

1993

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Recommended Citation

Dincauze, Dena F. (1993) "Bert Salwen's Prehistory: 1962-1983," *Northeast Historical Archaeology*: Vol. 22 22, Article 2.
<https://doi.org/10.22191/neha/vol22/iss1/2> Available at: <http://orb.binghamton.edu/neha/vol22/iss1/2>

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BERT SALWEN'S PREHISTORY: 1962-1983

Dena F. Dincauze

Bert began his career in archaeology as a prehistorian, having become interested in field archaeology and prehistory in several northeastern coastal states. Abandoning a career in engineering and the construction trades, he enrolled in graduate study at Columbia University. Early in his training he worked in South Dakota with Carlyle S. Smith and in Alaska with Ralph Solecki; those Columbia-connected archaeologists, who had both done innovative research on Long Island, encouraged and inspired him to continue in the coastal New York area.

As he gained experience there, he realized the importance for the archaeological record of the postglacial marine transgression of the coast, which had drowned or destroyed many early archaeological sites and transformed the environments in which ancient populations had lived. "Sea Levels and Archaeology in the Long Island Sound Area" appeared in *American Antiquity* in 1962, exciting widespread interest throughout the Northeast and far beyond. Surprisingly, his dissertation, *Sea Levels and the Archaic Archaeology of the Northeast Coast of the United States*, was published only by University Microfilms (1965). Despite, or likely because of, the wide influence of the work, research in the region rapidly overtook what Bert had been able to do with the subject, as the corps of active researchers in the Northeast was expanding notably in the late 1960s. With this influential work, Bert established himself firmly

among the leaders of the new cohort, a position he relinquished only two decades later, when he moved definitively into historical archaeology.

While completing graduate school, and for several seasons afterward, Bert conducted research on the Mohegan site, Fort Shantock, near New London in eastern Connecticut. This work led him into pioneering studies of 17th-century European artifacts recovered from the Indian site, and into a study of the documentary record of the Mohegans and the fort built with the help of their English allies. During the sixties, while Bert completed his graduate degree and began his teaching career, he was in the field excavating coastal middens and the historical fort, thus dividing his time and attention over a wide range of archaeological periods and cultures. His interest in shell middens, honed into skill on several sites in metropolitan New York (Muskeeta Cove, Croton Point, and others), drew him into investigation of a midden near Fort Shantock.

At the same time (mid-1960s through mid-1970s), he was among the group of young professionals recruited by John Cotter to begin contract surveys of northeastern archaeological sites for the National Park Service. Bert worked in Vermont, New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Massachusetts on a number of small projects, and took on what would today be called background research on the archaeological potential of the Connecticut River Basin. He assembled the documentary record and

folk history of Connecticut River archaeology and prehistory for the entire basin, assuring that subsequent planning for Connecticut River development would include consideration of the archaeological sites. Not even his own prior experience in the Connecticut River states prepared him for the evidence of the high archaeological potential of the area. Deploring the absence of professional attention there, he raised the alarm about destruction overtaking the sites. Twenty years after his report (1970a), knowledge of the archaeology of the Connecticut River Basin has vastly improved; however, the remaining gap between distributional knowledge and site research remains its most impressive aspect.

In 1966, in the midst of this highly productive period, Bert joined the faculty of New York University, gaining a solid base from which to continue and expand his regional research. A steady stream of articles in those years established him as an innovator and researcher of high competence. The Muskeeta Cove report (1968) presented the best stratigraphic sequence to date for the Woodland period in coastal New York. He turned his attention to the Mohegan-Mahican conflation that confused the ethnohistorical record in Connecticut and solved it through archaeology, concluding that the Pequot developed in southern New England, not in the Hudson valley (1969); that "tentative" conclusion has not been challenged since. He set the first standards for zooarchaeological work in the region with his paper on cultural inferences from faunal remains (1970b). Bert's publications and professional presentations at meetings helped to establish the scholarly value of northeastern prehistory as the field was being rediscovered after decades of neglect.

A notable facet of his career was his encouragement of women as students and colleagues at a time when few other archaeologists in the northeast did so. "Bert's bevy" of students was a notable feature of regional meetings in the 1970s, a hint of things to come in the composition of the profession. In this and many other ways, Bert helped northeastern archaeology come of age in the last third of the 20th century. As his influence and prestige grew, he contributed significantly to the professionalization of northeastern archaeology, through teaching, publication, and public archaeology. His students' work reflected and expanded his own interests, making contributions especially to knowledge of paleoenvironments, cultural adaptations, and ceramic sequences. A superb public speaker, effective whether talking extemporaneously or with preparation, Bert brought professional and media attention to new research efforts in the region. His early and wide experience in contract archaeology prepared him strategically for the rapid developments in cultural resource management, which threatened to overwhelm the few archaeologists in the northeastern states in the early 1970s. His roles in the formation and maturation of NYAC (New York Archaeological Council) and PANYC (Professional Archaeologists of New York City) were crucial.

The 1970s saw him gradually delegate his prehistoric fieldwork to students, while he maintained his research edge with a number of important publications. These publications display his wide range of interests in prehistoric research: paleoenvironments; settlement patterns and site distributions; regional scale analyses (1975; Newman and Salwen 1977); ceramic sequences, ethnicity in prehistory (1978);

methods of excavation and analysis (Salwen and Otteson 1972); and outreach and public education (1974).

Bert's publications were typically addressed to ideas; he published no site reports. In the 1970s he published radiocarbon dates for the Shantock Cove site that he expected had solved some outstanding problems in ceramic chronology as well as redefining aspects of ceramic traditions (Salwen and Ottesen 1972). His review of the Hudson River basin's paleodemography and paleoenvironments was a bold approach for the time (1975). Constrained by his acceptance of the concept of "carrying capacity," Bert nevertheless clearly sensed that prehistoric people affected their environments significantly, and he called attention to evidence interpretable as pre-contact anthropogenic forest destruction. His last publication in northeastern prehistory was a co-authored discussion of field evidence bearing on the associations of small-stemmed points and pottery (Lavin and Salwen 1983).

The innovative ethnohistorical research begun for Shantock in the 1960s eventually bore sweet fruit. Bert's contribution to the Smithsonian's *Handbook of North American Indians* was the strong, well-grounded summary of "Indians of Southern New England and Long Island" (1978), a publication that all northeastern specialists could recommend without embarrassment to colleagues, students, and the interested public. Bert, however, was disappointed that much of the commentary on sources had been cut from the final publication, a shortcoming he was pleased to overcome with the subsequent publication of the full report (1983). This latter publication will endure as Bert's finest gift to all interested in the native peoples of coastal

New York and southern New England—the summation of knowledge and insight gathered during two decades of researching, reading, thinking, and teaching prehistory and ethnohistory.

Bert's major roles in the development of northeastern prehistory were as teacher, codifier, and inspirer. Respectful of previous work and fully familiar with it, Bert nevertheless was alert to challenge extant interpretations when he was convinced by the evidence before him. His publications indicate how clearly he saw issues, and how willing he was to grapple with them. In the larger world, his willingness to take on administrative positions when archaeology would benefit made him a key figure in the growth of public-oriented conservation archaeology in the 1970s and 1980s. As organizer and spokesman for professional archaeologists and archaeological issues, he helped bring the discipline out of its ivory mousehole into the public forums of the 1980s and 1990s.

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