

# **ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGICAL COMMISSION**

## **ANNUAL REPORT**

**for**

**FISCAL YEAR 2023: JULY 2022 - JUNE 2023**

### **SUMMARY OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

Fiscal year 2023 marked the 48<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the formation of the Alexandria Archaeological Commission (AAC). The mission of the AAC is to establish goals and priorities to promote Alexandria Archaeology (AA), encourage volunteerism, and to advise on the preservation and interpretation of Alexandria's extraordinary sites and collections. The key accomplishments over FY 2023 are:

- 1) Continued focus on Waterfront history and archaeology through representation on the Waterfront Commission and advocacy for waterfront historical projects and initiatives including monitoring and storing the ship timbers for preservation in Ben Brenman Pond as a best practice and future exhibition of the ship from the Hotel Indigo anticipated to return from conservation in December 2025.
- 2) Participation by the AAC as a key member of the Torpedo Factory Stakeholders Task Force both as a partner in the building's future, the home of the Archaeology Museum and Division, and as a voice for the historic preservation of the 100-year-old building.
- 3) Telling the full story of Alexandria's history by participating in the Freedom House Master Plan process and supporting the preservation of Douglass Cemetery and the launch of the southern route of the African American Waterfront Heritage Trail.
- 4) Advised on the development of a new permanent exhibit in the Alexandria Archaeology Museum and other major efforts to interpret archaeology in Alexandria archaeology to residents and visitors.
- 5) Created a new award to recognize the contributions of City residents to this unique urban archaeology program. In honor of retired Councilwoman Redella "Del" Pepper's years of support since the founding of the program, the award was named for her and given to her.

## COMMISSION MEMBERSHIP, ACCOMPLISHMENTS, AND ACTIVITIES

The AAC is dedicated to *providing guidance and responsive advocacy, assisting in establishing goals and priorities, as well as supporting AA staff and ongoing outreach and education to our community*, so that AA can continue to be one of the country’s most respected, innovative, and leading city archaeology offices. The AAC remains active and, through their achievements, continues to positively impact and enrich the lives of residents, attract visitors (in person as well as online), and bring national and international attention to Alexandria’s discoveries.

### *Key Accomplishments*

#### *Continued advocacy for waterfront history projects and initiatives*

The AAC continues to provide representation to the Waterfront Commission and kept up to date with the Waterfront History Documentary Study Project. The AAC supports and encourages the City to begin the formal Waterfront Museum Feasibility Study and **determine next steps for the ship timbers undergoing conservation.**

#### *AAC Participation in the Torpedo Factory Stakeholders Taskforce Planning Process*

As a stakeholder representing the history and archaeology community, the AAC advised taskforce members and City staff to consider the Archaeology Museum as a vibrant and essential part of the Torpedo Factory Art Center (TFAC) worthy of consideration during the process. Despite all the efforts and advocacy during the stakeholder meetings, AAC remains disappointed that the final report did not include or recognize the important role that the Archaeology Museum and the history of the building play in the current and future TFAC experience.

#### *AAC Support of Telling the Full Story of Alexandria’s History*

The AAC continues to contribute to and collaborate with community partners and the Alexandria Black History Museum for the completion of the southern route of the African American Waterfront Heritage Trail StoryMap and associated website, which launched on Saturday, February 4. The launch of the southern route of the Alexandria African American Heritage Trail was highlighted across Visit Alexandria’s [What’s New in Alexandria in 2023](#) content, Black History Month content, and corresponding pitching efforts, directly resulting in top coverage in *Travel + Leisure*’s “[The 50 Best Places to Travel in 2023](#).” A strong dedication to storytelling around Alexandria’s new Black history experiences led to our city being highlighted as one of the best places to travel “For Cultural Riches,” among global destinations such as Cairo and the Nile, Venice, the United Kingdom, and more.

Below is additional local, regional, and national coverage on the trails that was garnered throughout the year:

- *The Washington Post*, [Guide to the Best Black History Month Events Around Washington](#) (online and print)

- *Business Matters* (UK Business Magazine), [Alexandria Just Added 13 New Spots To Its Waterfront African American Heritage Trails](#)
- *WUSA 9*, [African American Heritage Trails expand in Alexandria](#) (online and 6 broadcast segments)
- *NBC 4*, [NoVa's Black History Art](#)
- *Alexandria Gazette*, [New Route of the African American Waterfront Heritage Trail](#)
- *Alexandria Living Magazine*:
  - [Alexandria Black History Month Events include Films, Tours, Readings](#)
  - [Tourism Recovery Continues as Visit Alexandria Reveals Upcoming Attractions](#)
- *Patch*:
  - [New Businesses, Developments, Experiences: What's New In Alexandria](#)
  - [Black History Month 2023 Events Planned In Alexandria](#)
- *Zebra*, [African American Waterfront Heritage Trail is Complete with 19 Stops in Alexandria, Virginia](#)

The AAC sent representation to the Freedom House Master Plan stakeholder meetings to advise on future museum vision and interpretation.

The AAC attended preliminary stakeholder meetings regarding the Section 106 process for the Samuel Madden Homes redevelopment process, urging ARHA and the City to develop a scholarship program open to all residents pursuing a professional certification or degree in historic preservation or a related field, as the loss of the historic resources impacts all Alexandria residents.

The AAC continued to receive updates on and make a site visit to historic Douglass Cemetery, which is currently experiencing major and damaging preservation issues. The AAC continues to look for ways to support the long-term restoration of this significant sacred site.



FOAA President Tom Macia and AAC member Richard Owens at the site visit to Douglass Cemetery, June 2023.

## ***Supporting the Archaeology Program and Museum***

AA launched the new permanent *A Community Digs its Past: The Lee Street Site* exhibit on Thursday, June 8. Cases and panels display artifacts and reveal the archaeological process and the history of Alexandria as seen through the lens of the Lee Street Site (archaeological site number 44AX180) and several other waterfront sites. The exhibit answers questions like: what is urban archaeology; what did Alexandria look like in the past; and what do archaeologists do? The exhibition was made possible by a grant from Historic Alexandria Foundation and is the cornerstone of the museum.

Drawing on the skills and talents of AAC members including a retired museum professional, the AAC reviewed drafts of exhibit text and graphics, offering feedback and making significant contributions to the final exhibit. The AAC continues to enjoy a collaborative relationship with the Friends of Alexandria Archaeology (FOAA) and were excited to again partner on the annual Volunteer Party. A ribbon cutting for the new museum exhibit was a highlight of the celebration.



FOAA, the AAC, the Vice Mayor Amy Jackson, and Alexandria Archaeology Staff cut the ribbon on the new Archaeology exhibit.

Members of the AAC reviewed and commented on the Ships Report draft, a document written by Alexandria Archaeology staff to encompass the entire project of preserving Alexandria's maritime heritage from excavation through the storage of the ship timbers in Ben Breman Pond. As a key project stakeholder throughout the Ships project, review and comment on this draft was a critical step in fulfilling our community history mission.

The AAC continued to monitor and be a partner in efforts to educate Alexandria residents about the issue of privity digging and bottle hunting by non-professional archaeologists. This education campaign is called Backyard Archaeology. Each old well and privity in Alexandria has the potential to answer myriad questions about Alexandria's history and historic residents. Each time a well or privity is dug non-scientifically and the contents removed from the ground, we lose the opportunity to learn about the past. The AAC received a series of updates from staff and

assumed the role of archaeology educators, reaching out to community organizations to share information on how to properly and safely treat backyard wells and privies, including an article in the Old Town Civic Association newsletter.



AA's online resource to encourage residents to protect our buried past.

### *Ongoing Priorities*

#### *Waterfront*

The AAC strongly believes that the upcoming return of the Hotel Indigo Ship represents a tourism, economic, and business moment. The ship hull remnant and the thousands of other artifacts need exhibit space to highlight the stories they have to tell about Alexandria's seaport history. The AAC **remains committed to working with City staff and partners to find a location to showcase Alexandria's early seaport history** in a way that educates and entices residents and visitors.

The AAC would like the City to clearly understand that the conserved timbers that represent the ship from the Hotel Indigo are anticipated to be returned to the city of Alexandria in December of 2025. As of yet, there is not a location for them to be either stored, exhibited, or relocated. This represents a significant concern of the commission and one which we feel will not be addressed in time with the Waterfront Museum Feasibility study due to its delay in execution.

#### *African American History Initiatives*

Fundamentally, the AAC continues to strive for a more diverse commission stacked with members of different racial backgrounds, who have a passion for history and archaeology. To ensure equity in historic preservation, people of color need to be invited, included, and heard at the table. Through outreach efforts and with City Council, we hope to make strides in this direction over the coming year.

The AAC applauds the City for seeking funding to preserve Douglass Cemetery and work towards a solution to alleviate the drainage issues. The AAC supports this work in close collaboration with the Social Responsibility Group and the Friends of Douglass Cemetery and will closely monitor progress in FY24.

### ***Support for the Archaeology Program and Museum***

Planning has begun for an important milestone. The AAC established a 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Subcommittee. Through this committee, the AAC will advise staff and City Council on how best to commemorate the anniversary of the oldest commission of its kind in the nation.

### ***Ben Brenman and Del Pepper Awards***

Annually the AAC, in conjunction with AA, presents the **Ben Brenman Awards** to those individuals or organizations that have demonstrated exceptional involvement with city history. In October 2022, the Ben Brenman recipients were recognized for their significant contributions to preserving Alexandria's Maritime Heritage.

- **EYA RTS Construction, LLC received the award for Outstanding Developer**, in recognition of the company's commitment to the highest quality archaeological preservation and historic interpretation at the Robinson Landing development project, as well as their support and funding for the documentation and recovery of significant artifacts, features, and three ship hull fragments which will enrich the lives of Alexandria residents and visitors for years to come.
- **AECOM received the award for Outstanding Cultural Resources Management**, in recognition of their extraordinary efforts to rehouse the Robinson Landing ship timbers in Ben Brenman Pond to preserve the possibility of future study and conservation.
- **Maryland Archaeological Conservation Laboratory was awarded Outstanding Conservation**, in recognition of the organization's expertise, innovation, and leadership in preserving Alexandria's buried past and the excavation, conservation, and creative curation of significant waterfront artifacts, features, warehouse timbers, and ship hull fragments.



AAC and Ben Brenman Award Winners receive their proclamation, October 2022.

The AAC created one new award this fiscal year recognizing special service in public advocacy, volunteerism, or civic engagement as related to historic preservation and archaeology. The award is not intended to be presented annually, but only when an individual demonstrates exceptional merit. The first “Del Pepper Award” was inspired by and given to Del Pepper herself at the AA volunteer appreciation party in June.



Del Pepper receives her one-of-a-kind broken plate award, June 2023.

## ***Supports of Note***

### ***Appreciation of Budget support for Staff Position***

One of AAC’s key objectives has been to advocate for AA’s staffing needs, a critical goal given their increasing workload with the substantial waterfront discoveries and amazing creativity and ability to maintain significant community and education programming.

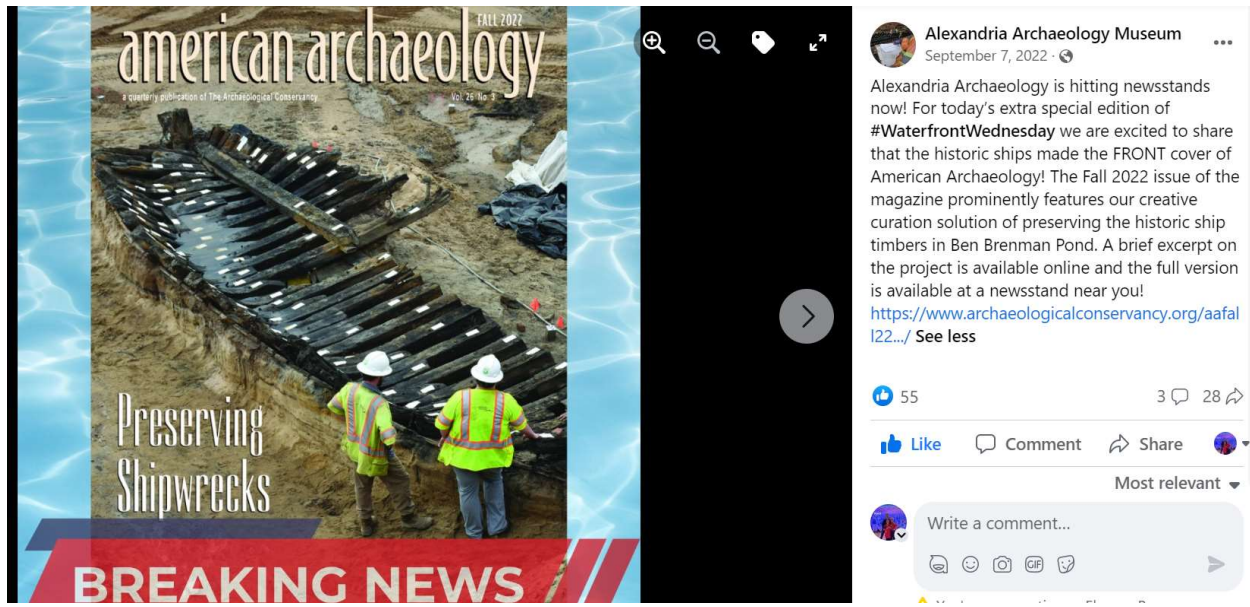
AAC sincerely appreciates City Council approval of the requested full-time Museum Education Specialist. In this past year alone, Emma Richardson has reached 693 students through 37 archaeology lessons and so much more.

### ***Recognition of the Social Media Work by AA***

AAC would be remiss if we did not, again, take this opportunity to acknowledge and advocate for the social media efforts of AA.

Across all platforms – Facebook and Instagram – AA has 7,322 followers/likes. The #WaterfrontWednesday series has become a staple.

The most popular Facebook post this year showcased efforts at ponding the historic ships with 364 engagements. The post featured the cover of *American Archaeology Magazine* with a feature article on preserving the ship timbers in Ben Brenman Pond.



The most popular video on the AA YouTube channel was the June 2023 release of "Preserving Ship Timbers." In less than a month, it had received over 1,100 views.

AA staff have continued their support of OHA's social media by creating content and advising on strategy.

### COMMISSION MEMBER ACTIVITIES

AAC members have followed, advised, and participated in multiple aspects within Alexandria that focus on the city's history. Most notable in FY23 include:

- Monitored progress of the **Waterfront Plan** via our participation on the Waterfront Commission and the waterfront public art process. Represented, as a member of the Waterfront Commission, the voice of archaeology and history on the waterfront and the plan/justification for the Waterfront Museum Feasibility Study.
- Supported the implementation of the **Fort Ward Management and Interpretive Plans**.
- Requested consulting party status on the Section 106 process for Samuel Madden Homes Redevelopment and advised on mitigation strategies.
- Spearheaded the efforts of an ad hoc committee to launch the second length of the **African American Waterfront Heritage Trail** and participated in the planning process for the installation of associated signage.
- Volunteered a total of **250 hours** in its commitment to review, advise, and advocate to Council for the many important occurrences of archaeological discovery and areas of historic importance throughout Alexandria.
- Continued representation on the **Historic Alexandria Resource Commission**.
- Continued advocacy for the Alexandria Archaeology Museum in City discussions on the **TFAC**.



## GOALS FOR THE FUTURE

The goals of the AAC for the future, at the time of this report, can best be summed up as we did in 2022-2023 – we are open and ready to be a partner with the City in navigating the upcoming challenges and opportunities regarding:

- Prioritize planning for the upcoming 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the AAC with partners including City Council.
- Remain vigilant and outspoken about Backyard Archaeology (bottle digging activity), which is destroying history one privy at a time, in partnership with FOAA and continue to educate community members.
- Successful collaboration on and implementation of the Waterfront History Museum Feasibility Study.
- Work closely with the City on their intentions as documented in the final report of the TFAC Stakeholders Taskforce for the “Additional Considerations in Following Phases” including “Work with Alexandria Archaeological Commission to determine future home at TFAC or elsewhere.” We also intend to continue to educate the public and City staff that Alexandria Archaeology is not a tenant in the space, but a City division that has been in the building since 1984.
- Continued interpretation of the African American story of Alexandria through the support of initiatives like Freedom House and other sites, projects, and collaborations; specifically, Freedmen’s Cemetery ten-year anniversary planning and development will receive attention and support as needed.
- Support for innovative solutions for the storage, exhibition, conservation, and accessibility of maritime and other artifacts including collaborative efforts with other City preservation commissions.
- Support for the continued leadership, staffing, and professional development of AA, including education, museum upgrades, and lab facilities, to remain one of the country’s leading archaeology programs.
- Continue to advocate for a sustainable budget in support of a viable archaeological program for the city and seek new funding sources to support the work of the program.
- Recruit diverse membership to the Commission to fill vacancies.
- The AAC plans to explore the possibilities of creating new ways that Alexandria Archaeology can continue to be a model for urban community archaeology programs.

## LEADERSHIP AND CURRENT AAC MEMBERSHIP/TENURE

The Commission elected officers in September 2022. Ivy Whitlatch was elected as Chair, Esther White as Vice Chair, and Elizabeth Vehmeyer as Secretary.

Three new members were appointed (Michael Johnson, John Oldfield, Robert Vierick) during the year and one member resigned (Jacob Hoogland).

Chair	Ivy Whitlatch	Planning District I Rep	December 2026
Vice Chair	Esther White	Planning District II Rep	December 2025
Secretary	Elizabeth Vehmeyer	Member at Large	December 2023
Members	Ralph Rosenbaum	Member at Large	January 2025
	Seth Tinkham	Historic Alexandria Foundation Rep	April 2025
	John Oldfield	Member at Large	September 2026
	Richard Owens	Friends of Alexandria Archaeology Rep	April 2026
	Dylan Colligan	Area Business Community Rep	October 2026
	Edward Pulliam	Alexandria Association Rep	March 2027
	Robert Vierick	Alexandria Historical Society Rep	October 2026
	Rebecca Doser	Visit Alexandria Rep	April 2025
	Nicholas Dienna	Member at Large	October 2025
	Ann Greer	Member at Large	September 2025
	Paula Whitacre	Planning District III Rep	October 2025
	Michael Johnson	Society for the Preservation of Black Heritage or equivalent Rep	September 2026

Eleanor Breen, City Archaeologist, is the staff liaison.

## ATTACHMENTS



*Alexandria Archaeological Commission*  
*America's First Archaeological Commission*



October 28, 2022

Mr. Jim Paragon  
City Manager  
Alexandria City Hall  
301 King Street  
Alexandria, VA 22314

Dear Mr. Paragon,

The Alexandria Archaeological Commission appreciates the opportunity to submit input for the FY 2024 budget. We agree that there should be budget investments in the seven areas detailed in your letter from August 31. In some form or another, archaeology is integral to all seven priorities and to the commitment the city has given to historic preservation. We expand below on those which we feel funding archaeology and historic resources impact the success of those priorities.

*Community Engagement.* Our focus for FY 2024 will be beginning to celebrate and recognize the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Commission (the first and oldest commission of its kind in the country) as Alexandria celebrates its 275<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. This will also be the same time that the conserved remains of the ship from the Hotel Indigo site are anticipated to return to Alexandria – currently without a place for display or storage. It is imperative that the Waterfront Museum Feasibility study yields recommendations before this time and that funding for the next phase is allocated.

The AAC would like to be an active partner with the city commemorating these two anniversaries at the local, state, and national level, and supports funding allotted for these initiatives.

*Employee Compensation.* To fully achieve Archaeology and OHA's educational mission, the AAC requests FY24 funding to change the Museum Education Specialist position from .75 to full-time. The part-time Museum Education Specialist created and has provided nearly 100 Ship Science lessons to Alexandria students and educators and beyond. We predict demand for these STEM-based history lessons will continue. The demand on this position has also increased as staff, the AAC, and the Friends of Alexandria Archaeology partner to raise public awareness about the Alexandria Archaeology Museum and current issues such as the destruction of archaeological resources through non-professional privy digging activities. We request that this role be made full time so that Alexandria Archaeology maintains the highest professional standards as one of the best community archaeology programs in the country.

There is another critical issue we want you to be aware of. Sixty years of significant archaeology has brought us to the point of critical need for additional storage of everything from artifacts to ship models. At this time, we request that a line item be added to the budget for a storage assessment that calculates current conditions and projects future needs to AAM standards.

*Alexandria Archaeology Museum, 105 North Union Street, #207, Alexandria, Virginia 22314-3217  
Phone: 703/468-6388*

As always, we request that the FY 2024 budget maintain the \$50,000 contingency fund for Alexandria Archaeology to continue to meet unexpected needs for conservation, storage, documentation, and research.

We are grateful for your management and foresight in budgeting for the opportunities Archaeology's work will bring to Alexandria for residents, visitors, scholars, and businesses.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Ivy E. Whitlatch".

Ivy E. Whitlatch  
Chair, Alexandria Archaeological Commission