completely. Some of the information, such as county rosters of war veterans, is published elsewhere and the cost of transcribing or scanning this information outweighs its apparent value. Other information, such as detailed church histories, lay beyond my research interests. Each of the transcribed records offered previously unpublished information relevant to general anthropological interests in the following topic areas:

- Archaeological site locations
- Native American lifeways and place names
- Civil War conditions
- Transportation
- Race relations
- Slavery

Other records that reflected local cultural and historical conditions or events were evaluated for copying as they were encountered on the microfilms.

All records copied from the HRS records were transcribed verbatim and stored by topic, assignment number, HRS "canvasser" or interviewer, report date, and county in a Folio VIEWS infobase (Lewis 1994). (VIEWS is a text management software package that offers powerful search, hypertext, and reporting capabilities (Folio Corporation 1993). Figure 2 gives a sample transcribed passage from the Hancock County HRS records.

This research stage was the most time-consuming part of the entire project. For each county it took about 40-50 person-hours to process a given microfilm, proofread the text file, and create the county VIEWS infobase from the existing format template.

**Interviews****Assignment No. 13****Report Date: 27 July 36****Canvasser: Emma A. Clay & Mary L. Jokich****County Historian: May H. Edwards****14 pages - all from interviews****Roland Weston, Logtown, Salt, Slaves**

Mr. Weston was a slave owner during the Civil War and manufactured salt near Bay St. Louis during this period. /1/

Mr. Roland Weston said Logtown was originally known as "Cabanage Latinier" or Palmetto Camp, so called because of the thick growth of palmettos on the river bank. He said there are still pieces /2/ of pottery and arrow heads, bones, a shell bank and other evidences of Indian life to be found there. /3/

[Eldest son of John Weston, Logtown]

**Mrs. Alvina Hoffman Hart, Salt, Civil War Conditions**

She spoke of the people here [Hancock County] being blockaded during the Civil War, lacking both food and clothing. Their only coffee was Indian coffee and they baked sweet potatoes and ground them to extract sugar - boiled water from the Gulf for salt. She said that her mother and Mrs. Ulmann found old Mrs. Bontemp, who was the great grandmother of members of the Capdepon, Favre, Cazeneure, and Bontemp families living here today, in dire need because of war conditions. Mr. Ulmann took the curtains off her gallery, dyed them with some berries and made this old lady some clothing. She and Mrs. Hoffman shared what little food they had with her and in this way saved her life. /7/

[Mrs. Alvina Hoffman Hart, Bay St. Louis]

**Jesse Cowand, Shell Mound**

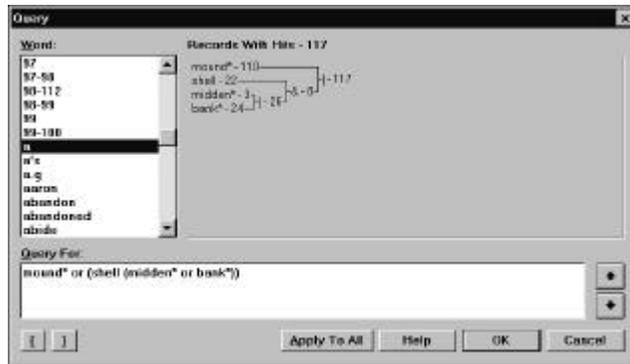
One of the earliest settlers of this coast was Jesse Cowand. Melite La Sassier's grant of land dates back 1786 and Jesse Cowand bought from La Sassier all this tract lying on the water front known as the Cowand-Field cotton plantation.

In an interview with his grandson, Jesse Cowand, a citizen of Bay St. Louis, Mr. Cowand said that his grandfather began work on his home, now Elmwood Manor, but left to fight in the War of 1812. He completed the house after the war and it is one of the oldest homes in Hancock County. The bricks were brought over from Spain as ballast on ships and some from Pensacola. The sills made from cypress logs were floated down the Mississippi River. Mr. Cowand said the home was on the plantation where Sea Island cotton was raised. There are still signs of the field on the place as the ground is still in ridges.

Mr. Cowand said that when his grandfather built the home there was an Indian shell mound on the grounds, the lime for the cement was taken from the shell in the mound but this has entirely disappeared. /11/

[Jesse Cowand, Bay St. Louis]

Fig. 2. Sample Mississippi Coast HRS Database entry. The word "Interviews" at the top of the figure is the HRS subject classification name. For each report submitted in a given classification, the assignment number, date, interviewers, county supervisor, report length, and general assessment of sources is recorded in the database. Each transcribed item is given a descriptive title. Comments inserted by the transcriber are given in brackets. The numbers in slashes (e.g., /2/) are the original report page numbers of the entry.



*Fig. 3. VIEWS query screen. Queries are constructed in the window marked "Query for." In the example given in this figure, the user has entered a query that tries to capture most mentions of Native American archaeological sites. As constructed, the query searched for all entries that contain the word stem mound- or shell and the stems midden- or bank-. The immediate results of the query are displayed in the top center of the screen under the heading "Records With Hits." In this example, there were a total of 117 "hits" or separate mentions of the target words or phrases; the dendrogram shows the breakdown of hits per target. By clicking on the "OK" button, all of the hits can be examined in narrative context.*

## Document Assessment and Criticism

The validity and reliability of the transcribed documents had to be assessed before the information was used for research purposes. This task was made much easier by VIEWS' extensive text search capabilities (Figure 3). Document assessments that were beyond VIEWS' capabilities were handled by TACT, a literary text analysis program developed by the Centre for Computing in the Humanities at the University of Toronto (Lancashire and Stairs 1994).

The reliability and face validity of most HRS reports can be assumed to be high. Interviews in which informants described events they witnessed decades ago are

undoubtedly subject to the failings of memory, but they can often be corroborated by internal or external evidence. One key strength of the reports is that the canvassers were natives to the counties in which they worked. They shared the same dialects, sense of place, and much the same understanding of the cultural landscape as their informants. Given the make-work nature of the HRS program, it is also reasonable to assume that canvassers were mostly indifferent to the cultural images and patterns reflected in the content of their reports. Uniform reporting standards were dictated by the Washington office of the HRS program, the state directors (e.g., Powell 1936c, 1937), and the county supervisors. Submitted reports were checked at the county and state levels and were often returned to the canvassers for clarifications or added details.

HRS canvassers turned for information to every source they could think of and get access to. The result is a purposive or judgment sample that reflects the canvassers' social networks, local public sentiment about New Deal make-work projects, general consensus about who the county experts on given topics were, and many other factors. In some counties (e.g., Pearl River, where Solomon Smith and Samantha Varnado are often cited as sources), canvassers clearly depended on the key informant technique and their information is biased towards the views of those informants.

Important factors that bias the HRS records include race, gender, social class, and the fallibility of memory. As Hirsch and Terrill (1979) found in the HRS projects of other states, most HRS staff members identified in the Mississippi Coast study appear to have

been middle-class whites, most of whom were women who were high school graduates or had attended college. These factors undoubtedly influenced the kinds of people interviewed by the canvassers, their openness and rapport, and the extent to which interviewees expressed their own views rather than those the canvasser expected to hear. One cannot reasonably anticipate, for example, that Nathan Bess and Frank Childress, two aged ex-slaves who lived their final years, somewhat inexplicably, in the state-supported rest home for Confederate military veterans at Beauvoir, would have necessarily given frank and honest opinions about their lives to canvassers who began their report, "At Beauvoir, the old home of Jefferson Davis, the beloved leader of the Confederacy, there are two old ex-slaves..." (Works Progress Administration for Mississippi 1936-37).

The Mississippi Coast HRS data also suggest that if canvassers knew little about an assigned topic and had no local experts to turn to, they would copy published accounts in order to complete a given assignment. The bibliographic sources of these passages are often cited inadequately or not at all. I assessed authorship and possible plagiarism by direct comparisons of HRS records with possible published sources. This was a relatively simple task because, given the local focus of the HRS records, there are only a few sources from which county-specific information could have been copied.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Analysis of the Mississippi Coast HRS data was primarily exploratory. The analysis methods were all qualitative, primarily contextual assessments and content analyses. This section describes the results of these analyses with emphasis on archaeological and ethnohistorical patterning.

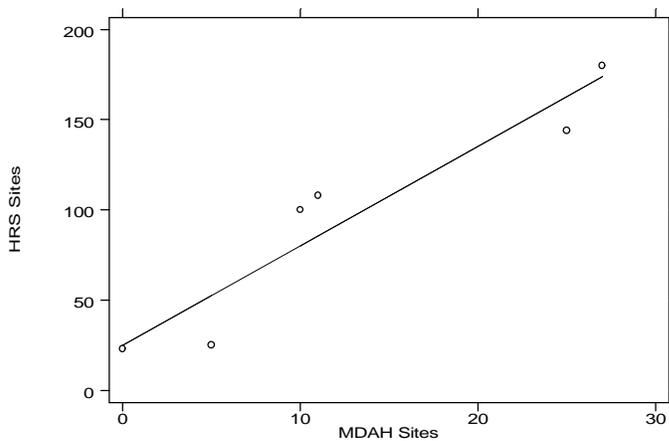
### Archaeology

As part of their participation in the HRS project, each county was required to report information about archaeological sites (Powell 1936b). Contextual searches of the coastal county databases yielded many possible site locations, each of which was checked against existing Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH) site files and maps. Previously recorded sites were matched with their MDAH site number. Site locations not included in the MDAH files were documented for future field verification, a task that was not part of this study.

*Table 1. Comparison of HRS and MDAH Sites Reported for Each County.*

County	HRS	MDAH
Hancock	10	100
Harrison	11	108
Jackson	27	180
Pearl River	25	144
Stone	0	23
George	5	25
Totals	78	580

A minimum of 78 site locations are described in the HRS records for the six county region (Table 1). Roughly one half of these sites appear to be undocumented in the MDAH archaeological site files. A plot of the HRS archaeological site information for each county against the 1994 MDAH site location totals for each county is given in Figure 4. The fitted line, which has an  $r^2$  value of 0.9, suggests two inferences. First, the HRS canvassers found and described about as many sites as they should have, given the known rate of site discovery as measured by how many sites have been reported to MDAH. In other words, this implicit test of criterion validity suggests that the canvassers tried honestly and competently to fulfill their charge rather than just treating their job as “make-work” of little consequence or meaning. (The relationship also assumes that the gross



*Fig. 4. HRS sites in each coastal county plotted against the corresponding 1994 MDAH site location totals.*

factors that structure site discovery, such as ground cover and relative population density, have not changed much over this century.) Second, we can infer the following rough rule of thumb from the regression equation ( $\hat{y} = 0.16x - 2.7$ ) of the plot: a rough estimate of how many sites are described in the HRS records for a given county is 16% of the total number of MDAH sites on record for that county. If, for example, the MDAH site files contain

14,000 records, then the “best guess” of how many site location descriptions are embedded in the HRS records for all 82 counties is  $14,000 \times 0.16 = 2,240$  sites.

What makes the HRS site location information useful is that many of the HRS sites are new information. In the six Mississippi Coast counties, roughly one half (37) of HRS sites require additional external evidence, mostly field verification, to identify precisely. Of the remainder, 19 sites are locations for which there are existing MDAH site numbers. Another 19 locations, none of which are in the MDAH site files, can be identified precisely from the HRS records (in a few cases the information is given down to the quarter-quarter section).

The HRS data comprise both site descriptions and information that can be reasonably inferred to indicate the presence of an archaeological deposit. Among the latter are many locations of historical significance in the development of the coastal counties. These locations include early county courthouses, military posts, mills, settlements, and slave cemeteries. In Jackson County, for example, the HRS files give the approximate legal location and other archaeologically important details (e.g., the jail cellar) of the site of the first county courthouse and jail, which was constructed at Brewton, Mississippi. At the other end of the Coast in Hancock County, information cited in the HRS records provide fresh information that may help to identify the 1820-21 site in Bay St. Louis of the cantonment for the U.S. Army 8th Infantry Regiment, which was then commanded by Lieut-Col. Zachary Taylor (Hamilton 1941).

## Ethnohistory

To turn now to the ethnohistorical side of the HRS picture, the files contain detailed descriptions of late 19th - early 20th century settlements and lifeways. They also offer fresh insights into the cultural contexts and lives of White, Black, and Native American Mississippians, their relative integration into the mainstream of early 20th century Mississippi county society, and the construction of local ethnic groups in the social imagination of other Mississippians.

Of particular interest to me has been the Native American ethnohistorical information contained in the HRS records. As with archaeological sites, the HRS canvassers were required to report information about Native Americans in each county (Powell 1936c). *These files are the only systematic national survey of local and county-based information about Native Americans in the United States.* An important component of the Mississippi Coast research has been to identify aspects of Native American lifeways and ethnohistory as they were recorded and interpreted by the HRS fieldworkers.

Here are a couple of examples. Center or Caesar in Pearl River County is described in various accounts as a Choctaw town and an early Hancock County seat and trade center (Hall 1992:5-7; Thigpen 1965:15). The HRS files describe the general location of the Choctaw town and its associated burial ground; the importance of Center as a site for ball games, weddings, “cries,” and other big gatherings; and the names of several of the 19th century Choctaws who lived there, including three of the town’s headmen. When one

considers that the other available published information for this town runs to less than one double-spaced page, the HRS files offer considerable fresh information about this Native American community.

The HRS files also mention another Choctaw community that has fallen through the cracks of history even more completely than Center, Mississippi. This is Tacala's settlement near Bayou Philip on the edge of Devil's Swamp in Hancock County. The HRS information about Tacala's settlement includes general descriptions of lifeways and subsistence and specific details such as genealogical links to families that still live in Hancock County. Part of the information about this community was recorded in an interview with a former resident of this long-ago-extinct Native American community.

To complement the ethnohistorical descriptive information about Native American communities and lifeways in the Mississippi Coast counties, the HRS files also provide an excellent testbed in which to examine the integration of Native Americans into the dominant society. Content analysis of HRS reports suggests that both interviewers and interviewees tended to view Native Americans as existing primarily in the past, not in the present. Whether viewed as "past" or "present," Native Americans lifeways and values were romanticized in images that appeal to "Noble Savage" or brutish extremes. Day-to-day social relations were constructed differently. Whites saw Native Americans as social inferiors and Blacks tended to view them as social equals. Marriages and other alliances between Whites and Native Americans, when projected into the past, are typically described in the HRS records as having been with high status Native Americans, regardless of the social status of their White partners. Conjugal relations described by HRS informants were almost entirely between White males and Native American females; those involving Native American males were with mixed-race females. Generally speaking, perceptions of Native Americans in the coastal counties seem strongly colored by images promoted by early 20th century popular culture (Green 1988) and the movies (Marsden and Nachbar 1988).

Although my presentation stresses the Native American data recorded in the HRS files, it also offers rich veins of other ethnohistorical information. They describe, for example, primary and secondary information about slavery conditions that complements and contextualizes ex-slave narratives for the Mississippi Coast collected by the FWP (Hillegas and Lawrence 1977). The HRS files also include oral history interviews with Civil War veterans (soldiers, prisoners-of-war, couriers) about their military experiences and civilians about home front conditions. Some of these narratives also contain information of potential archaeological significance.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the Mississippi Coast study did not achieve some of its goals. I did not, for example, learn much about coastal shell mining from my examination of the HRS files. I also found few Native American place names that were not duplicates of those I already knew. I did, however, discover a wealth of archaeological and ethnohistorical information

that I would not have known about otherwise. I have become so intrigued by the research potential of the HRS and the FWP that I am now seeking grant support to transcribe the HRS records for the other 76 Mississippi counties.

One may reasonably question whether this information worth the effort of gathering it from the HRS records. This question could not have been answered in the affirmative in 1940, nor even in 1960, simply because the cultural and historical context of the 1930s was then still so fresh and of immediate resonance in our society. Now, however, it's a different story. The HRS records offer a systematically collected cultural snapshot of United States counties. What is described above from a small piece of Mississippi is also available in Georgia, in Louisiana, in Illinois, in every state and territory of the 1930s United States. Captured within these records is a time and a place and an immediacy of detail and spirit that is nearly without equal in the cultural history of the United States. Within it can be found many things and many data that serve many disciplines. Among these things, and of great potential value to archaeologists and ethnohistorians, are literally thousands of archaeological site descriptions and a remarkable ethnography of 1930s America.

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