VISIT THE ISLAND OF ST. CATHERINES, four miles off Georgia’s coast, and you step into an ancient world. There are gloomy forests dripping with Spanish moss, shadowy pools where gators lurk, towering magnolia trees, wild hogs, and a zillion ticks that find you prime for feasting.

Owned by a private foundation and preserved for research and education, St. Catherines Island has lain virtually untouched since the end of the Civil War. It is a Manhattan-sized time capsule guarding the remains of 5,000 years of human occupation—from ancient mounds to a long-lost Spanish mission—and for the last three decades archaeologist David Hurst Thomas has been patiently picking its lock.

“All that archaeology is intact in a way that’s just hard to find any place now,” says Thomas, 61, curator of North American archaeology at New York City’s American Museum of Natural History (AMNH). “There are sites everywhere.”

Last May, Thomas and his crew were making one of their frequent visits to St. Catherines. One team was on the island’s north end, looking for sites threatened by erosion, and another was digging and sifting a 250-foot-wide buried ring of shellfish more than 4,000 years old. It may be a constructed monument, but even if it is only a pile of trash, the team is counting every seed, shell, and bone they find for insights into the daily lives of ancient Indians. One day Thomas studied the ring from on high, standing in a backhoe’s raised scoop. A week later he descended into a telephone booth-sized pit to sketch its densely packed layers. “This is taking forever to dig,” said Thomas, “and we’re not going to rush it.”

Painstaking analyses and assorted perspectives are Thomas’s stock-in-trade. For years he has mixed trips to St. Catherines with expeditions to parched western deserts. And although he’s an empiricist to his bones, he has urged fellow researchers to blend their data with the perspective of Native Americans, people who archaeologists once held at arm’s length.

“Dave is a brilliant reflection of 30 years of change in archaeology,” says colleague Larry Zimmerman of Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. “Here’s this hard-core scientist suddenly realizing there are other stories, there are other pasts, and he was missing something by not paying attention to them.”

Thomas’s approach to archaeology matters. Young researchers across the country start their careers under his guidance—his introductory textbook, long an undergraduate staple, is in its seventh edition. His office at the museum is down the hall from where Franz Boas helped establish American anthropology a century ago, and Thomas sits behind Margaret Mead’s old desk. His wife Lori Pendleton, co-pilot of his archaeological enterprises, works nearby in Mead’s former quarters, and Thomas has followed Mead’s example and established an internship program that attracts a dozen applicants for every opening. Under his purview is a collection of more than one million objects, including 15,000 Indian skeletons that were dug up a century ago, remnants of what some have called American anthropology’s original sin.

ALTHOUGH HE HOLDS A POST AT ONE of New York’s iconic institutions, Thomas, who hails from California, remains a steadfast

"A Different History" by Tom Gidwitz from ARCHAEOLOGY, March/April 2007. Reprinted by permission of the author.
Westerner—he strolls the museum in cowboy boots, drives a ’61 Corvette that he rebuilt himself, and has labeled two of his three laptops Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings. A crack pistol shot and an expert trapper, he’s also the author of hundreds of articles, papers, and books. On St. Catherines, to keep tabs on his far-flung crew, he tools about in a gleaming white Chevy pickup that has “RKOLOGY” on its plates.

Last May I visited Thomas on the island and rode shotgun in his truck. “I’m basically an overgrown Boy Scout,” he told me as we bumped along the island’s dirt roads. “I got interested in Indians when I was a kid in the Bay Area and built my own costumes and did all the stuff that white kids did to act like Indians because I thought—and any number of archaeologists got into it for the same reason—that the Indians got screwed.” Years later, he entered graduate school at the University of California, Davis, thinking “There must be something that I can do as an archaeologist that will help solve what we always called ‘the plight’ of the American Indian.” Although it would take him decades to fulfill his goal, he quickly began to have an impact on the field.

At the time, archaeologist Lewis Binford was leading a movement to make archaeology less of a descriptive, comparative tradition and more of a multidisciplinary, data-driven science that used modern technology and statistics to develop testable theories about the processes that shape human cultures.

Thomas was eager to apply Binford’s teachings. He was intrigued with Indians’ survival skills, and for his master’s thesis he apprenticed with a trapper to understand how ancient Shoshone Indians survived in Nevada’s arid Reese River Valley. “As we were setting traps we started looking down at the ground,” Thomas says. Shoshone artifacts were scattered everywhere.

Thomas learned that the modern theory describing ancient Shoshone life—a seasonal migration between highland and riverbank base-camps, with work and hunting parties traveling to temporary camps—was based on contemporary Shoshone recollections of what their parents and grandparents had told them. Thomas set out to test the stories, and immediately began to innovate.

Because the Reese River Valley had no caves with easy-to-date strata or ruins crammed with artifacts, he developed what he calls “non-site archaeology.” Pioneering the use of computers in archaeology, Thomas wrote a punch card FORTRAN program that analyzed the Great Basin environment and, using data from the stories, predicted where Shoshone artifacts would be found in meaningful concentrations.

He then selected a portion of the valley that encompassed the Shoshone’s varied terrain. At 300 square miles, it was far too large to survey completely, so like a political pollster, he took a sample, randomly selecting 10 percent of the area, and searched it with crews of dozens of people, testing his computer predictions. It took three years to finish the job, but he found more than 3,500 artifacts and showed that the Shoshone migration theory was correct.

Thomas’s pioneering work in Nevada marked him as a wunderkind and the AMNH hired him in 1974. With museum backing, he spent 11 more seasons working in Nevada and made two more landmark discoveries. A chance conversation with a waitress in a small-town bar guided him to Gatecliff Shelter, a cave in Nevada’s Monitor Valley that proved to be the deepest ever excavated in the Americas. In 1979, a forest ranger told Thomas of some stone hunting blinds in a meadow atop Mt. Jefferson, one of Nevada’s highest mountains. Thomas led a crew on a two-day hike to the 11,000-foot summit, where he discovered pit-house remains, huge stone slabs, and hundreds of tiny arrowheads. Dubbed Alta Toquima, the site was the highest North American Indian village ever found.

Soon after heading east to the AMNH, Thomas began work on St. Catherines Island, joining a long-term AMNH study funded by the Edward John Noble Foundation, which owns the island. An antebellum cotton plantation that was then a haven for freed slaves, St. Catherines was also once home to untold generations of Guale Indians, among the first indigenous peoples Europeans encountered north of Mexico. Noble, a New York businessman, bought the island in 1943; his heirs have made it a center for educational study and have rehabilitated the old slave cabins to house research teams.

One fact astonished Thomas. St. Catherines had been the site of Santa Catalina de Guale, one of the more than 150 Franciscan missions in La Florida, Spain’s colony in the Southeast.
Established in the late sixteenth century, Santa Catalina de Guale endured until several hundred Westo Indians, abetted by Carolinean colonists, raided the mission in 1680, wiping out any trace of the outpost.

As a Californian, Thomas had been nurtured on what he calls the West’s “mission mania”—its romance with Spain’s Franciscan friars and the 21 churches they built in his home state. But he had never known that the east had Spanish missions. Finding Santa Catalina presented an irresistible challenge.

As in Nevada, science came first. For three field seasons, he and his team surveyed 20 percent of the island. While bushwhacking through swamps and thickets, dodging gators and snakes, they probed the soil with steel poles and found more than 250 sites, including whole villages and 20 burial mounds, some dating to 1500 B.C.

The survey led Thomas to an acre of nondescript forest on the island’s west coast where there was an abundance of Spanish pottery. There, he used three geophysical techniques to pinpoint the mission site: soil resistivity surveys, which zap the ground with electric current; proton magnetometer, which can spot traces of subsurface iron; and ground-penetrating radar, which gave him a clear picture of the well-preserved remains of the mission compound, including the wattle-and-daub church itself. “We had walked over it a hundred times, but it was absolutely invisible,” he says.

Beneath the church floor were 431 Guale converts, buried with their feet toward the altar, hands crossed on their chests. It was the most extensive series of human remains from an early contact site in North America. The story of the skeletons exerted an unexpected and powerful influence, and took Thomas the scientist deeper into the field of historical archaeology.

In this case, the dead Guale showed that the accepted history was wrong. The friars’ plaintive letters home complaining of severe privation had convinced historians that La Florida was the poorest of Spain’s colonies. However, Thomas discovered that the mission was wealthy and well-supplied—the skeletons were adorned with gold crucifixes, rare Franciscan medallions, and more than 65,000 glass trade beads. And, says Thomas, the rich burials, which contrast with the austere internments customary in Catholic Spain, show that the friars did not inflict Christianity on passive Indians. Because there were no soldiers at the mission, the friars had to compromise with the Indians living around them. They won converts by first dispensing treasure and then acquiescing as the Guale violated church doctrine by continuing their own traditions and taking imported Spanish riches, as well as valued aboriginal items, to their graves.

As he worked, Thomas pondered why he had never heard of La Florida’s missions before. What he calls “Anglo-colored” lenses had filtered Spain’s encounters with Native Americans from the national story. To fully understand the past, he realized, archaeologists had to adopt what he calls “a cubist perspective.” Just as cubist painters rejected the conventional single-point perspective practiced since the Renaissance—instead painting their subjects from many viewpoints at once—archaeologists had to add historical archaeology, Native American studies, historical demography, and ethno-history to empirical science. However, Thomas soon found how hard it was to put this philosophy to work.

In 1989, Thomas was nominated to the board of the National Museum of the American Indian. The members’ most important task was to plan a new museum on the Mall in Washington, D.C. Most of the 25 board members were Native Americans, and Thomas thought his knowledge would make him welcome. But when they met around the Smithsonian board room’s big table, Thomas says, “It turned out the Indian people weren’t too wild about anything I had to say.”

They shared the views of the late Vine Deloria, a board member and Lakota activist whose influential 1969 book Custer Died for Your Sins urged Indians to fight the indignities they received in American popular and academic culture. Especially insulting, Deloria said, were museums where Indians appeared as specimens frozen in a pre-contact Arcadia that was the invention of curators like Thomas himself.

Thomas was proud of his discoveries and the museum. He had been in grad school during the 1960s when Indian protesters disrupted academic conferences, barred researchers from sites, and trashed their camps. In the ‘80s he kept the Alta Toquima excavations secret for fear Indians would stop them.
A Different History

The Indians had a different perspective. For more than 200 years, researchers had treated Indians as specimens of a primitive stage of cultural evolution. Archaeologists dug up tens of thousands of skeletons and hurried to collect the last bits of “authentic” Indian culture before it disappeared. “Just the idea of people digging up the remains of your ancestors—we couldn’t believe people were doing that,” says George Horse Capture, a Montana A’aninin and former National Museum of the American Indian curator. The board members wanted a museum that would tell their story their own way.

And while the other board members cheered the 1990 Federal Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), at the time Thomas saw disaster. NAGPRA protects Indian graves on federal land and gives tribes the right to ask for the return of human remains and sacred objects in museum collections. For two years Thomas and his fellow board members clashed, Thomas says, until one day a board member announced “There’s someone in this room who is so clueless about Indian affairs that we should convene a course of Indian 101 immediately upon conclusion of this meeting.”

The encounter began an education that prompted Thomas to see the history of American anthropology through Indian eyes. “I considered myself to be an expert on Indians,” he says, but he knew nothing about their laws, treaties, and tribal sovereignty. “That experience on the board of the Indian Museum just completely turned me around, I learned more there than I did when I was in grad school because I didn’t understand that the Indians had a different history.”

Thomas and Deloria became friends, and Thomas realized that his notion that science trumped all was wrong. He saw that NAGPRA gave Indians power and encouraged consensus and mutual respect. Soon he was advising tribes how to hire and work with archaeologists and even how tribal members could become archaeologists themselves. Tribes now use archaeology to gain federal recognition, file treaty rights claims, and protect sacred sites.

In 1996, when Washington state Indians battled archaeologists over possession of the 9,400-year-old bones of Kennewick Man, Thomas felt that the public misperceived the dispute as an Indian attempt to substitute their myths for modern science. In response, his 1999 book Skull Wars showed anthropology’s past abuses and defended the Indians’ desires to protect their cultural heritage. “My generation is still pretty irritated about that book,” he says. Larry Zimmerman, who cooperated with tribes long before NAGPRA, says the book marked the first time that someone of Thomas’s stature had bucked the establishment. “To have the courage to say the things that he did in Skull Wars was phenomenal,” Zimmerman says.

“We can’t redig Gatecliff, we can’t redig Alta Toquima, but if we did it again we’d be sure to have a big native component,” Thomas says of the Nevada sites. He would ask tribal members to come to the sites and share their oral histories, myths, and stories. For mountaintop Alta Toquima, he says, “We’re actually thinking about getting some helicopters and doing that.”

Thomas may finally have fulfilled his ambitions by helping Indians with archaeology. But he is still as focused as ever on data. “I can’t remember ever working so hard on research as I’m doing right now,” he says of his current work on St. Catherines, “I think it’s the best science we’ve ever done.”

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A Different History is a timeline based not on just one Point of Divergence, but several over the march of history. There is no one main focal PoD, but several over the centuries. This results in not an alternative history based on one event, but all of history, and beyond. In the beginning, events should be more or less the same, but as history moves on and the Butterfly Effect takes hold, more and more differences will happen. What if different decisions completely changed the course of history? The Song of Ice and Fire. The last two Targaryens are in exile in Essos, their security is constantly threatened, Robert Baratheon wants them dead and the Dothraki want Daenerys. They can count on the help of a great friend to prepare the forces necessary to reconquer Westeros. A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America is a book by Ronald Takaki. It received an Anisfield-Wolf Book Award in 1994. A Different Mirror deals with the subject of minority perspectives of multicultural America, incorporating quotes, folk songs, letters, telegrams, and photographs into the text. It deals with, in roughly sequential order, Native Americans, African Americans pre- and post-slavery era, Irish, Mexicans, Chicanos, Chinese, Japanese, Jews, and ties up the book with a current