

## **Digging the Past for Fifty Years: A Model for Community Archaeology**

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*Fifty Years of Community Archaeology on the Potomac: Lessons from Alexandria*  
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Community archaeology began in Alexandria, Virginia, even before the term entered the lexicon of professional archaeologists. The year was 1961, and the first archaeology in the City resulted from citizen efforts to preserve a Civil War fort from destruction by the encroachment of suburban sprawl. Over the past fifty years, the hallmark of Alexandria's successful community program has been collaboration among professionals and the public, with public advocates often leading the way, as they did in 1961, for the promotion of archaeology as a community value and for its use as a preservation strategy.

Founded in 1749, Alexandria was laid out in a grid pattern around a small cove of the Potomac River. With the third oldest historic district in the country, the City has been recognized as a national leader in preservation and takes pride in its historical character. Situated across the Potomac from the nation's capital, the diverse 15 square-mile town, with a population of almost 140,000, extends from colonial Old Town on the river to the highways, high-rises and subdivisions of the West End. A World-War I torpedo factory, rehabbed into a popular art center on the riverfront, provides a location for the Alexandria Archaeology Museum and office space for six staff members, employees of the municipal government.

Throughout the years, the key component of the City's archaeological program has remained public participation and partnership. As Maureen Malloy points out in the introduction to the SAA volume *Archaeologists and Local Communities: Partners in Exploring the Past*, community archaeology involves going beyond “**participation by the public**” to incorporate “**partnership with the public.**” The Alexandria Archaeology Commission, a citizen's board of 14 members appointed by City Council, acts as one of the most significant catalysts for this public/professional interaction. Established in 1975, the Commission advises City Council on policy and direction for archaeological matters and works in tandem with the professional staff. Serving as a voice for the larger community of interested residents, the Commission makes specific recommendations, which have more impact because of this mandate.

Naturally, public participation remains a strong and integral part of the community program. Each year, about 200 volunteers and students contribute from 5,000 to 9,000 hours of time, conducting historical research and oral history interviews, excavating sites, processing artifacts, staffing the museum, and performing administrative duties. Other participants include those with short-term involvement—like those who attend events or visit the museum. Even at this level,

public participation involves a dialogue, as the interests and curiosity of visitors and volunteers shape the character and products of the program. In this sense, they become partners in the City's archaeological experience. All are invited to join the Friends of Alexandria Archaeology, a non-profit group formed in 1985, that encourages participation in, knowledge of, and support for archaeology.

This paper celebrates the 50th anniversary of archaeology in Alexandria, illustrating how the citizens and archaeologists of one city have approached the challenge of recognizing the value and knowledge of its buried past and using this knowledge to enrich the community. The paper is organized sequentially to provide a glimpse into the evolving priorities of Alexandria's program. It highlights some of the knowledge gained over the past 50 years and the various tools and ever-increasing number of partnerships that have emerged to accomplish the program goals. Later papers in this session will discuss some of these strategies in greater detail.

### **Rescue and Reconstruction**

In keeping with the expanding preservation tenets of the 1960s, the first archaeology in Alexandria focused on rescue and reconstruction. The efforts of a group of citizen activists, moved by their recognition of the value of historic places for education and enrichment, led to the City's purchase of Fort Ward to create a historical park with a museum dedicated to interpretation of Alexandria's Civil War past. The first archaeology, conducted in 1961, took place to allow for an accurate reconstruction of the northwest bastion of the fort. This model of saving a site and turning it into a park continues to this day as a part of the archaeological preservation toolkit in Alexandria.

During a period of urban renewal from 1965 to 1975, local citizens mobilized again to protect the City's archaeological resources, this time in the heart of Old Town. As buildings were razed exposing artifact-laden privies, community outcry led to demands that the City address and halt the archaeological losses. An archaeological technician was hired to conduct excavations. The constant sight of this salvage work in the middle of Old Town and the array of artifacts recovered bolstered the public's appreciation of archaeology. Citizens successfully lobbied City Council, resulting in the 1975 passage of a resolution that created the Alexandria Archaeological Commission and led to hiring professionals to staff a City archaeology program.

### **Context, Research and Discovery**

Employment of professionals, beginning in 1977, sparked a shift from a rescue strategy to a research strategy for Alexandria's program. As the last urban renewal block was investigated, the new City team began to picture this one block as part of a larger city-site. Envisioning that this broader framework could bring more power to the findings, staff archaeologists recognized the need to develop context to allow for the accurate identification, evaluation, and interpretation of sites across the City against the backdrop of the full continuum of human occupation.

To this end, a survey of stream valleys led to the identification of locations of more than 15 Native American sites. For the historic periods, development of context began with the collection of historical maps, aerial photographs, and other locational information to allow for plotting of potential site locations. Themes of study and periods of significance were established.

Work from the late 1970s through the 1980s centered on a number of significant themes. Waterfront studies focused on mapping the physical changes along the river as wharves were constructed and bluffs were cut down to fill silting mud flats, ensuring access to the deeper river channel for the port's viability. A cemetery survey amassed information about locations of these particularly sensitive resources. Investigations at taverns, potteries, and an early 19<sup>th</sup>-century sugar refinery provided insight into commercial/industrial activities. Work in Old Town concentrated on understanding changes in land use patterns and the evolution of neighborhoods from 1780 to 1910. Understanding Alexandria's African American community emerged as an important research focus as archival work documented locations of and changes in black neighborhoods through time. This work led to investigations of sites of free blacks and sites of enslavement.

In addition to establishing new connections formed through the variety of neighborhood investigations, the archaeological community partnered with developers and planners to foster construction of another historical park. When plans for new building along the north waterfront became immanent, the Commission recognized the opportunity for park creation, this time as part of a private development project located on the site of a tide lock of the Alexandria Canal. The developers became convinced that creating this amenity to enrich and enhance the community would add interest and value to their project. The canal was excavated, recorded and preserved in place. A reconstruction was completed, and interpretive signage erected. Oral history interviews added connections from the present to the past.

## **Museum and Collections**

With the collection of so many artifacts and so much information about the City's past, the pressing need arose for a facility where exhibits and interpretation could bring information to the public. The Alexandria Archaeology Museum opened in 1984 in the newly renovated Torpedo Factory Art Center. In addition to featuring exhibits and hands-on activities, the museum serves as a valuable source of public outreach and education, and functions as a working laboratory, where 30,000 visitors per year can engage with the archaeologists and volunteers as they process artifacts from sites in the City.

Responsibility for the high volume of artifacts recovered also brought about the pressing need for proper curation. To meet newly developed federal standards, a state-of-the-art facility was developed, and the entire collection was re-boxed and placed into a temperature- and humidity-controlled environment. The facility contains more than 2 million artifacts and ecofacts from almost every site excavated in the City, providing a research resource that is extremely rare for any locality in the country.

## **Archaeology Code and Master Planning**

By the late 1980s, rapid development raised concerns for threatened sites across the City. The Archaeological Commission concluded that a local protection ordinance was needed to identify and preserve all threatened resources and worked with developers and their lawyers to craft mutually acceptable requirements. City Council passed the Alexandria Archaeology Protection Code in November 1989, one of the first local ordinances in America. Part of the Zoning Ordinance, the code set out a process whereby the private sector would pay to preserve resources through excavation and analysis before construction, or hopefully, through protection of some sites *in situ*.

Implementation of the code involves review of all City development projects by staff archaeologists to determine the level of work needed. When required, private developers hire cultural resource management firms to conduct investigations and produce technical and public reports on their findings. City staff responsibilities evolved to include overseeing the entire preservation process, from writing scopes and coordinating with consultants on research and fieldwork to reviewing both public and technical reports.

The City review process necessitated collection of as much data as possible regarding the locations of potential sites to make appropriate determinations of the work levels. City archaeologists compiled the data and wrote a preservation chapter for the City's Master Plan that included over 4,000 potential site locations. This mapped information, now in digital form with GIS, facilitates the review process, which is coordinated with developers as well as City planners, engineers, and landscape designers.

Results of the code, now in its 23<sup>rd</sup> year, have added immensely to the understanding of Alexandria's past through coordinated efforts with numerous consulting firms. Analysis of artifacts recovered from the Quaker Burial Ground suggests that Alexandria's Quakers abided by the tenets of simplicity that characterized their faith. The Lee Street Site excavations yielded early tavern foundations and artifacts, a Civil privy and remains of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century bakery. Investigations have provided insight into other industries with discoveries of a 50-foot long beer cellar that maintained the cold temperatures needed for lager fermentation at the Shuter's Hill Brewery Site, and the furnaces and flues that reveal the mechanics of creating the high temperatures needed for manufacturing bottles at the Virginia Glass Company. Work at two Civil War encampment sites revealed brick fireboxes and flues covered with metal, features known as Crimean ovens, that were designed to provide heat for hospital tents during winter encampments. Excavations at the Bruin Slave Jail uncovered a cistern that was part of the slave jail laundry and a pit containing hundreds of animal bone fragments, scraps from stews that were made to feed the slaves. Investigations of plantations and estates provided insight into rural life on the outskirts of the town. Elucidation of so many themes—domestic, industrial, waterfront, religious, agricultural, African Americans—would never have become reality without the code.

## **Education, Recreation, Tourism, Promotion**

Concurrent with the implementation of the preservation strategies, numerous public programs for different audiences—school children, families, walkers and bikers, etc.--were developed in the 1980s and 1990s as important educational tools to promote public awareness of archaeology. These include hands-on lessons for elementary grades, family dig-days, summer camp, and establishment of the Alexandria Heritage Trail. The events themselves promote the program, with wider audiences reached through the web site and media coverage.

So where is Alexandria's program now, after 50 years of archeology? The implementation of the code continues to build upon the historical and archaeological knowledge of past decades. Pure research goes on in the form of excavations at Shuter's Hill, where volunteers and students excavate the laundry of a plantation site that promises to provide significant information about the lives of enslaved African Americans. However, most research now is community-driven and revolves around large, long-term City projects that require archaeological expertise, like Freedmen's Cemetery and a new project at Fort Ward Park.

### **Community Projects—Freedmen's Cemetery, Fort Ward**

As was the case with Fort Ward fifty years ago, the creation of the Contraband and Freedmen Cemetery Memorial is the story of the dedication and commitment of two inspiring women and a small group of citizens. Freedmen's Cemetery was established in 1864 by the military governor of Alexandria, head of the occupied town during the Civil War. It is the resting place of up to 1800 African American refugees who fled to Alexandria to escape from bondage in the war-torn areas south and west of the town. In the mid-twentieth century, a gas station and office building were constructed on the property, and memory of the cemetery faded. When a newspaper published information about the existence of this sacred ground, the subsequent desecration, and the possible impact of a bridge construction project, citizens sprang into action. The Friends of Freedmen's Cemetery was established to support the preservation efforts. Lobbying efforts led to purchase of the gas station and office properties with plans to create the Contraband and Freedmen Cemetery Memorial. To ensure that creation of the memorial would not cause further desecration of the burials, a full-scale archaeological investigation was completed, which identified 534 grave locations.

As the project proceeded, community interaction increased through various public events and activities, including site tours and lectures. Hundreds attended an inspiring rededication ceremony that featured memorial luminaries created by Alexandria school children and citizens, one for each of the 1800 souls buried at the site, whose names come down to us through a Civil War-period document. A design competition generated more than 220 entries from all 50 states and 20 countries. A genealogist has identified descendants of almost 100 individuals buried at the site. Within the year, the City will dedicate a memorial park on this one and a half acre site, with a wall of names and known grave locations marked.

Alexandria Archaeology has also returned to Fort Ward. The forces in play that brought this about remain similar to those that resulted in the creation of the park fifty years ago, namely citizen interest and activism. When the City's Department of Recreation released proposed plans for changes in the park, concerned residents banded together to compel the City to consider

impacts to and interpretation of all historical and archaeological resources within the park, not just those related to the Civil War. These include a Native American site, known from a 1979 survey, and a post-Civil War African American community, known from oral history and previous research. Called “The Fort”, the community contained residences, a school/church, and most importantly, cemeteries and unmarked burials. Acknowledging the importance of protection of burials and preservation and interpretation of the full range of the history, City Council allocated funds for historical and archaeological research and established a citizen committee, the Fort Ward Stakeholders Advisory Group, to make recommendations relating to planning and management in the park. Interest in “The Fort” also led to the formation of a public History Group and the creation of the non-profit organization, The Ft. Ward and Seminary African American Descendants Society. Descendants of the original founders of the community and later residents, many of whom still reside in Alexandria, continued to live at The Fort until it was taken by the City and now play an active role in City/public interactions about the park. The first stage of the archaeological investigation, conducted by The Ottery Group, identified 23 grave locations and other remnants of “The Fort” community.

### **Tangible Benefits: Planning and Preservation/Historical Interpretation and Open Spaces**

More than ever, archaeology is integrated into the planning process of the City. With the implementation of the code over the past 20 years, developers, planners, engineers and landscape architects, both within the city and in private firms, have become more sensitive to preservation needs and to how the integration of historical character and archaeological finds can enhance development projects and benefit the community. In addition to site plan reviews, the archaeological staff contributes information about history and archaeology to studies of planning districts, open space, and land acquisition. As the City formulated plans to revitalize the riverfront and address issues of flood control and increased public access, the Commission produced a waterfront preservation plan, highlighting the importance of preservation and knowledge of history in the planning process.

The increased interaction with developers, planners and designers has led to community decisions to preserve sites, create more parks with historic meaning, and integrate art that reflects historical themes into development projects. Thus, knowledge of the past has made its way into the very fabric of the community. Interpretive markers, erected in parks and as part of development projects, highlight the history and archaeological significance of historical places. At the African American Heritage Park, a sculpture memorializes 26 archaeologically identified burials. In a long linear park at Potomac Yard, pavers and design elements reflect the historic canal and rail lines that crossed the area. Open space for the James Bland project incorporates a musical theme to pay homage to its namesake, an African American musician and songwriter. A statue at Bruin Slave Jail site recalls the story of the Edmonson sisters, jailed there after a failed attempt to escape to freedom aboard the schooner *Pearl* in 1848 and eventually freed by abolitionists, including Harriet Beecher Stowe, who used her knowledge of the Bruin establishment in the writing of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

The public/professional partnership that began with citizen activism to create Fort Ward Park continues to enrich the lives of visitors and residents with an ever-widening circle of partners.

The success of the program stems from **both engaging the public and listening to the public**. The sources of collaboration are manifold, including occasional visitors to archaeology sites and events; volunteers; the Alexandria Archaeological Commission, the Friends of Alexandria Archaeology, and members of other more project-specific boards and committees; developers and planners; members of descendant communities; professional partners; and especially, those individuals who have led crusades to protect our past for the future.

Through these myriad interactions, archaeology brings the past alive in Alexandria. The artifacts and places of past lives serve as a conduit for building networks that help the present community connect with historic communities. The strength of these partnerships has allowed for increased knowledge and an enriched community.