



CONSERVE NEIGHBORHOODS

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Community Archaeology in Alexandria, Virginia

by Pamela J. Cressey, Ph.D.
City Archaeologist

Pamela J. Cressey has been the City Archaeologist of Alexandria, Va. since 1977. Ms. Cressey also holds a joint appointment in the departments of Anthropology and American Studies as Adjunct Associate Professor at George Washington University, Washington, D.C. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Iowa.

Alexandrians have been engaged in the preservation, study and public interpretation of archaeological sites since 1961. In fact, Alexandria is unique in the nation for its continuous and comprehensive commitment to archaeology. Alexandria Archaeology, part of the Office of Historic Alexandria within the city government, was created to study and preserve the rich heritage that lies beneath the town's yards, streets and parking lots. Alexandria Archaeology has pioneered a new field -- community archaeology -- which combines artifactual, documentary, photographic and oral historical sources for the study and preservation of the community's archaeological heritage.

Active citizens first articulated the values of archaeological preservation and encouraged rescue work by the Smithsonian Institution during the days of urban renewal in the 1960s. Later in the seventies, citizens developed both public and professional groups for ongoing research and education.

An effective partnership has evolved between members of the community and trained archaeologists. The Alexandria Archaeological Commission is appointed by the city council and sets policies and goals. The professional staff of Alexandria Archaeology work with community volunteers to carry out this public mandate by conducting research; providing preservation recommendations on development projects and endangered sites; studying and curating the Alexandria Archaeology Collection and interpreting community history in the Alexandria Archaeology Museum and throughout the city.

Alexandria Archaeology has conducted numerous research projects aimed at describing and understanding the nature of historic urban life. The projects range from studies of the town's main street and waterfront to investigations about the Quakers' role as community leaders and the development of free black neighborhoods. Ten years of systematic study have produced an array of information on many diverse topics such as burial practices and infant mortality, sugar trade and refinement, canal and wharf construction, pottery manufacture and public works. This information has been generated from projects which build on one another to produce an integrated view of the city.

Preserving Alexandria's Underground Heritage

America's towns and cities are experiencing a major building boom which endangers archaeological sites and artifacts. Massive office and commercial developments can quickly destroy archaeological information that has been safe for thousands of years.

It is also possible to restore a property accurately by architectural standards, while dislodging and destroying rich archaeological evidence. If archaeological expertise is brought to a site in sufficient time, however, development activity can benefit a community's appreciation of its past.

In Alexandria we have created a method for staying in front of the bulldozers -- the Preservation Tracking System (PTS). The city archaeologists have identified areas that are the most sensitive to archaeological loss. It may seem incongruous for archaeologists to conduct painstaking scientific investigations on some sites while bulldozers destroy artifacts only blocks away. Yet, once the information obtained from these projects is integrated into a wider view of community history, we have the ability to distinguish which sites merit preservation efforts. Determination of site significance is based on several criteria: research value in answering important questions about Alexandria's and America's past; public value for use and interpretation; uniqueness; physical integrity; and the impact of the proposed development.

By examining development dockets for both the planning commission and the board of architectural review, it is possible to assess the need for archaeological preservation action on land which may soon undergo changes. Recommendations are then made to property owners and city officials for the appropriate level of archaeological activity. This level of activity correlates with the importance of the site -- the more significant the site, the more time and precision are needed to excavate it. The Alexandria Archaeological Commission has developed a draft ordinance to formalize this procedure. It will be presented for city council approval in the near future.

By alerting site owners to the archaeological value of their properties and by monitoring construction sites, the city archaeologists have discovered sites that were unknown from previous studies. A kiln of potter Tildon Easton was found four feet underground when part of it was sighted protruding from a construction sidewall on a neighboring property. Scheduling of the kiln investigation prior to development of the site created sufficient time for scientific investigation and averted a crisis.

Volunteer Ken Ward catalogs artifacts in the Alexandria Archaeology Museum.





Alexandria Archaeology volunteers excavating Tilden Easton Kiln site

A free black neighborhood called Hayti was studied through documentary and oral history sources by expanding a study of one site slated for construction into a three-year project. Abundant knowledge was produced on the architecture, lifestyles, diet and social history of newly freed blacks living in a slave city.

A recent construction project provided the unusual opportunity to investigate Alexandria's historic Christ Church cemetery. Correlation of graves and burial records with gravestone texts documented that even in this protected cemetery, little evidence remained aboveground of the historic landscape and markers. Extremely careful archaeological excavations provided the only tangible evidence of the hundreds of individuals buried in the churchyard 200 years ago.

King Street Merchants

The urban renewal projects of the sixties and seventies provided the opportunity to investigate the city's commercial hub. Alexandria was a major port in the 18th century and through the second decade of the 19th century. King Street was laid out at a right angle to the Potomac River and continued into the western hinterland. King Street was one of several street names in the 1749 town plan symbolizing loyalty to the Crown. The streets and blocks were designed to fit the natural

topography of the crescent-shaped bay which provided a safe harbor.

The street names were assigned in a symmetrical manner -- the male royal titles radiating south of the central axis and the female ones going to the north. The royal street names descend in rank (e.g., King, Prince, Duke) as you move away from the center of town. The only variation in this pattern is the use of a folk name, Oronocco, where symmetry would require a Duchess street. Oronocco is a generic term for the type of tobacco grown in colonial Northern Virginia. Oronocco Street, beginning at the site of the earliest tobacco trading warehouses and wharf, indicates the importance of this commodity to Alexandria's existence. Street names assigned as the city grew reflect the changing loyalties of Alexandrians. By the 1790s, most new streets received names of American patriots such as Patrick Henry and Benjamin Franklin.

King Street became the central axis of Alexandria's bustling port. Unlike contemporary cities, which have specialized activity areas for commerce, industry and residence, historic King Street contained a variety of land uses. Wealthy merchants lived side by side with breweries, warehouses and wharves, slave quarters, taverns and dry goods stores. After 12 years of archaeological excavations on the King Street urban renewal blocks, we are able to describe the types of shops, goods and people which were seen over a 200-year period. We are also able to understand some of the personal dynamics

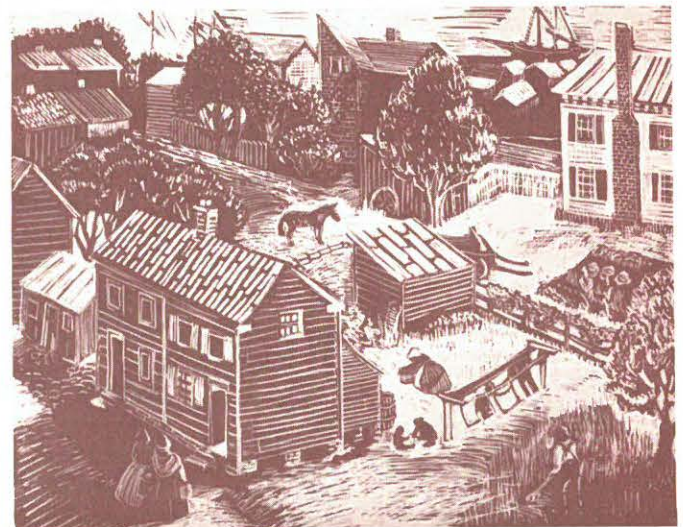


Illustration of Hayti, free black neighborhood, ca. 1850 by Karen Murley

that came into play as Alexandria developed from a colonial tobacco warehouse to its modern role as a suburb of Washington, D.C.

The saga of Quaker businessman Robert H. Miller's financial dealings and partnerships combined with archaeological information from his home provide a view of 19th-century Alexandria's quest for both economic and physical health. Over a 50-year period, Miller owned an import and dry goods business on the 300th block of King Street. He also entered into several partnerships to encourage the economic and cultural development of the stagnating city. He assisted in establishing the Alexandria Canal Company, the Lyceum, a railroad, a bank, a female orphan asylum, the largest industry in town -- a cotton factory -- and the water company.

We began by tracing Miller's involvement with water when an unusual structure was found beneath a parking lot on King Street. This underground circular structure was a brick and plaster-lined cistern that once had been located at the rear of the Miller residence. A two-part filtration box purified water by percolating it through layers of gradually smaller materials (from gravel to sand to charcoal). The structure is a tangible statement of Miller's technological

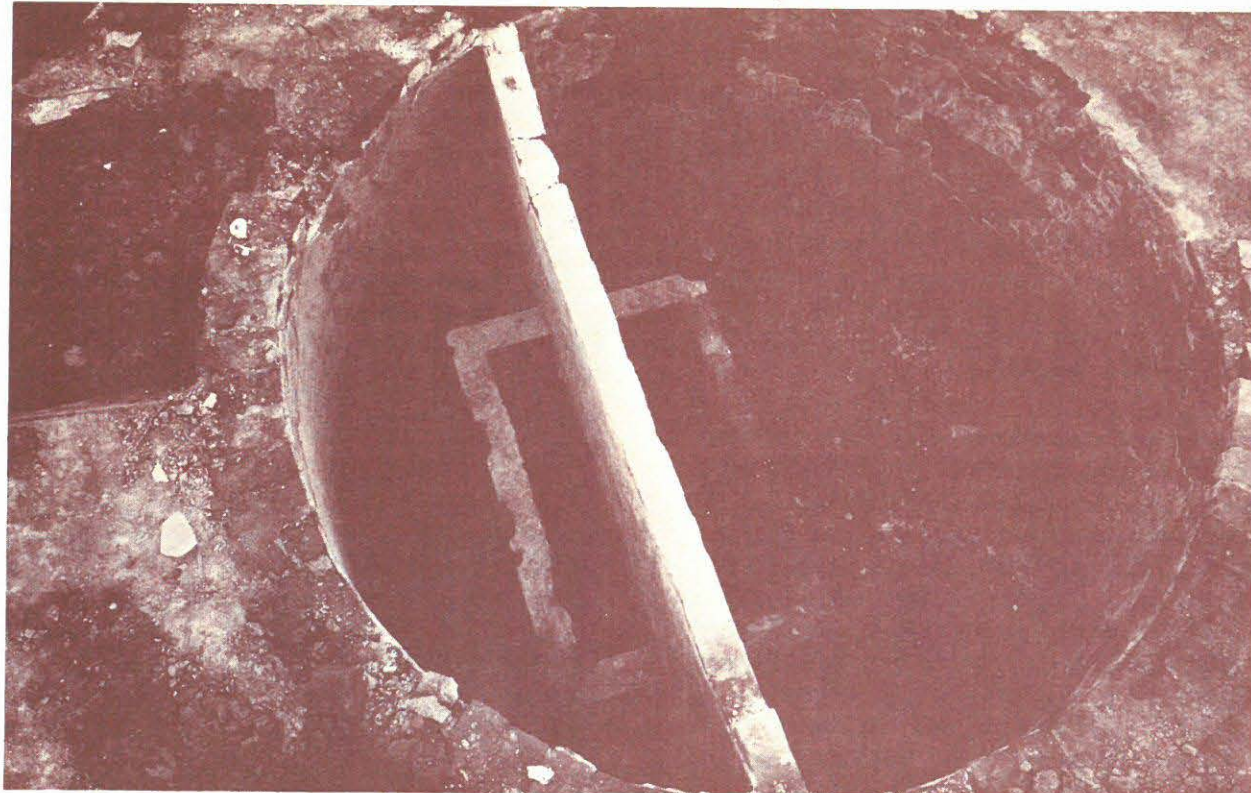
inventiveness and quest for a healthier environment. At a time of continual epidemics of yellow fever, small pox and cholera, a clean water supply was essential for public health. Miller's private construction may have contributed to the health of his own children -- all 11 survived. It also led to a public enterprise: Miller established the first company to bring clean water into private homes.

Miller's Quaker background provided motivation for both economic individualism and community welfare. Miller and other Quakers acted on their faith and vision to play central roles in the transformation of Alexandria into a 19th-century city.

Interpreting Alexandria's Archaeology

Research into Alexandria's past is the foundation for both the preservation and interpretation of its archaeological heritage. Research also produces the artifacts, historic documentation and ultimately the story of the past, which is interpreted through publications, museum exhibitions and videotapes.

Cistern and water filtration system located in Robert Miller's backyard



The City of Alexandria's archaeology collection numbers over 2,000,000 artifacts excavated from more than 100 sites. It is the largest and most comprehensive urban archaeology collection in the United States. All the materials excavated in the city are maintained in one collection, which is available to the public and scholars for individual studies. The collection consists of European, American and Chinese ceramics; European and American bottles and glassware; textiles; toys; bones and seeds from food and indigenous species, as well as many specialized tools and objects such as newspaper type, bone combs and toothbrushes.

Archaeology and the Community

Alexandria Archaeology Volunteers are the heart and hands of all projects. Over the last 10 years, more than 2,500 individuals have worked to excavate sites, catalog and illustrate artifacts, draw maps, research documents, write papers, give site tours and enter data into computers. Each year, about 75 volunteers work with

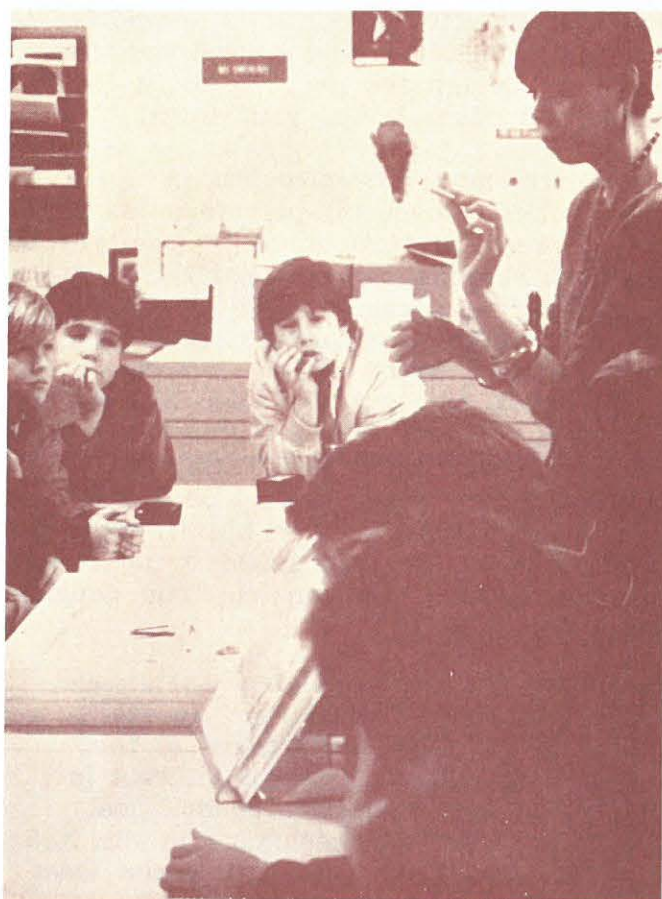


Mayor Charles E. Beatley, Jr. and Archaeological Commission member, Vivienne Mitchell, celebrate plaque commemorating a portion of the Alexandria Canal.

Alexandria Archaeology and contribute 7,000 hours or more of their time.

To produce work that is valuable to both the individual volunteer and the program, it is necessary to have shared expectations, training and belief in the value of community archaeology. Potential volunteers are asked to fill out application forms, sign an ethics statement and attend a general orientation. If they find the work and methods appealing, these new volunteers are directed to supervisors, training manuals and projects which suit their interests. Systematic supervision is required in all project phases to produce consistent results that lead to a broader view of Alexandria's history.

The business community in Alexandria has provided great support for the public interpretation of sites. Recently, Savage/Fogarty Companies, Inc., completed the reconstruction of the Alexandria Canal Tide Lock on the Potomac River as part of the Canal Center development. The tide lock had been nominated to the National Register of Historic Places by the Alexandria Archaeological Commission. This action created a high community profile for the site and brought it to the attention of Savage/Fogarty. The company has also donated space for the City of Alexandria to create a Waterfront Museum which will open in the fall of 1987.



Museum Education Coordinator, Joanna Moyer, discusses new discoveries with students in Alexandria Archaeology Museum.

Archaeology enriches communities and provides a focal point for energy and enthusiasm. One project can create a ripple effect throughout the community leading to museums, school curricula, neighborhood histories, condominium and hotel newsletters and historic street names. All these things have happened in Alexandria and in other cities across the country. Baltimore, Md., Pensacola, Fla. and Cleveland, Ohio, have all reported that archaeology makes a difference. Every community in America has an archaeological heritage which, if managed properly as a public resource, can help us recognize and celebrate the accomplishments of our predecessors. Archaeology brings the American legacy to life.

Alexandria Archaeology is located in a museum space in the Torpedo Factory Art Center. Alexandria Archaeology, the Torpedo Factory Art Center, the Alexandria Tourist council and the new Black Heritage Center and Waterfront Museum are combined into the Office of Historic Alexandria within the city government.

The Alexandria Archaeology museum has exhibits and a "living laboratory" in which visitors can see archaeology volunteers at work. Almost 100,000 people a year view the exhibitions as they walk among the studios of 200 artists in the Torpedo Factory. In the museum, visitors encounter the most recent discoveries, videotapes of current and finished projects and trained interpreters. Workshops, monthly seminars and publications are also available for the public.

To become a Friend of Alexandria Archaeology and receive the monthly Volunteer News or to obtain additional information on publications, volunteer administration and manuals and preservation planning, contact:

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105 N. Union Street
Alexandria, VA 22314

Archaeology in Your Community

If you are interested in the archaeological study of your city or town, there are a number of steps you can take. Review parts of your city or county to identify known areas of native American or historic sites. If any of these areas will be developed soon, ask that an archaeological study precede site plans and construction. Meetings with site owners, city planners and city officials will aid in this process. Be aware of local, state or federal government plans for new projects that will cause changes in the landscape (i.e., roads, sewers, new buildings, erosion control). Federal legislation, and some state legislation, include archaeological assessments in environmental impact statements. Information from these projects can help in creating awareness of the importance of your area. By asking for funds for archaeological study of local government property or a particular project area, you may develop a catalyst for additional work. Archaeology may also be tied with tourism, recreational activities and historic site museums. See who is interested in developing a local program, and then design the program to fit the needs and character of your town.

There are many archaeologists in universities, museums, private industry and government throughout the country to assist in establishing community archaeology programs. Call your state historic preservation office, state archaeologist, anthropology department of a university or state archaeological society to locate the most knowledgeable individuals in your area. Below is a listing of archaeologists who deal with community heritage issues on a daily basis. Each has information on program goals, budgets and job descriptions that can help you develop your own program.

Recently, the Archaeological Assistance Division of the National Park Service (NPS) in the U.S. Department of the Interior has taken a special interest in helping to expand local archaeological activities. The archaeologists in the NPS regional offices are willing to assist local groups with projects, particularly ones in which federal agencies are involved. The Washington, D.C., office and regional

archaeological assistance programs are also listed below.

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Enthusiastic high school student proudly displays archaeological discovery.

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