

## **Making the Community Archaeology / Local Government Connection**

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*Fifty Years of Community Archaeology on the Potomac: Lessons from Alexandria  
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### **Abstract**

Archaeology's ability to recover hidden information about the past can create a variety of opportunities for collaboration with local community groups. Although many archaeologists have recognized this characteristic of their profession, few have been in a position to make cooperation with the public as high a priority, and to do it for as long a period of time, as has the City of Alexandria, Virginia. While many facets of Alexandria's program are worth exploring, one of the most noteworthy is the nature of the relationship between archaeology and local government. Supplementing the fifty year history of Alexandria's program with examples from municipal archaeology programs in other cities, this paper will explore how archaeology taking place within the local government context necessitates public involvement in the archaeological process, how it creates opportunities to use new tools for archaeological protection, and how it facilitates the use of local history by city residents.

### **Introduction**

As archaeology continues its efforts to reach out to the public, and as some have said, to become a tool of civic engagement or to be recognized as a form of political action, it is worth studying those programs that have existed for years precisely because of early and whole-hearted cooperation between non-professional and professional members of the archaeological community. While it may seem unusual to think of archaeology carried out at the municipal level as being categorically different than archaeology carried out under more traditional circumstances, the unique characteristics of archaeology programs situated within a local government framework demand closer attention.

Alexandria is not alone in having an archaeology program housed within the structure of local government. It shares some of its principal characteristics with programs or regulations found in cities across the country, including St. Augustine, FL; Phoenix, AZ; Albany, NY, Santa Fe, NM and other locations. But, as the following speakers will make evident, Alexandria has taken the concept of community archaeology to places that no one would have imagined when the City first employed an archaeologist to guide the reconstruction of Fort Ward in 1961. Using examples from Alexandria and other cities, what follows is an identification and brief discussion of five characteristics that begin to define what municipal archaeology is, and how it fosters such a robust relationship with the public.

## Characteristic #1: The City is the Site

Archaeologists working in local government are guided by modern political boundaries in a different way than are many of their colleagues. Rather than becoming an expert in one period of history, or in the history of a particular group of people, or of one field of human activity, these archaeologists must become familiar with the entire history of one city, from prehistoric times into the present, in order to be able to determine the significance and value of whatever material may be encountered within its modern boundaries. They must become experts in the urban condition – understanding how their city has changed through time, and must understand the different social forces that shaped this particular city as a cultural product. This has very real consequences in terms of how the city's research agenda is developed, and it creates many of the avenues through which the public may engage with its history.

When Pam Cressey began working in Alexandria in 1977, one of the most immediately apparent differences between her work and that of her enthusiastic avocational predecessors was that she framed the archaeology of Alexandria as one might a city explored through classical archaeology in the Mediterranean or in Mesoamerica. The details of this “city-as-site” approach adopted in Alexandria were described in a 1979 paper she presented at the Society for Historical Archaeology conference in Nashville, TN. The paper, titled *The Alexandria Urban Archaeology Project: An Integrative Model for Systematic Study, Conservation, and Crisis*, outlined the four research questions that guided what was then known as the Alexandria Urban Archaeology Project. Those questions were:

to describe the evolutionary growth of the city; to diachronically delineate spatial distributions of land use, ethnic groups... and socio-economic status; to determine whether historic neighborhoods can be located ethno-historically and archaeologically and; to test the degree to which historic urban processes are operative in creating contemporary changes in socio-economic and ethnic distributions (Cressey, 1979, p. 10).

Adopting this research agenda radically altered both the type of information that would be seen as relevant in Alexandria's future archaeological excavations, and the methodology that would be used to obtain that information. Rather than emphasizing the salvage and display of Colonial era showpieces from Urban Renewal sites, or the reconstruction of a Civil War site, there would now be a series of questions guiding the development of a knowledge base to which each dig in any historic area of the city could contribute in many different ways. Focusing on the city's growth through time introduced a level of complexity that had never previously been part of the program.

The effect of this change was that it greatly expanded the subject matter that the public could explore through archaeology. As this new philosophy developed, it began to illustrate the importance and meaning of the city's industrial archaeology, of its African American archaeology, and of other elements of the city's past that had previously been perceived as less important than its Colonial era and Civil War history. Placing all eras and themes from the city's past on an equal plane allowed members of the public to contribute to the development of a

common knowledge base by exploring whichever aspects of the city's history that they found to be the most meaningful.

## **Characteristic # 2. Local Government Means Local Priorities**

Another characteristic of municipal archaeology programs is that as products of local government, they are more likely to be shaped and guided by the values and priorities of local citizens. Section 106 and subsequent federal regulations were not crafted to meet the needs of any specific local jurisdiction, or to take advantage of a particular group of enthusiastic and knowledgeable citizens. Those local governments that have created their own archaeological protection mechanisms, however, have done precisely that. They have generated local responses to local conditions, and opened the door for innovation in cultural resource management as a result.

Alexandria, again, regularly demonstrates the benefits of having a local body shape the response to local cultural resource management needs. In 1975, the city created the Alexandria Archaeological Commission, the nation's first local government advisory board for archaeological issues. Since its formation, the individuals associated with the AAC have set city policy with regard to archaeological issues; they were a major voice in developing Alexandria's system of converting significant archaeological sites into public open spaces; they helped to convince the city's own archaeologists of the possibility of an archaeological protection ordinance linked to development review procedures; and they have remained a stalwart voice for the protection of historical and archaeological resources citywide. In this context, local residents, working alongside the city's professional archaeologists, decide how the city's archaeological resources can best be protected and used for the public good.

Other cities with archaeology programs have had similar experiences making sure that archaeological regulations and policies are tailored to local conditions. In Phoenix, for example, the city's archaeologist, Todd Bostwick, has worked with the region's Native American tribes and with the Arizona State Museum to establish city policy that if Native American burial sites are inadvertently discovered during city projects, a media blackout ensues. The site is blocked from public view, it is not photographed, its location is not publicized, and both tribal representatives and the Arizona State Museum are notified. This not only helps to prevent vandalism of the site, but it also helps to make sure that the remains and the affiliated descendant communities are treated with dignity and respect. This is a textbook example of archaeology at the local government level being shaped according to local values and priorities. The end result is that it improves the standing of archaeology in the community, and it improves the ability of archaeologists and the city to work with the public in the future.

## **Characteristic # 3. Local Residents are both Generators and Consumers of the City's Archaeological Knowledge**

A third characteristic of many successful city archaeology programs, but of Alexandria's in particular, is that local residents are recognized as both the generators and primary consumers of

the city's archaeological knowledge. In addition to establishing the priorities of the city's archaeology program through the work of the Alexandria Archaeological Commission, local residents also play a major role in the actual process of developing historical and archaeological information. Today, trained members of the non-profit group Friends of Alexandria Archaeology, or FOAA work with city archaeologists to carry out historical research, do lab work, and in some cases, assist in supervised excavations in order to support the city's archaeological goals. Volunteers are also responsible for carrying out and transcribing oral histories of the city's senior residents, which sheds tremendous light on the history of a city that has changed so much over the course of one lifetime.

The city's volunteers also play an essential role in connecting the general public with the archaeological information that has been developed by city staff and other professional archaeologists. They staff the city's archaeology museum, post professional archaeological reports online, write and publish local histories in newsletters and as monographs, and assist the city archaeologists in field schools for the public. Relying so heavily on volunteers in the process of developing and disseminating archaeological information is in and of itself an incredibly engaging form of interpretation.

And Alexandria is far from alone in employing enthusiastic members of the public in developing and disseminating archaeological information. In St. Augustine, Florida, the city archaeologist, Carl Halbirt, relies entirely on a trained volunteer crew to help him enforce the city's archaeology ordinance. In Phoenix, volunteers at the Pueblo Grande Museum play a central role in protecting and maintaining the Pueblo Grande Platform Mound. Phoenix volunteers also play an important role in documenting the Hohokam rock art found throughout the 17,000 acre city-owned South Mountain Park. Indeed, as the slides indicate, in each of these cities, the city archaeologists have emphasized the importance of volunteers to their program. In the realm of municipal archaeology, the participation of the public cannot be framed as an "add-on." It must instead be recognized as the essential foundation on which the program is built.

#### **Characteristic #4: Local Government has unique powers and authorities that can greatly facilitate archaeological protection.**

A fourth characteristic that helps to define municipal archaeology, and that opens opportunities for interaction with the public, is that local government possesses certain powers that can be used to greatly facilitate archaeological protection. In the United States, the authority to regulate land use on private property is given to local government. As most archaeologists are aware, Section 106 and its state equivalents only become relevant for public projects. With only a handful of exceptions, land development taking place on private property, with private funds, has no obligation to carry out archaeological review. And given that the overwhelming majority of potential historical-archaeological sites in the United States are located on private property, this situation presents a problem. But it also presents a solution. Because local governments typically write their own zoning and development regulations, any community with enough archaeological supporters, and sufficient archaeological resources to capture the public's imagination, can rally to convince their local elected officials to pass an ordinance requiring archaeological review as part of their local development review processes. There are many

models for this type of program. Such ordinances exist in Alexandria, in St. Augustine, Santa Fe, Albany, and a number of other communities. In Pensacola and Phoenix, archaeological review is required for city activities, such as preparing new city roads, carrying out new municipal construction, and other activities. In Phoenix this process has provided the city archaeologist with a platform for convincing others within government, and frequently within the private sector, of the value of archaeology.

Local governments are also frequently in a position to develop community amenities, such as city parks and memorial spaces, greenways, municipal buildings, and transportation enhancements that may be used for archaeological protection and interpretation. Alexandria's Fort Ward Park, its Contrabands and Freedmen's Cemetery Memorial, and the Gadsby's Tavern Ice Well are a few examples of archaeological amenities created using the power of local government. In St. Augustine, the archaeological easement protecting the site that contains the remains of the Mission of Nuestra Senora de la Punta was developed as a result of the city's negotiating between the developer of the site and the local St. Augustine Archaeological Association. And in Phoenix, the entrance to the city's new Convention Center addition is covered by floor to ceiling murals depicting and interpreting the archaeology of the convention center site. None of these community amenities would have been developed had archaeology not had a home within local government.

### **Characteristic # 5: Longevity**

Archaeologists working in local government enjoy another characteristic that distinguishes their work from that of their colleagues laboring under other circumstances. Municipal archaeologists do not have to pack up their equipment and look for the next job when the current project is finished. They can plan on being present in the community not only for the duration of a particular excavation or season, but indefinitely. With that longevity comes the opportunity to develop relationships with others in the city, and to tap into deep community knowledge that allows the program to grow and to partner with the public in new and unexpected ways. The gradual development of the Alexandria Contrabands and Freedmen's Cemetery Memorial, and the newly re-examined story of the families who lived at Fort Ward following the Civil War represent projects in which archaeology played a major role, but in which that role was only possible because of the knowledge accumulated over decades of working with community members on these and related issues. Both projects will be discussed in greater detail in upcoming presentations.

This long term view also has very concrete side effects in terms of the ability of the program to function as both a repository for, and a generator of, archaeological knowledge. In Alexandria, the Archaeology Museum houses not only finished reports of sites that have been excavated, but also the insurance maps, historical tax records, oral history transcripts, property records, church directories, aerial photos, civil war records, family photographs, and other documentary evidence that allows the city's archaeologists to carry out their long-term research goals. A good research facility, like relationships with community members, takes time to develop. Potentially useful information that a community member may find and bring to the attention of the city's archaeologists will likely be filed by topic in the cabinets or drawers of the archaeology museum,

where it can be found and referenced when needed. It is not always clear how that information may become useful, or when, but making sure that the information is available when needed for archaeology or for other city projects is one function that most archaeology offices have come to serve.

## **Conclusion**

In closing, municipal archaeology programs should be recognized as having the potential to be the most engaged form of public archaeology currently practiced. The citizen driven nature of local government provides a framework that can be combined with archaeological processes to result in truly public archaeology – archaeology that is not only carried out “for” the public, or that uses public funds, but that responds to needs identified by the public without compromising archaeological methods or processes. Different cities have, of course, developed their own relationships with archaeology, and, as they should, those relationships all take different forms. The presentations that follow represent an opportunity to see how one city has developed this relationship and sent it in some very exciting and innovative directions.