

NAME

Chris Lidner Interview

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2 SPEAKERS

Chris Lidner

Sam Phelan

START OF TRANSCRIPT

[00:00:01] Chris Lidner

Excuse me. You're on. We're on. Okay. So what have you been doing for 20 years? Lots of things. But this all archaeology. Yes. All archaeology. And there've been lots of projects. But I kind of feel as though this, the work here in 2003 was was an important part of my overall career. Really? Yeah. I do feel that I had done work with community before. And I think that it, it, it developed here more. I had worked on structures before not simply artifacts that were in the ground, but buildings. Oh, really? Yeah. Oh. And that's what we found here. Yeah. We found infrastructure here really is what we found. We might have found some suggestion of where the barn was. Or perhaps a hay barrack where hay is stored outside a barn. But and I've recently been digging in the early 2000 in Hyde Park at a residence, a stone foundation there. But this gave me a sense of what else could be unexpectedly buried in a yard like this. So back in 2003, was digging for Native American artifacts a big deal then? Or is that more recent that that's become a what do you mean by big deal? Requirement a requirement? Oh, yeah. It was a requirement back then. Yeah. And my early, say the early ten or so years of my career were focused on pre-colonial artifacts. Okay. And it wasn't until toward the end of my doctoral research which was on the Schoharie Valley on the other side of the Catskills that I encountered a historic structure in my excavations.

[00:02:26] Chris Lidner

Yeah. Okay. I had trained on identifying historic artifacts in graduate school when I was writing up my master's thesis, but I hadn't dealt with, actually, a foundation. Yeah. And what happens to it over time once it's abandoned and how it gets buried and lost and forgotten? Yeah. Which has been a major feature of my work ever since. Still is. Liz. Really? Yeah. Yeah. Okay. Currently, I'm excavating the foundation at Montgomery Place. Oh, the part of the Bard campus. Yeah. Of a rare tropical plant conservatory. You got that? I do, I remember hearing about that. Okay. It's been a few years now. Yeah. We started in 2020 21 when we couldn't leave campus with students because of Covid. Yeah. And so I said, well, Montgomery Place would work and go do it. Where's the conservatory where Alexander Gibson developed these unusual plants? And he had a show in this building right around that time too. Yeah. Yeah. That Myra Young Armstead did a course around Gilson called Gilson Fest. Yeah. And I, the first time. This is only the second time I've been in the story studio, and the first was for that show, which was remarkable. Really remarkable. After that was all done, I began to do the archaeology of it. Right. Because when you did the archaeology over here, this wasn't part of the Elmendorf, was it? No, no it wasn't.

[00:04:14] Chris Lidner

So this was off the whole story studio on the parking lot. And all of that was off limits to what you were doing? Well, the parking lot, I think we were out there looking for a variety of things that were in the ground where the parking lot is now. Well, remember, there used to be a big tree line and bush line right there that separated, right? Yeah. So the parking lot that was at the Elmendorf at that time, I'm sure you dug in there. I believe so, yeah, yeah yeah yeah. But it was expanded, obviously. Yeah. So what, what you say this was early on in your Archaeological career. Not early on, but yeah, maybe midway. What? What? The Elmendorf had been here already for 20 years. And the Elmendorf in as a historical art building and whatnot and open to the public and whatnot. Yes. What instigated somebody to ask you to come on over here for a year and dig holes? Yeah. Yeah. Well, it had to do with taking down a shed. I think it was called and replacing it with that green building there. This one here? Yeah. The new barn. Right. Barn. Is that what you call it now? Yeah. Yeah. So that that and the infrastructure of the, the the drainage water and electrical lines that fed into that and develop into the parking lot.

[00:05:54] Chris Lidner

All those were what needed to be cleared in terms of the impact on the archaeological resources. Okay. So so the state got involved. Oh, they were involved. Oh, very much so. Yes. Read the appendix to my report. It has detailed notes on my conversations with them. I don't usually read the appendix. State historic preservation office. Well, you can feel in reading that you can see how there was tension about this because there was a deadline of November, I think, to actually start the project. And I started in May. I think I gave the first proposal. And so it was fitting it in to the schedule here and my research schedule and teaching at Bard. And it was pretty tight. Okay. I kept it to not very many days. So the state was concerned that there would be artifacts spread around the grounds here that would illustrate the history of the land or. Yes, yes. That's true. The history of the building the community and that they would there, they would be affected by whatever modifications to the ground there would be. And specifically, probably the most important thing was that the, the new barn had underneath it, there were, there were footer trenches all over, all the way around, I believe. Oh, okay. And when we excavated there, we found enough stuff below, I think an average of nine inches. Yeah. So there's a lot of fill out there.

[00:07:47] Chris Lidner

Yeah. That is material brought in the 20th century to bury the earlier stuff and to level it, to level it out. Yeah, sure. So we were able to determine that if it was put on piers in, I think there are eight of them. And then it rested. The building was on top of a layer of gravel. Yeah. It was graded and then there was gravel put in that it wouldn't have any more impact on what was buried there under the fill except in those places which we sampled. That is to say, we dug maybe 50% of what was going to be affected. Right. To get an idea and how deep it was. So when you yeah, when you're doing that type of thing, you only need to go down a certain depth. You need to figure out what that is. Exactly. It could be 4 or 5ft. It could be 40ft in the urban area. How do you go about that? Well you dig. I don't know, 30 some test pits, I guess. They're called. Yeah. Usually 14 inch diameter cylinders. And in this case some 20 by 20 inch squares. And then when you hit something that looks suspicious, like, oh, it looks like there's a wall there, a foundation for something which we found in three places. You dig more, you open it up. Yeah, yeah. As and you try to keep to a minimum that you need to do to find out what it is and where it is and where it's going to be affected so that you can then avoid that area.

[00:09:37] Chris Lidner

So almost all these kinds of projects wind up in avoidance rather than a direct impact, right? Okay. So it's not it's not like an archaeological dig that they do to try to uncover a town or something like that. This is very limited, right? Just to try to find what artifacts are there or if there are artifacts there. If artifacts include structures and structures, includes facilities or infrastructure, I'm calling it. So what we found besides artifacts, it's told us there was there was a lot of there was a building early stuff out there, 18th century pottery and 19th, mostly 19th century and some 20th century artifacts. And, you know, there's a there's a 28 page catalog in the report that lists everything and how deep it was and where it was and so forth. But what we found that was really of concern were a. Let's see a. Dry well. A septic tank and a sister. Really? Yeah. And the what's really important to understand is I asked if there was anything known in the art that I should focus on or be aware of. And I heard that there was nothing out there. Nothing out there. Nothing out there of concern. Yeah. And you find a sister? We did. And we, we also found two places where posts were set, which might indicate the barn, the early barn and the or a hay barrack that went with it.

[00:11:34] Chris Lidner

Yeah. I'm not sure what they were because we couldn't find any more of those. So it was just intriguing. Nothing indigenous, nothing pre-colonial. Right at all. Nothing at all. And Those those three facilities were really important to know about. Maybe not so much for historic reasons, but for safety. If you drove a piece of heavy machinery over any of those, you could get really hurt. Yeah. You know, imagine I never thought of that tooling along on your front end loader all of a sudden. Whoa. And you're, you're pitched, you know, and at worst, case would be it was on top of you. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So because they were at various depths, I think the cistern, which is just off the house where you would expect it to be was down six feet. Right. And it was, there were cavities that weren't filled. So they had a line. Gutters or something from the house that was catching the rain and putting it into the cistern. And then it had some way of extracting the water. Pump pump pump. Yeah. After we found it, somebody remembered seeing a pump ages ago. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Just kind of confirm it. That's cool. Yeah. Yeah. The walkway that you mentioned earlier. I'm not really familiar with. I'll have to take a look if I have time.

[00:13:12] Chris Lidner

And I do. There was something that I found in my, one of the tests that I thought was a walkway and it might have been. But what it was really doing there was protecting a pipe, which led to a drywell to keep. I think that was what it was because it was a large fieldstones. Yeah. You know that big ones around. Yeah. And they led in a straight line. And I thought, well, this is interesting. I'd ran into walkways before. And at other sites. But finally we lifted one and there was this iron pipe underneath it leading to the dry well. Right, right. And the drywall is kind of interesting. Nothing in it. But it was open. Yeah. We lowered a camera in. You couldn't really get in between the pipe and the drywall. And you could. There was a big open space about the size of this table, maybe. But the unusual thing about it, it was shaped like a coffin. Oh, yeah. There's a drawing in the report. A coffin? Yeah. I wonder what that was all about. I could tell. I don't know. I don't know. Waste water. Dead water? I have no idea. And I have no idea whether any other dry wells are shaped like that. Not to my experience. I found at least one, maybe two I can think of. And then finally the, you know, the septic tank.

[00:14:51] Chris Lidner

Took a lot of work to find out how big it was and get its area. But then as we were doing that, we had to expose more of it. I think with six test holes, not like that. We came down on where the opening the hatch is when you found that. Yeah, yeah. Okay. That's what it is. And we're leaving it alone. We understand this. We're going to leave it alone. Don't drive over it. Where is that? It's out there. It's out there in the yard. You can use the map. The map you have in there is a scale. Oh, that's got a scale of it. Yeah. Oh, okay. You could actually relocate all those things. Okay. As very carefully done by a colleague. So the final report there is called a final report of mitigation. Yeah. What were you what were you trying to mitigate? Destruction of artifacts. You know. Yeah. Location of the building and damage that it might do or. Yeah. Those are all accurate. Literally, the word means to lessen the effect upon. Yeah. Yeah. So if, if the footers had been put in you know, a lot would have been so either either out of place. So and oftentimes what's near something and what is what layer it's in is very important to interpretation. And so either if it was done without archaeology, that information would be lost or it would have to be done by archaeology at great expense.

[00:16:34] Chris Lidner

Great expense. Right. Right. So we we mitigated the cost as well as the damage. And yeah. And we, and hopefully the system was avoided. And you know, there was nobody hurt, right. Mitigated the risk. So, so it's not just trying to find artifacts. I mean, there's no, it's much more complex than that. I'm afraid so. Yeah. And you always want to find something you can really interpret and say this adds to history. Yeah. Well we added that there was a cistern, a dry well and a septic tank, which. And now we know where they are. So that's it. So when you took on the project I presume you hadn't had a lot of experience with the Elmendorf in prior to that? I don't think so. I've been thinking about how. How do I know the Elmendorf and Yeah. Well, so my my core question is, who helped you learn about the Elmendorf, which would then frame your archaeological work? Yeah, yeah, I wanted to talk about that before we got into this other because I felt like I had a really good time in the archives. Thank you to Bobby Thompson and Barbara Bielenberg. Yeah. Okay. And helped me find the maps and answer questions. So they did. They got in there. Oh, yeah. No, it was a, I think that's my only exposure to the Elmendorf was to look at maps for maybe some other project, I don't know.

[00:18:25] Chris Lidner

But I knew it was a resource. The archives here. And then when I got to really go through and look for all the maps that are in the figures at the back of the report, which were very helpful, they helped a great deal. So they were wonderful and I really enjoyed working with them. And Larry Thetford. Oh, Larry really was yeah. Who was himself an avocational archaeologist. Yeah. We called him out of respect for people who aren't in the profession, but they do archaeology, and they do it carefully. Yeah. And he actually participated in in the excavation. He did, he did. Yeah, yeah. I think, I think Larry is deconstructing barns and whatnot, not digging around. I brought my copy and it has the clipping. I will make a copy of this too if you don't have it. Clipping from the Reinbeck Gazette Advertiser. There he is, shovel in hand. Sorry, if not a better copy, but. Well, there he is. All right. Yep. He was president of the Friends of Elmendorf, and I think he did a lot to to raise funds and support for the Elmendorf. Yeah, that's my sense. I mean, I wasn't in on the history, but it seemed like he he had really worked hard for it. And then he came out and worked with us. Right. I know, yeah, yeah. This this is a Bard student, maybe still a Bard student at that time.

[00:20:19] Chris Lidner

Maybe he had graduated and continued to work for me. Now works in Puerto Rico. Oh, really? Yeah. Oh. That's cool. I employed 2 or 3 students, and my partner at the time was involved in the cataloguing. And one other community member was involved in the excavation of the lab work that is identifying everything and making sure it all fit with the field records and so forth. Right. A lot of, a lot of time was spent not in the excavation, but in accounting for what we had found and documenting it, documenting everything. Right, right. And would the same people do that? Yeah. There's overlap. Some new people who hadn't been in the dig. One person was hadn't even started his freshman year at Bard, but he contacted me and said he heard there was a project on it As Trevor Johnson is his name. He's. I said, well, you can help with the cataloging. And they were cataloging in the upstairs of the Elmendorf. Yeah. And it was August. It was really hot up there. That was his first exposure to archaeology. He then went on to he studied a degree in accounting or something, decided he would go into computer graphics and but then he changed his mind and came back to archaeology. He worked with me in Germantown when I was starting that project. Which you probably know something about. Yeah. And he Let's see if I can get this right.

[00:22:09] Chris Lidner

He, he did the computer graphics for the report. When we started that project, which is somewhat similar to that report that you have. And he wrote a thesis documenting what 4 or 5 individuals thought about doing an archaeology project in Germantown long term before it ever really started. Oh really? So it was kind of an ethnographic. Yeah, yeah. Evaluation of the potential for archaeology to contribute to the community. And he then went to graduate school. I think he got hired by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and then went to graduate school at UMass Boston. Did his master's thesis on the project in Hyde Park. Which I was doing when I was here. I was also there. And he and I then published his thesis in my research in a book called The archaeology of race in the northeast, because it's an African American community who lived on the former Bard family land. That's right in Hyde Park. And then he said, well, I see where I'm going with this. He went to Harvard and got a master's in urban planning. And he was then hired by New York City to plan for what? To how to protect the neighborhoods that were flooded, the historic neighborhoods, Manhattan, Brooklyn, by hurricane Sandy after Sandy. And he goes and he makes these very complicated maps of how to mitigate the flood effects. And then he got hired by a Dutch firm and works all over the country now doing that.

[00:24:06] Chris Lidner

And he got his start here. Yeah. That's great. At the elbow, in the upstairs in 100 degree and 100 degree weather. Yeah. Just sorting through all these little bits. That was his exposure. So he's a person I greatly admire. You stay in contact with him? Yeah, yeah, yeah. He's really good. Yeah. Wow. Yeah. So it has effects on people's lives, you know? Yeah. Larry and I continue to work together. I think it was around that time that he and I were both part of the Native American Institute that was founded at the State Museum in Albany. And he eventually led that organization. Larry, have you over for his powwows every spring. Once or twice I went to the powwow. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah. We did we did some experimental archaeology, which is part of what I do as a as a person who works with pre-colonial materials scraping. We made flint scraping tools and worked a bison hide in his yard. Oh, there you go. Yeah, yeah. To see if we could produce the kind of wear patterns that we thought might have been produced by processing a large animal. Yeah. So in terms of the oldest materials you found here, I found I found references to coal. Finding coal, coal dust, and that type of thing, which I don't think of as being that old. Well, that old in comparison to.

[00:25:44] Chris Lidner

Well. Well, let me let me ask, would that would that be used in the late 1600s? No. Okay. Not here at least. Yeah. Maybe in Pennsylvania, I'm not sure. But it comes into the Hudson Valley in the 1830s until the 1830s. Yeah, yeah. And domestic use. Okay. It might have been experimented with and so forth. But oftentimes it's a real important marker as to how old something is if you're digging in mid 19th century deposits and you find coal, or you stop finding coal as you dig down. You can say, okay, this is probably what we're getting older. Yeah. Yeah. Right. Okay. And that was a key piece of evidence at the Palatine Farmstead in Germantown, right? Coal. Coal. When we were digging the fireplace in the cellar, which is, I mean, probably the most important find at that site. When we got down to the bottom of the fireplace, we were still finding coal. A foot down. So that means that the deposits we were unearthing in this old fireplace were put there after 1830 or so. Yeah. Okay. There was a continued disturbance of the fireplace. Okay. So that would, that would then be true here to potentially for the the deposits that you did find, whether it was dust or actual coal itself. Yeah. Yeah. Not so much the dust because that can that can move in the ground. Yeah. Roots and earthworms. But large pieces of coal at the very bottom of the excavation would then tell you it postdates the beginning of domestic use of coal.

[00:27:37] Chris Lidner

Right. So it's a it's a marker, we would call it. Yeah. Okay. Index of the age. Yeah. And then there was another marker that I noted that you found. And it had to do with some type of ceramic that was made widely in the 1700s, but it was used to some degree in the 1600s. And you used it as a way to kind of date the building and what was going on in the building. At what time period? Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm I'm what comes to mind. And it's not a very clear recollection but that we did find some red earthenware with a yellow glaze. There would be some brown or red markings which could be English or it could be American, but it's typical of the, the late 1700s, but earlier to earlier. Yeah, it could be, it's just gorgeous stuff. And you get large pieces and you can really see it. Yeah, yeah. Did they save everything that you found? Yeah I presume. I mean, I gave the collection, have you seen it somewhere? There are lots of boxes upstairs. That's right. That's where where it went. I remember them being up there. Yeah. Great. Yeah. We're talking boxes of materials. Oh, yeah? Yeah. I don't know how many. How many would you say? Two or 3 or 4.

[00:29:16] Sam Phelan

Well, there's a collection of maybe 20 or 30 boxes. But which one was labeled yours? I don't know. Yeah.

[00:29:24] Chris Lidner

Yeah. I would say it's 2 or 3 boxes. Banker's boxes? Yeah. Wow. Excuse me. Okay. Okay. Yeah. We talked about the. There's a you did a lot of research before you even began to do the dig. Relying on Barb and I guess Larry and probably some other people. Claire Carr and Claire. Yes. Of course. Yeah. I, I dedicated to her. She had just passed away. She was she was important at that. That was in the middle of her research then. The thing I, I. Well.

[00:30:10] Sam Phelan

She already died.

[00:30:11] Chris Lidner

She had died by by that date. By when.

[00:30:15] Sam Phelan

When Chris did his archaeology.

[00:30:18] Chris Lidner

Oh. By oh three. Right. Yeah. But you knew her before then. I did. In fact, she took a class with me. Oh, okay. Yeah. And I can't remember. I might have, I might have read her book in draft. I'm not sure. I can't remember exactly. Yeah. But yeah, she was. We were fairly close. Yeah. Were there other people that stood out to you as Not that I can think of. Well, we've got Larry, we got Claire, we got Barb, we got. Well, I also, I also had conversations with Herman Gauguins. Herman Gauguins. Yes. He was drafted right where the building was going to be. The redesign. When we started finding stuff where the new building would be, where he shortened it up, I think a little bit or something like that. Well, he he changed from footer trenches, right? That was a big change. Yeah. Yeah. He had worked it out. And they've got like eight of those out there. Right? I think so. Yeah. Four corners and then midpoints. Midpoints. Yeah. Yeah. That's all all the local folks I can remember. I except let's see there. Oh, Larry. Yeah. I remember now what my early contact with Larry was. I designed an exhibit. I proposed it. I wanted to get a grant to do an exhibit about the ancient inhabitants of this area. And I applied somewhere for funding and didn't get it. And I. I met Larry and mentioned it maybe through And and miracle gobbler who were next door neighbors, I think.

[00:32:08] Chris Lidner

Yeah. And he said, well, I can get my company to fund that. We, we have community contribution monies available. So he funded the exhibit. And once I had it out for Hardscrabble Day and it's a freestanding exhibit. It's been to, it seems like every school in this area and lots of public libraries and historical societies. It's currently resides in my lab, but and a couple walked up and said, wow, that's a, that's a really nice exhibit. This is very interesting. We could work with you and do some similar stuff. You know, it would be a bit different than what you're doing here. And Scott Guerin and Jane Dodds. Dodds worked with me on, I don't know, a dozen, I think, exhibits over time, mostly at the parsonage in Germantown. Also at Bart. So there are two Bart. There are two exhibits at Bard that I. I'm very proud of that Scott and I and Jane did. And and Larry was involved in one of them because it was about ancient inhabitants of the area. So it was a real important connection for me to, to get this artist exhibit designer, colleague and his wife who does the text part of exhibits to work with him. And yeah, we're still, still talking about projects we could do. Yeah. Really? Yeah. So that's, you know, 20 years of yeah, of having good colleagues that came out of it.

[00:33:48] Chris Lidner

Terrific. Yeah. Yeah. I'm really grateful I could do that. There are other things about the project that you want to mention. I take a moment to think of that. I got a I got to zoom over to the archive. Any surprises? Well, all those structures were a surprise. Those were all a surprise to you. Yeah, I, I didn't mean to find any of them. So. So those structures then. Yeah. Would have been indicative of a time period when it was used as an inn. Do you think or. I couldn't I didn't excavate enough to date any. Well the septic tank was recent. It was probably 1960s or so. Oh, okay. Yeah. Yeah. And it's surprising that nobody remembered. Nobody remembered that. But. Well, there's a change in ownership. Yeah. Yeah, definitely. But if there was to be archaeology, if somebody becomes a component of what goes on here in the doing and the reinterpretation. Potentially it could serve to guide people into where to look or where not to look. Right. Yeah. I like to think of archaeology as having a fairly active role in a site like the Elmendorf or the Parsonage in Germantown. Or the the park because it documents the activity, it engages young people. I hate to say this, but maybe more than history does. Well, it's active. It's hands on. It's active. It's finding a piece of.

[00:35:40] Chris Lidner

Yeah. And then they get into the science part of it. You know, there's all this measuring and counting. And, you know, we do not very sophisticated statistical analysis. Quantitative. I shouldn't even say statistical. You know how much in this one deposit do you have compared to this deposit over here? Can tell you a lot, but it involves some math and some geometry to figure out the volume that you're dealing with. So some students certainly by no means all really engaged with that. Yeah. And I think in thinking about a site or I talk in terms of sites as I t because that's archaeology speak, but a place like the Elmendorf, if you had a, I would guess maybe a really robust education and community engagement program, I would hope that it would include archaeology because it serves certain people really well. And I like to think that and I'm still learning how to do this. I have had some experience. It also would engage people who Not so active and have have learned a lot of history in their lives, but can still work together to do the lab work. Maybe not the field work. Yeah. Yeah. And I have seen projects like that, that, that engage the, the elders in the community in getting in touch with the stuff of their history. Yeah. Yeah. Well, we got a whole section here that hasn't been done yet, so. Yeah.

[00:37:29] Sam Phelan

No finding of any old barn over there, is that.

[00:37:33] Chris Lidner

No. No, surprisingly, unless those two posts had to do with it. And so that would be a place to look into along this property line. I would never want to dig again because we found ash pits, coal ash pits, and they were horrible today. Why? Well, you're digging in. In coal dust, most of the bits of broken glass, you know, you got. How big is this? Where does it go? What is it? Why am I doing this? Yeah. Really? I had a volunteer to work with me on that. Maybe two. But we, you know, we, I think we documented two ash pits. Pets pits back there. Yeah. And then, you know, said avoid this area. So those were just, those were just pits where people were throwing stuff. Right, right. Throw their their ash and their garbage. Yeah. I think there was metal in there. Rusted metal. It was awful. Really awful. And but if you had to put something where you were going to disturb something deep, that might be the place. That'd be the place. Yeah. Because it's recent and you're not going to really learn anything more about it probably.

[00:38:47] Chris Lidner

Yeah. And so you had to choose where to disturb for another century. Oh, okay. Yeah, right. That would be the place to do it. I would, I would think so it can guide you to do further development as well as learn more stuff. You know, you have to remember that we dug as little as we could. So really targeting places where you could learn a lot more about Red hook. I was amazed when I was reading the initial part of this, how, how methodical you and deliberative you were in selecting where you were going to dig holes and how big those holes were going to be. And if I found this and I wasn't going to dig this and you know that, yeah, it was I mean, you really made the attempt to be as non-intrusive as possible. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah. That's, that's definitely the, the goal in that the method. Right, right. Cool. Okay, great. Okay. That was great. Thank you very much, sir. Good to talk to you. I'll see you in two.

END OF TRANSCRIPT



