

Towards a New American Antiquarianism: Basic Research, Aesthetics, and the Irrelevant Early American Past

PETER JAKOB OLSEN-HARBICH

Welcome to the inaugural issue of *The New American Antiquarian* (NAA). In the following pages, I will attempt to elaborate on our Mission Statement, found in the preceding section, by stating concisely and in conventional terms the reasons for this journal's founding, the scope of its scholarly enterprise, and its proposed contributions to research in early American studies. Following this survey, I will propose an additional set of technical terms, named in this essay's title, for apprehending the NAA. As is true for all aspects of the NAA, the below originates from a series of conversations with my co-editor, Simeon A. Simeonov, though I have the privilege and responsibility of here communicating our mutual thought and consensus.

The NAA was created to encourage and host the empirical reconstruction of early America, principally through the publication of peer-reviewed primary source material. We define "early America" as spatially inclusive of both American continents, and chronologically as the era stretching from the hemisphere's initial human habitation through the collapse of its first European empires, ending at roughly 1825 A.D. Our hemispheric scope derives from an understanding of "America" as a unified field in world history, one defined by the unique encounter and blending of Indigenous, African, and European traditions. Though all aspects of this field are within our purview, we are especially interested in the process by which historical, civilizational traditions were received, confronted, or forgotten during America's post-Columbian epoch. The transmission, intermingling, and abandonment of New and Old World traditions was a hemispheric phenomenon whose earliest phases—from contact through the formation of national American cultures—are the principal subject matter of the NAA.

The NAA's commitment to empirical reconstruction includes the support of both standard secondary scholarship as well as what has often been called "antiquarian" practice in American letters. This practice encompasses the collecting, collating, cataloging, and publishing of all surviving evidentiary fragments

Peter Jakob Olsen-Harbich is the Editor of The New American Antiquarian. He received his Ph.D. in History from William & Mary in 2021.

of a historic field, without regard to any fragment's particular significance in the past or present, to enable the maximal possible understanding of that field. We anticipate the NAA will apply this practice to mostly textual fragments—in the form of manuscript transcriptions, English translations, and critical editions—but fine arts, material culture objects, architecture, oral histories, archaeological artifacts, and whatever other sources bearing data on early America have endured into the present are all the matter of our empirical reconstruction. We seek to bring as many fragments as possible out of obscurity and into the public intellectual domain through publication. We additionally seek to incentivize scholars to participate in this process through the provision of peer review for source publications and our valuation of such works equally with secondary analyses.

The third and final type of publications that will appear in the NAA is that to which this present work belongs: non-peer-reviewed essays, letters, and reviews. These works will appear within a distinct subsection of the NAA entitled *Forum*. We anticipate most Forum publications will be reviews of either monographs, conferences, or exhibitions. The Forum will also provide an outlet for essay-length rumination on early American studies or antiquarian practice that is not strictly empirical and thus not properly subject to expert review. All scholarship submitted to the NAA for consideration to appear *outside* the Forum will be subjected to blinded peer-review by a panel of at least three Ph.D.-holding scholars and published only after approval is secured from two such reviewers. This requirement has been met by the three pieces of scholarship—two textual primary sources (one transcription, one translation), and one secondary analysis—appearing in this inaugural issue.

As The “New” American Antiquarian, we are obliged to explicate what, exactly, is novel about this journal's enterprise. This task can only be essayed properly through the introduction of several technical terms. The most significant of the NAA's novel facets is our commitment to developing a new conception and instantiation of antiquarian practice within the field of American history—i.e., a “new American antiquarianism.” This commitment derives from our supposition that American antiquarian practice presently requires redefinition through the elaboration of a new conceptual vocabulary. We propose this vocabulary is best organized around the concept of *basic research*.

Basic research is research pursued without a commitment to applying results to a predetermined, practical end. “Practical” here describes feasible material action. In the natural and social sciences, basic research is contrasted with “applied research,” or research pursued with the above commitment, typically towards the end of generating improvements in technology or industry. Positively defined, basic research is research pursued to advance “fundamental” knowledge in a field—i.e., knowledge that currently exists outside any practical end—with researchers being driven to this pursuit by subjective motivations known typically

as “curiosity.”¹ While the labels of basic or applied are rarely deployed in characterizations of research outside the sciences, it is our position that antiquarian practice is, in its function and substance, basic research in the humanities.

Antiquarian research is basic research first and foremost because those who conduct it choose their subject without regard to the anticipated applicability of their findings. Application, for the humanities, can be understood as the process in which research findings are utilized for the advancement of an end whose success is both a) highly dependent upon qualitative claims of semantic meaning and ontological reality—the broad category of objectives usually described as cultural, social, or political—and b) considered practical in the present or near future. In early American studies, these ends are often either civic, with the end of research being the formation of ideal citizens, or reformist, in which its end is the alteration of prevailing political or social arrangements. Beyond academia, the early American past is frequently called upon for legal application within constitutional systems premised upon historical assertion. Within nations, communities, and even families, the past is applied as a determinant for the allocation of deference, attention, and material resources. Application has always predominated across scholarly and popular conceptions of the purpose of humanities work—as has contentious competition for primacy between advocates of different ends. Indeed, even when a researcher attempts to sidestep such disputes and pursues a project without committing to application, they can expect to face pressure from editors, reviewers, administrators, funding bodies, and hiring committees to present their project as having made such a commitment. This pressure often takes the form of appeals to the concept of “relevancy.” Without the equipment of a developed vocabulary to describe and defend humanistic basic research, antiquarian researchers must either acquiesce to these appeals or silently ignore them.

Those who engage in antiquarian practice need not contest the premise of the challenge: humanistic basic research can be fairly characterized as *irrelevant*. What is required of such practitioners is a defense of irrelevancy itself. There are several compelling reasons for the embrace of this label, and chief among them is the scope of irrelevance. The vast majority of surviving artifacts from every historic field are irrelevant when considered against the narrow set of applications that exist at any particular present or imagined near future. Intellectuals whose primary commitment is comprehending their chosen historic field maximally will therefore find artifacts of that field irrelevant to current applications at every turn. The conjuncture between the totality of the past and those elements of it that can be applied is not only limited, but also unstable, due to the present’s

¹ This schema derives most directly from the writings of Abraham Flexner and Robert Dijkgraaf, *The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

ceaseless, unpredictable evolution. Irrelevant studies are thus both prudent and inevitable. Antiquarians accept the fraught relationship between past and present by focusing humbly on the empirical study and dissemination of all available evidentiary fragments in a given field—particularly those overlooked by others focused on the partial evidence currently suitable for application.

The empirical reconstruction of irrelevant evidence advances our fundamental knowledge of the past, a progress that can be defended on utilitarian terms. The evolution of the present ensures not only that some currently applicable knowledge becomes irrelevant over time, but also that some currently inapplicable knowledge will become relevant in the unanticipated future. Fundamental knowledge therefore possesses a not-yet-applied² character—a latent potential for application that invests it with a practical utility similar in kind to that actively generated by applied knowledge. Through basic research of presently irrelevant evidence, antiquarianism pushes beyond the limitations on inquiry imposed by a narrow focus on the presently relevant, expanding the empirical knowledge basis which will resource future applied research and ensuring its quality. Our ignorance of the exact fundamental, not-yet-applied knowledge that will be useful in the future engenders a collective interest in conserving and growing the store of all such knowledge. Antiquarians should not shy from claiming the distinction that attending to this interest bestows: no humanistic discipline better prepares us and our descendants to meet the unimagined future that will, we can be sure, arrive.

An aside must be made here to contextualize the above theory of application and relevance within the NAA's commitment to reception and antiquation studies. We do not inhabit the first age in which the past has been deemed variously applicable to the present. In early America, too, the past was used or ignored mostly according to its relevance. For studies of the former cases, a developed set of methods is already extant, most especially in scholarship concerned with the reception of European political philosophy and, increasingly, science. The NAA aspires to expand the topic matter subjected to such analysis dramatically, with a particular eye towards Indigenous and African receptions of useful pasts in the New World. Here, too, we seek to elaborate conceptual vocabulary. Where received elements of the past in early America were considered not simply relevant, but indispensable, we propose the term *hegemonic* to describe the past's domination of the present. Where elements were deemed inapplicable and therefore irrelevant, deserving of attention only as objects of antiquarian study—the inverse of reception, a process we term *antiquation*—we propose the terminal state

² This phrase adopted from Sir George Porter's 1999 Athenæum Lecture, "The Arts and Sciences: The Two Cultures 40 Years On," in *The Life and Scientific Legacy of George Porter*, eds. David Phillips and James Barber (London: Imperial College Press, 2006), 5.

of this process, in which such elements were ignored to the point of being entirely forgotten, be termed *obsolescence*. Our encouragement and hosting of basic research at the NAA will, we hope, mitigate the obsolescence of the early American past in the present and future.

There remains one final dimension of basic research that requires our attention: the aesthetic. Antiquarian research is also basic research because it is pursued to a significant degree in order to satisfy the sensorial desires of its practitioners. We can explain these desires only by developing an *aesthetics* of antiquarianism—an understanding of the passions its practice evokes. “Curiosity,” the most oft-cited subjective motive in discussions of basic research, indeed encapsulates much of what stimulates antiquarianism: the seduction of the mesmerizing unknown; the thrill of conveying new knowledge carved from this unknown into the world. But curiosity is not enough. Antiquarian aesthetics must also articulate the broader set of sensations that are evoked by the mind’s engagement with objects which are themselves products of past subjectivities. Antiquarianism communes us with the wondrous and revolting minds of the deceased, their brilliance and pathos as well as their banality and depravity—even inhumanity—and enlists us as their conduits in service of empirical reconstruction. A complete model of antiquarian aesthetics, one that accounts fully for the range of passions evoked by this ventriloquy, is far beyond the scope of this essay. But it is satisfactory to state here that the aesthetic experiences evoked by all such encounters are defensible ends of humanistic scholarship.

A new American antiquarianism can be located most particularly in this embrace of humanistic basic research’s aesthetic value. We need not justify as “useful” time spent in antiquarian practice—even if we easily can, through recourse to not-yet-applied value—any more than we need contrive such justifications for time spent reading poetry or admiring the weaves of baskets. The engagement of one’s mind with artifacts produced by the minds of others provides nourishment to the human spirit. To witness others captivated by this engagement is affirming to the spirit’s insistence that it exists for ends that transcend utility, and that it lives not alone in this higher reason. *The New American Antiquarian* exists primarily to support basic research on early American artifacts that enhance our fundamental knowledge and evoke the passions that together constitute the art of human being—artifacts that are more luminous, wrenching, splendid, perturbing, and true than they are relevant. We sincerely thank you for joining us in this undertaking, and hope that you deem our efforts worthy of your notice and participation.