

american archaeology

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PROJECT ARCHAEOLOGY



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Girl Scout campers visit Canyonlands National Park with Diné elder and archaeologist Lorraine Nakaii.

‘Discover the Past — Shape the Future’

Project Archaeology is a national education program designed to develop awareness of archaeological sites, cultivate personal responsibility, and enhance historical literacy and cultural understanding. — *By Elizabeth Lunday*

Leah Guenther had a problem. After several years teaching English in a Chicago high school, she took a new position in 2019 teaching American history and civics to seventh and eighth graders.

She began with a traditional curriculum that started the school year with European discovery of the Americas, but she was concerned that this approach didn't give enough weight to Indigenous cultures. She decided she could manage this if she rewound to pre-contact America after discussing colonization.

That's not how it worked out. She struggled to get her students to genuinely connect with Indigenous cultures. "I couldn't rewind it enough," she said. "I was getting off to the wrong start by not foregrounding the whole history in a way that allowed my students to understand Indigenous people and empathize with them, to get a fuller story of the history of the country."

Then Guenther learned about a workshop sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities and presented by the organization Project Archaeology. The workshop introduced



Top: Students eat their way through history at a summer camp studying the archaeology of food and nutrition. **Left:** State program coordinators expand their knowledge of local archaeology at a Project Archaeology conference. **Right:** Teachers learn to document petroglyphs on public lands during a workshop. **Bottom:** Students do reverse archaeology as they place artifacts back in context on a map of a Pawnee earth lodge.



teachers to the use of archaeology to teach about ancient peoples. During the summer of 2021, Guenther spent a week with teachers, museum educators and archaeologists exploring Project Archaeology curricula by investigating the Fremont culture, a society that lived in what is now Utah, Idaho, Nevada, and Colorado from the first to the 13th centuries.

Guenther began the next school year with a unit on the Fremont people. It changed the entire course, because her students became invested in Native cultures. “When we get to Columbus, the kids are naturally angry. They say, ‘wait a minute, how did he discover America when people had been living here for thousands of years?’” she said. That is exactly what Project Archaeology organizers want for their curriculum: deep engagement with people of the past through archaeology. For more than 30 years, the organization has provided educators with tools to explore the past while developing a basic american archaeology

Students at Dewey School of Excellence in Chicago work on creating their own stories through petroglyphs.

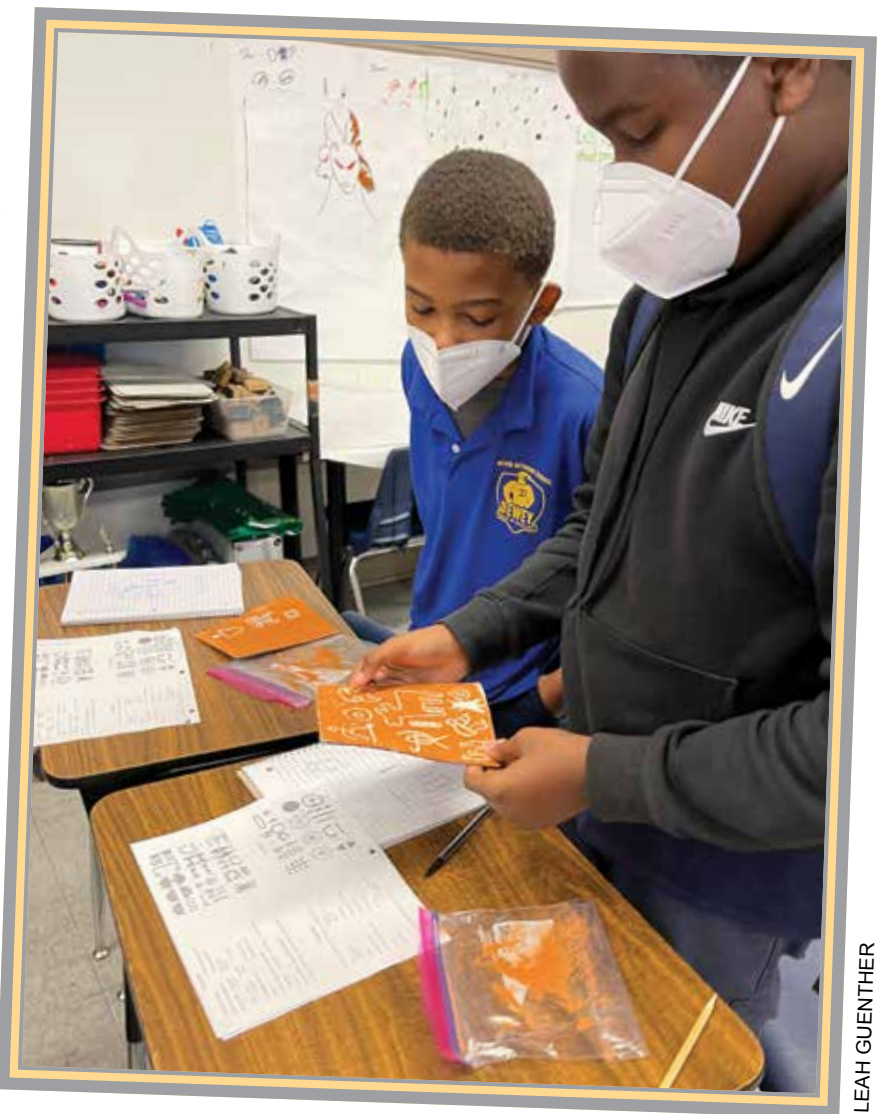
understanding of the discipline and instilling respect for the nation's cultural heritage.

The roots of Project Archaeology date back to 1990 as an interagency effort led by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The agency was concerned about the frequent looting and vandalism of archaeological sites. "There's no way you can put a policeman at every rock art site, so they wanted to educate people to protect these sites," said archaeologist and Project Archaeology Co-director Samantha Kirkley.

The BLM created the program with three goals: to develop awareness of the nation's fragile archaeological sites, to cultivate a sense of personal responsibility for the care of those sites, and to enhance scientific and historical literacy and cultural understanding. Archaeologist and educator Jeanne Moe worked with a team to develop the first educational materials, a curriculum that included both archaeological and Native American perspectives on rock art sites.

About a year later, Moe received assessments from elementary school students who had been taught with the new curriculum. When students were asked, "What will you remember about archaeology a year from now?" One response was, "Vandalism of rock art hurts the living descendants of the people who made it."

"I thought, 'We have something here,'" Moe wrote in a recent blog post. "The kids made the connection between the past and present and between thoughtless vandalism and the



LEAH GUENTHER

feelings of living descendants. They achieved cultural understanding at a deep conceptual level."

That first curriculum became the foundation of Project Archaeology. Today, the program is headquartered at Southern Utah University (SUU) and operates as a partnership between SUU, the BLM, and the Institute for Heritage Education, a non-profit supporting organization for the program.

Workshops and curricula are offered through both the national organization and a network of state-based teams. State-level involvement ensures that educational materials meet state curriculum standards, which is essential for their adoption.

Many of Project Archaeology's more than 30 curriculum guides are part of a series called "Project Archaeology: Investigating Shelter." Each guide focuses on a specific type of shelter, among them a Fremont pit house, a Tsimshian plank house and a Pawnee earth lodge. Teachers

Becky Junge's students researched the Indigenous people of the Great Plains and constructed this interpretation of what an earth lodge would look like.



BECKY JUNGE / JOURNEY ELEMENTARY



Co-director Samantha Kirkley instructs youth at a 4-H summer camp at Frontier Homestead State Park in Utah.

can select guides specific to their region, so students in Wyoming can study Crow tipis and those in New Mexico can investigate ancient pueblos.

Each unit begins by explaining that archaeologists learn about people by studying where they live. “We ask the students, what could someone learn about you by what you have in your bedroom?” said fourth-grade teacher Becky Junge of Casper, Wyoming.

Students then study data from an archaeological site. In one activity, teachers lay out a large diagram of a site with the locations of various artifacts marked. Students are given photos of artifacts that they must place in the proper location, then draw conclusions about how the site was used based on which artifacts were found in what location. “The students get to be little detectives based on the things that people left behind,” Junge said.

Along the way, students are learning critical thinking skills such as making inferences and drawing conclusions based on observations. “It gives us a really good opportunity to practice these skills in a real-life situation,” Guenther said.

The voices of descendant communities have been an essential element of Project Archaeology from the start. For example, the study of Painted Bluff, a prehistoric rock art site in Alabama, includes cultural background from Chickasaw citizen LaDonna Brown; the Chickasaw are among the

american archaeology

descendants of the creators of the site.

Members of descendant communities also contribute to teacher workshops. Virgil Johnson, elder of the Confederated Tribes of Goshute and a retired teacher and administrator, has participated in numerous Project Archaeology programs. His aim is to communicate the Native perspective on the sites and artifacts that students investigate.

For example, in workshops on rock art, Johnson emphasizes that the drawings and engravings have enormous cultural significance for Native people. “They are sacred to us,” Johnson said. So, too, are artifacts and archaeological sites. “We believe the spirits are still there, and we’d rather not disturb them. That’s what I want teachers to know, the significance of these sites and why they need to be protected.” Teachers benefit from his involvement, Johnson said, because the inclusion of Indigenous voices offers more than an academic view of America and its history. “The Native perspective opens their eyes,” he said.

While understanding the Native perspective benefits the students and teachers of the dominant culture, it also helps Native students learn about their history. Eileen Quintana, a member of the Navajo (Diné) Nation, has incorporated many materials from Project Archaeology into programs for Native American children in Utah’s Nebo School District. About 500 of the district’s roughly 35,000 students are Native



Southern Utah University Archaeology Repository Curator Barbara Frank shows artifacts to teachers at the 2021 National Endowment for the Humanities program “Voices of the Ancients,” held at the university.

American, the majority of them Navajo.

Quintana has led the district’s efforts to improve outcomes for Indigenous students by giving them information about “their language, their culture, their practices, and their Indigenous ways of knowing,” she said.

Archaeology provides a tool for Quintana to teach Indigenous history and the cultures of the past. For example, in a recent month-long summer school, Quintana’s students studied what archaeology reveals about the Fremont people. “We asked, what did they use for shelter, what foods did they eat, how did the climate and environment help them,” Quintana said.

The students also visited Fremont Indian State Park and Museum, the site of the largest Fremont village ever discovered. Visiting these sites isn’t easy for many Navajo people, who have a strong cultural aversion to disturbing places with broken pottery or rock art since it is likely people died there. Quintana explains to her students that they could learn a great deal from archaeological sites, but also understands when families prefer their children not visit. In fact, Quintana had to wrestle with her own early teaching, as well as a general distrust of archaeologists.

Over time, however, Quintana came to appreciate the value of archaeology to provide a lens for viewing the past. By studying the Fremont culture, she said, her students find similarities between their lives and the lives of their ancestors.

Like Virgil Johnson, Quintana also works with Project Archaeology to incorporate Native perspectives into the program’s curricula. Her overall goal is to help all children, no matter what their background, to understand the contributions of

Native American people and their history on the continent.

“We need to go back and rewrite the histories,” Quintana said. “A lot of our problems stem from that. We do not tell these stories; we are not honest about the history of our nation. We need to tell the accurate story so that healing can take place for all.”

The original goal of the BLM to instill respect for archaeological sites remains an important element of the program. Students come to this realization organically, Kirkley said. “They learn that these places are significant because of their history and because they are sacred to the people who lived there,” she said. “You don’t have to beat them over the head with a conservation message because they get it.”

Kirkley recalls a recent field trip that was part of a summer camp for elementary school students. “We went out to a rock shelter near Cedar City, Utah. We had just learned the concept of context — that one way we learn about how people lived is by where artifacts are found in relation to one another,” she said. “But this site has been heavily looted, and the material is all mixed up.”

“The students were so upset,” Kirkley said. “One young man said, ‘why would anybody do something like this? Don’t they know that somebody cares about this place?’ So, yeah. They get it.”

To learn more about the program, Project Archaeology, visit projectarchaeology.org.

ELIZABETH LUNDAY is freelance journalist and author based in Fort Worth, Texas.