

Entrenched in the Community: Alexandria Archaeologist at Work

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Fifty Years of Community Archaeology on the Potomac: Lessons from Alexandria
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Recently, Alexandria Archaeology reached a significant milestone, its golden anniversary, celebrating 50 years of community archaeology. Like any lasting relationship, archaeology in Alexandria is an active give-and-take between the public and the professional. In fact, the primary goal of the city archaeologists has been to conduct archaeology not only *for* the public, but more importantly, *with* the public (Cressey, Reeder and Bryson 2003:2).

The roots of this approach in Alexandria sprouted almost organically back in 1961 with the archaeological investigations and partial reconstruction of the Civil War-era fortification called, Fort Ward. But the seeds of Alexandria's increasing awareness of history and its preservation movement had been planted in the mid-1940s when the city established one of the first historic districts in America (Cressey and Vinton 2007:395). With urban renewal in the 1970's and large-scale development in the '80s Alexandria's archaeologist were doing *community archeology*, even before it had a name.

This period also witnessed the creation of the Archaeological Resource Protection Code and two important citizen organizations relating to archaeology. In 1975, the Alexandria Archaeological Commission (ACC) was formed. The Commission is a volunteer citizen advisory board to Alexandria's Mayor and City Council on matters dealing with archaeological and historical resources located in the City. It is this group that had the foresight to create Alexandria Archaeology as we know it today. In 1986, the Friends of the Alexandria Archaeology (FOAA) was formed. The Friends group advocates for Alexandria's archaeological resources by raising community awareness and increasing community involvement. Can you think of another city in America where archaeologist and community members march together in the President's Day parade singing and banging metal buckets with trowels like drums? *The din created by this IS the sweet sound of community archaeology!*

In this paper, my co-author and I wish to demonstrate how Alexandria Archaeology continues to engage the community by focusing on the role of the Alexandria Archaeology Museum as a venue for this interaction. We will highlight some of our educational programs, touch upon our internship opportunity and conclude with some insight from two of our long-term museum volunteers.

There are many factors that have contributed to the success of Alexandria Archaeology over the past 50 years. Those that quickly come to mind are resources, both historic and financial, timing, a little bit of luck, and most of all, a focus on people and a strong sense of place. The program has been blessed with the right people at the right time. People like the late Alexandria

Archaeological Commission chairman, Ben Brenman, and City Archaeologist, Dr. Pam Cressey. But they are just two in a long list of citizen advocates, city officials, professional archaeologists, volunteers and members of the public who are continuously interested and engaged in the history of the city. All of these individuals have come together to make Alexandria Archaeology what it is today and the foundation of what it will be in the future.

As for place, the program has been fortunate to have matured in a city where the citizenry has a keen sense of belonging by identifying with the city's distinct neighborhoods, historic character, and artistic flare. The archaeology program has benefited from this environment when in 1984 it established its museum within a thriving arts center. The museum itself serves as the central place for Alexandria Archaeology. It boasts an open floor plan that combines exhibit space with archeological laboratory. Above this area is a semi-private space containing staff offices and a climate controlled storage facility housing some of the city's most significant artifacts. The museum is Alexandria Archaeology's home within the community.

The Alexandria Archaeology Museum is uniquely located within a community of nearly 200 working artists in a historic torpedo factory at the heart of the city's waterfront and historic landmark district (Cressey and Vinton 2007:408). Construction of the building began in 1918, and by the end of WWII the factory had produced over 10,000 MK-14 torpedoes, in addition to other munitions (Visitor's Guide 1990). Today, the creation of art has replaced the manufacture of weaponry.

The guiding principle of the Torpedo Factory Art Center is to allow the public the opportunity to witness the creative process, ask questions, and learn about the many different art forms they come into contact with. This same principle has been applied to the Alexandria Archaeology Museum, which is located on the third floor of the arts center.

Colorful woodcuts of ceramic vessels from the city's artifact collection and bold signage, invite the public to stop into the museum. Visitors are welcomed free of charge to experience Alexandria's buried past through interpretive displays centered on the theme of "A Community Digs its Past." Many of the exhibits can be viewed from either side of the museum's glass walls.

The museum, however, is more than just a series of interpretive displays. It was designed to function as an open, working laboratory where the public can witness real archaeological process, see and touch authentic artifacts, and freely ask questions of professional staff and volunteers. I've often heard Pam Cressey ask the question, "How do we compete with the Hope Diamond?" The answer, of course, is to do what Alexandria Archaeology does best: offer the public an up-close and personal experience with the city's past; reveal the hidden stories artifacts can tell, and help put historic places and events in context on the modern city landscape.

While some visitors to the Alexandria Archaeology Museum have purposely sought us out, the majority of our visitation is from people who discovered us during their browsing on the third floor of Torpedo Factory Art Center. Over the past decade, annual visitation to the museum averages approximately 30,000 individuals. From the information recorded in the museum's guestbook, it is clear that the Alexandria Archaeology is communicating its message to a national and international audience. For example, in the past quarter, September to December 2011, the museum had visitors from 27 different states and the District of Columbia, and 18

foreign countries, including Canada, Nicaragua, Venezuela, England, Italy, Israel, Sweden, Russia, Tibet, China, South Korea, Indonesia, Australia, the Philippians, and more.

On a local level, the space in the museum serves as a community venue for public archaeology lectures, such as the Friends of Alexandria Archaeology's Saturday "Java Jolt" series. During these events the portable work tables that fill the center of the museum's workspace are rolled away and chairs are set-up to accommodate the attending public.

Similarly, many of archaeology's hands-on educational programs are conducted within the museum space creating an interactive classroom for children and young adults alike. These programs are called "Adventure Lessons" and are linked to state educational standards. On average, over 1000 students participate annually in one of these lessons. Nearly all of the students are part of public, private and home-schools groups from the greater Washington DC area; but a group of high-school student from Toronto, Ontario, Canada, recently visited the Museum specifically to partake in one of our lessons. Each Adventure Lesson employs real artifacts recovered from a site excavated within the city. The use of genuine artifacts provides a level of authenticity to the lesson and creates a link between past generations and the present. One such lesson is the Potter's Art.

In this lesson, children are presented with fragments of 19th century stoneware vessels recovered from the Wilkes Street Pottery excavations in 1977. The students are allowed to examine the artifacts to identify the original shape of the vessel, and to touch and see the various cobalt blue designs that decorate the exterior surfaces of the fragments. The students also investigate the sherds for the presence of makers' marks to identify which of the Wilkes Street potters made the vessel.

Once all of these attributes have been identified by the students, the educator leads the discussion inquiring about the use of the vessels and how these 19th century examples compare to modern day food storage containers. Further, the lesson explores the types and styles of decorations and potter's marks to demonstrate how archaeologist use these attributes, in conjunction with the historic records, to come up with ways to date an archaeological site and create a chronology of artifacts. Also, the names of the potters stamped into the vessels before firing, opens the door for a discussion about Alexandria's workforce during the age of slavery. At the end of the lesson, students young and old, are given blue markers and various worksheets containing the outline of a 19th vessel to decorate, just as if they were the potter. Some of the results are truly unique!

Other examples of Adventure Lesson include the Sugar Lesson and the Hayti Lesson. The Sugar Lesson is based on excavation at the early-19th century Alfred Street Sugar House site. This lesson focuses on the refinement of sugar in Alexandria and the broader themes of slavery and Alexandria's commercial ties to the Atlantic world.

The Hayti Lesson is based on excavations in one of Alexandria's early 19th-century free black neighborhoods. In this lesson, high school aged students work with a variety of artifacts and census records to interpret what life was like in this African-American community (Cressey and Magid 2003).

The Alexandria Archaeology Museum also hosts a number of undergraduate and graduate-level interns each year. Many college and university programs such as, George Washington

University's Museum Studies Program, requires students to complete an internship as part of their academic training. Students seek to complete their internship at the Alexandria Archaeology Museum because it offers a unique set of opportunities not found at the larger museums in the Washington DC area.

Among these opportunities is that "small museum" experience, whereby students are routinely exposed to a variety of tasks and situations. All interns are assigned an individual project based on their interests and area of study. In addition, each intern is asked to fully participate in all aspects of museum work, which can be anything from helping with school groups, to assisting with curatorial needs, to working side-by-side with a volunteer, to interacting with the public. It's all part of a day's work at Alexandria Archaeology. And it is this diversity that helps build confidence and increases a student's knowledge, skills and abilities.

The backbone of the Alexandria Archaeology Museum is the dedicated group of volunteer docents. The docents are the first line of contact when visitors enter the museum. And if you call the museum by the phone, there is a good chance that the voice that greets you is one of these lovely individuals. Many of the docents have been volunteering at the museum for over a decade. And several have been honored with the "Volunteer of the Year" award, which is given to the individual who donates the most number of hours during a calendar year.

The docents are part of a larger group of field, laboratory and research volunteers who give freely of their time to Alexandria Archaeology. The archaeology program maintains an average of approximately 100 volunteers, who donate about 5,000 hours each year.

When asked why the docents dedicate so much time to the Archaeology Museum, it is no wonder that their answers all come back to community. They unanimously agreed that they felt it was their civic responsibility to volunteer -a public service for being a resident of Alexandria- and that it was important to connect a community's past with the present. Some elaborate further on their experience at the museum. Ms. Fitzgerald replied, "It is welcoming here. I feel at home. And, I am free to follow my interest." Ms. Lynch stated that she "...enjoys working with the interns and student" and that the Alexandria Archaeology Museum is a place "Where a woman of a 'certain age' can still feel appreciated." Anna is correct; she and all of our volunteers are greatly appreciated!

So what is in the future for the Alexandria Archaeology Museum? It is difficult to read the tea leaves, especially in this time of economic challenges and ever shrinking budgets. But there is always optimism at Alexandria Archaeology. So long as preservation continues to be valued by Alexandria's citizens and we do our best to stay relevant to community needs we will look forward to celebrating Alexandria Archaeology's diamond jubilee.

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