



**North Carolina
Archaeological Society**

N e w s l e t t e r

SUMMER 2022, Volume 32, Number 3

Research Laboratories of Archaeology, Campus Box 3120, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3120

Society Website: <http://www.ncarchsociety.org>

STEVE DAVIS RETIRES, WITH A LASTING LEGACY

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On June 30, 2022, my colleague and fellow Society member R. P. Stephen Davis, Jr. retired after nearly 40 years of service at UNC-Chapel Hill. Arguably, no living archaeologist has done more to advance knowledge of our state's archaeology than Steve.

Steve grew up in Charlotte, attended UNC as an undergraduate in the early 1970s, and then, after graduate studies at Calgary and Tennessee and a brief stint working in West Virginia, he returned to

Chapel Hill in 1983 to accept a job in UNC's Research Laboratories of Archaeology (RLA). He started as a staff archaeologist, and in 2000 was named the RLA's associate director, a title he held until retirement. The upshot is that he spent most of his adult years at Carolina, and throughout that time showed a deep commitment to North Carolina archaeology, which he has demonstrated in many ways — as a steward of our state's heritage, a researcher, an editor, and a teacher. Let me give a few examples of his extraordinary service in each of these areas.

As most Society members know, the RLA is home to the North Carolina Archaeological Collection — the preeminent archaeological archive in the state, with more than 8 million objects, 60 thousand photographs, and hundreds of linear feet of paper records that pertain to these items. From the time he started working here, Steve was the primary caretaker and curator of this irreplaceable archive, which documents the human history of this state going back more than 12 thousand years. In 1983, when Steve arrived, the collection was stored in decrepit boxes stacked in an old warehouse in Durham with minimal security, no air conditioning or heat, and difficult access.



Today, the collection resides in a secure repository, with movable shelving, precise climate control, and archival boxes, and can be searched online from anywhere in the world. Moreover, the entire photographic collection has been scanned and placed in the Carolina Digital Repository. This transformation could not have happened without Steve's extraordinary vision, dedication, and skill. When I arrived in 1988, Steve had already acquired a scanner with primitive OCR capabilities and was in the process of scanning the collection's catalog in order to create a database that could be used on an IBM PC. This database took two decades of persistent effort to build, and it eventually morphed into the state-of-the-art search tool we have



today. Similarly, the collection's journey from Durham to its present location required two major moves, each of which was a major logistical undertaking. Steve planned and executed these moves with amazing skill, never compromising the safety of the objects and the physical integrity of the collection.

Steve's familiarity with and care for the collection has always been rooted in his scholarly work. Without question, he is widely regarded as one of the preeminent experts in the archaeology of North Carolina, particularly the Piedmont, where most of his research and writing has been focused. He has published dozens of articles, book

chapters, and technical reports, as well as a number of important monographs. They are far too numerous to catalog here, but I can highlight two of special note: In 1998, he was the principal author of *Excavating Occaneechi Town*, published by UNC Press, which was one of the very first electronic monographs in archaeology and won the PSP Electronic Product Award from the American Association of Publishers. And in 1999, he co-authored a book called *Time Before History*, also published by UNC Press, which still remains the most comprehensive description of this state's ancient American Indian cultures as seen through archaeology.

Steve's scholarship, while widely read by academics, has never been confined to the "ivory tower." Rather, public outreach and engagement have always been central to his work. He is routinely asked to speak at local historical societies and libraries, to help museums with exhibits, to identify artifacts, and to give tours of UNC's archaeological collections and labs. All of these things he does cheerfully, thereby building a tremendous amount of good will across the state. His scholarly work and support were also central to the Occaneechi tribe's quest for state recognition, which they achieved in 2002.



His engagement with public is also evident in his involvement with the North Carolina Archaeological Society. Steve has been a leader in this organization since 1983 and served for much of that time as editor of the Society's journal, *North Carolina Archaeology*. His work with the journal — soliciting papers, working with authors, copy-editing, and single-handedly bringing each issue to print — was not glamorous, but was extremely important not only in disseminating information on the state's archaeology, but also in forging a broader community of people across the state who are interested in archaeology and site preservation. Steve also served for three years as the elected editor of *Southeastern Archaeology*, one of the most important regional archaeology journals in the U.S.



Last, but not least, it is important to recognize Steve's contributions as a teacher. He is widely known as a superb field archaeologist who has trained generations of UNC undergraduate and graduate students in the intricacies of excavation techniques, principally through UNC's summer

field schools. Many of these students went on to become prominent archaeologists in their own right and are continuing to use and pass along what they learned from him. Steve has also helped and mentored many graduate students as they've written their dissertations. Some years back, when the Anthropology Department circulated a list of doctoral committees for its students, I noted with interest that Steve, as a staff employee (albeit with a secondary faculty appointment), was serving on more doctoral committees than most of the tenured professors in the department!



Throughout his career, and long before the “digital humanities” became popular, Steve was an innovator in the adoption of digital technologies in archaeology. For example, he began working with digital photography and image editing back in the mid-1990s, when a six megapixel camera cost \$25,000! He learned the techniques himself, then trained our graduate students in using them, which gave these students a tremendous boost as they entered the job market in subsequent years. The expertise he developed also led directly to the publication of *Excavating Occaneechi Town*. More recently, he has been a pioneer in adopting the techniques of digital 3D modeling of artifacts and excavations.

The one consistent thread throughout his career, and that runs through every activity and accomplishment I've described, is *service*. It's therefore not surprising that he received the C. Knox Massey Distinguished Service Award from UNC in 2020. Steve dedicated his career to the advancement of North Carolina archaeology, as well as to helping his colleagues and students thrive. To use a sports analogy, he's been like a teammate who makes everyone around him better. And he's done all this with grace, humility, and good humor. I consider it a privilege to have worked with him for more than 30 years as a UNC colleague — and, like many of us, I look forward to working with him for many more years in his retirement!

ANCIENT NORTH CAROLINIANS

A VIRTUAL MUSEUM OF NORTH CAROLINA ARCHAEOLOGY

DIGITAL SPOTLIGHT:

[Ancient North Carolinians \(unc.edu\)](https://www.unc.edu/ancientnorthcarolinians)

People have lived in North Carolina for at least 15,000 years. This site tells the story of who these people were, how they lived, and who they are today. *Ancient North Carolinians* is a project of the Research Laboratories of Archaeology, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Its creation was made possible by the generous support of the C. Felix Harvey family (through a Harvey Award at UNC-Chapel Hill) and a grant from the Kenan Creative Collaboratory. Other organizations that provided key support are the N.C. Archaeological Council, the N.C. Archaeological Society, the N.C. Commission of Indian Affairs, UNC-Chapel Hill's American Indian Center, UNC Libraries, and the Office of Arts and Sciences Information Services (OASIS) at UNC-Chapel Hill.



“A GATHERING SPOT” – UNC Archaeologist Steve Davis explains the social significance of the Hardaway site (Click picture for video [01:19]).