



Public Archaeology Address Delivered at the Society for Historical Archaeology Conference in Williamsburg, Virginia, on Saturday, January 13, 2007

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There is an age-old truism in the natural history museum world that when attention lags or visitation falters, show them the dinosaur. Well, here I am. The first time I addressed this society was here in Williamsburg at its first annual meeting in 1967 — half a century ago. Sadly, many of our founders are gone, among them J.C. “Pinky” Harrington and his archaeologist wife Virginia, and John “Jack” Cotter, all three Park Service pioneers, Charles Fairbanks from Gainesville, the Smithsonian’s Malcolm Watkins, and social historian Wilcomb “Wid” Washburn who was responsible for bringing us together at a Smithsonian conference in 1965 and which, in turn, led to the creation of our society at SMU in Dallas in 1966. Among those present, and thankfully still with us, was our host Ed Jelks, and the always inspirational Stanley South whose annual conferences on what was then called Historic Sites Archeology preceded the creation of this society. If you wonder what, if anything, I brought to the table, it was the letter “a” which I persuaded my colleagues to inject into the word archaeology—causing frowns, though not vetoes, from the Park Service’s Harrington and Cotter.

Since those far gone days the art and craft of historical archaeology has taken root around the world and flourishes from Australia to Zambia. Had I the time and you the fortitude I could cite you sites and names already familiar to many of you: Charles Cleland, Jim Deetz, Kathy Deagan, Jeff Brain, Lyle Stone, Norm Barka, Bunny Fontana, the list goes on and on. I hope you will forgive me, therefore, if, in these few minutes, I ignore the archaeology of the Spanish Empire or French Canada and look only at what might be termed Anglo-archaeology.

The number of registrants at this year’s meeting makes it very clear that American colonial archaeology has dwindled into a relatively minor facet of global historical archaeology. To cite a single example from the work of the Australian Society for Historical Archaeology I point to its survey of the Aztec battlefield at Gallipoli. In short, the techniques of historical archaeology are applicable wherever there is a question to ask and evidence to be found.

It can be argued that sites marrying historical documentation with artifactual evidence can be as recent as burials in Vietnam or as old as the Third Dynasty in Egypt. So can Egyptology be called historical archaeology? I had occasion to ponder that question when I found fragments of pearlware beside the temple of Seti the First at Abydos (1318 BC). In truth, any archaeological approach to a literate society can be called historical archaeology.

Although some of us think of Jamestown in the 1930s as the cornerstone of historical archaeology, excavating and interpreting 18th-century sites on the basis of their artifacts goes back much further. I cite, for example, the work of New Yorkers William Louis Calver and Reginald Pelham Bolton who as long ago as the 1880s began digging on Revolutionary War and War of 1812 camp sites on Washington Heights. When a collection of their articles was published by the New York Historical Society in 1950, it was titled *History Written with Pick and Shovel*— which is not exactly the way one likes to portray archaeological techniques. Although that Society spelled archaeology with the second “a,” Calver and Bolton rarely if ever used the word, preferring to call their very considerable efforts “field exploration.” The sites they excavated and recorded are all gone under the spreading New York City, so we owe those men with their picks and shovels a warm place in the history of American historical archaeology.

I would be seriously remiss if I do not mention Virginia’s own Thomas Jefferson whose report of his excavation of an Indian mound at Shadwell represented the dawn of modern archaeology, our archaeology, by that I mean the study of the relationship between soil stratigraphy and the remains found in the strata. I often wonder how Jefferson would have responded had I told him that two hundred years later Bill Kelso would be digging up his trash at Monticello.

The idea that one might learn something from digging in the colonial American ground had its roots on Roanoke Island in 1895 when Talcott Williams dug in search of the Lost Colony and found little more than a nail of uncertain date. Here in Virginia, Mary Jeffery Galt, co-founder of the APVA, took a shovel to the ruins of the church at Jamestown and carefully recorded what she and her cohorts discovered. However, it was Pinky Harrington who earned the credit for being the father of historical archaeology in America as the result of his leadership at Jamestown as well as his work on Roanoke Island, at Fort Necessity, and the Mormon temple site at Nauvoo, all significant accomplishments. In truth, however, Pinky was not the first field director at Jamestown to think significant archaeological thoughts. His name was W.J. Winter. Actually, he wasn’t really a director; he was what the Park Service classified as a Junior Park naturalist, parenthesis “archeology”—with an “e.” He took control of the Jamestown digging in 1935. After a somewhat acerbic encounter with architectural excavator Henry Chandlee Forman he wrote that “the most important things on Jamestown Island are not the brick foundations. We are attempting,” he said, “to make a study of a culture, to gain all (underlined) of the information that the ground has to yield.”

The APVA’s current excavations and its new museum are providing graphic proof of Winter’s contention. Three months later another Park Service archaeologist, J. Summerfield Day, amplified Winter’s words, saying, “We must study everything, find the correct interpretation for every object, we must omit no detail that will help build up the complete story of life on Jamestown Island, whether it be how the colonist dressed, how he ate, what tools he used, what his amusements were, or what kind of house he lived in.” In short, Day concluded, “we must find out all that is to be found out from the soil that will tell us the answers to any question that anyone might ask.” Those remarkably astute observations came from prehistorians who, before coming to Jamestown, had no prior experience of digging a colonial site. Today, Bill Kelso and his highly skilled Jamestown Rediscovery team are doing all that Winter and Day proposed.

But their message went unheard in 1930s Williamsburg where the architects were sometimes referred to as archaeologists and who for decades to come would be content to use picks and shovels to expose brick foundation while ignoring the artifacts associated with them. I should add that it was Summerfield Day, and not Harrington, who first recognized that the shapes and sizes of tobacco-pipe bowls could be used as dating tools—though it was left to Pinky to recognize the significance of their stem-hole diameters.

Simultaneously, in England, my mentor, Adrian Oswald was earning his place as the father of Britain's post-medieval archaeology and publishing the first tobacco-pipe bowl chronology. He and I first worked together in 1949 on the site of the Bankside Power Station, since converted into the Tate Modern art gallery, whose ground had been home to 17th-century factories making delftware, brown stoneware, and glass. It was, to say the least, a remarkable learning experience. At the same time, in the Liverpool area another novice archaeologist was making his mark in the post-medieval sphere. He was Jim Barton, who became a leading specialist in English coarse earthen wares and the founder of the Post-Medieval Ceramic Research Group. Also in England in 1955, the now famed archaeologist, Martin Biddle, was beginning his career by excavating Henry the Eighth's palace at Nonsuch. If you do not already possess his newly published book on the interpretation of its artifacts—its material culture—you surely should.

But back to Virginia. Because in the 1930s and '40s Colonial Williamsburg had no trained archaeologist on its staff, there was no one there to think in the much broader archaeological terms being espoused by Winter, Day, and Harrington. In 1954 Pinky gave his seminal speech to the American Anthropological Association which he titled "Archeology as an Auxiliary Science to American History." Intended as an overview of achievements in the field prior to 1952, Harrington went on to decry the lack of people trained both in field archaeology and historical research. "We cannot expect," he wrote, "a single individual to be qualified to excavate and interpret cultural remains so varied and so complex as those represented in this country any more than we would consider an Egyptologist qualified to excavate in the Roman forum. Yet we send out an archaeologist to investigate a 17th-century English plantation site, a Civil War site, or a Hudson Bay post, naively assuming he can do the job because he has successfully excavated prehistoric Indian sites." Pinky generously refrained from noting that the first archaeologist hired by Colonial Williamsburg and who was in charge of the 1930 excavations at the Governor's Palace, accepted the task while on his way to work at Sakkara in Egypt—from which he sent encouraging postcards to his colleagues in Williamsburg.

While sitting in the entrance to one of the Sakkara tombs whose murals our man had drawn, I asked a famed Egyptologist how she rated him. She replied, "He was a good draftsman. He drew what he saw, but he could not interpret. And without that ability one cannot be considered an archaeologist."

Pinky's charge that prehistorically-trained anthropologists should not shift their attention to historical sites at the drop of a contract did not sit well with his audience. I later learned that the AAA had a way of showing its displeasure in a time-honored manner. I took my first Colonial Williamsburg film "Doorway to the Past" for its premier screening at the Association's 1967 annual meeting at New Orleans. Big mistake. Members of the audience booed it. They considered it ludicrous that the science of archaeology should be so trivialized.

In 1963 in a speech in Raleigh, North Carolina, I described archaeology as a handmaiden to history. But university historians who resisted the jargon of their anthropology departments had yet to be persuaded that archaeology offered anything they needed, or, more importantly, that its evidence was reliable. And it is true that we did, and still do, rely a great deal on guesswork—though we prefer to call it “interpretation.” Historians, on the other hand can say with conviction that this was so—and here’s the paper to prove it. Only rarely can we do that, but when we can we are truly handmaidens to history.

As you well know, Webster’s dictionary defines archeology (with an “e”) as “the scientific study of the material remains of past human life and activity” and then blows it by listing fossils as its prime example. But what matters in that definition is that it says nothing about digging. It is the educated study of these material remains that makes us archaeologists. It is not enough to be able to dig a tidy hole.

Artifacts, be they clay pipes, potsherds, or old wagon parts are the warp and weft, the nuts and bolts, of archaeological interpretation. I was distressed, therefore, at dinner last night, to hear a distinguished member of the society regretting that so few of the many papers being read here relate to artifact studies.

As some of you may remember, I came to archaeology not through the back door, but through a stage door. Consequently, I have always stressed the need to make our work acceptable to the general public; otherwise we would be preaching to the choir, and as a rule the choir has no money.

Through the 1960s and into the early 1970s I had the wholehearted support of Colonial Williamsburg’s president, Carl Humelsine. I made films, mounted exhibits, wrote books, even went on a television game show [“To Tell the Truth”], doing everything I could to teach Colonial Williamsburg that in the fruits of archaeology it had an unparalleled popular asset (Figure 2.1). It had what successful archaeology must have, an enduring end product. However, my message was better received in the front office than it was by C.W.’s chief curator, who in 1958 decreed that his staff should stay clear of the archaeologists and all their junk.

In the mid 1970s, still under the protective mantle of Carl Humelsine, I set up an exhibit at the James Anderson House here in Williamsburg which demonstrated both the techniques of field archaeology and the interpretation of the resulting artifacts. It proved to be extremely successful in terms of tourist visitation. However, within weeks of my retirement, Colonial Williamsburg saw fit to destroy the exhibit and convert the house to offices—thereby removing all that junk from public view.

Some of you may have become acquainted with our work at Carter’s Grove and the discovery of Martin’s Hundred and Wolstenholme Towne. The site provided an opportunity to practice all that I had been preaching. With 2007 in sight down the track, the discovery of a 1620’s settlement and the recovery of its remarkable assemblage of diagnostic artifacts allowed me the luxury of building a modern museum wherein to tell that story. Alas, in the eyes of Colonial Williamsburg scholars and management, we had been digging in the wrong century. In the early

1930s, the Carter's Grove mansion had been through what its architect called a "renaissance," improving it into an F. Scott Fitzgerald era rich man's home. It was still so when Colonial Williamsburg acquired it and therefore aesthetically unacceptable to architectural historians focusing only on unsullied 18th-century buildings. Then, too, the rich man's widow's furnishings that came with the mansion were considered too inferior to be curatorially acceptable. In short, nobody but the visiting public liked Carter's Grove.



Figure 2.1. Over forty years ago, archaeologist Ivor Noël Hume excavated this 18th-century well at the James Geddy House and many others like it in Williamsburg, Virginia. Courtesy of Ivor Noël Hume

That those acres provided an opportunity to tell the story of Virginia's 400 centuries of evolution from fragile post-in-the-ground dwellings to a grand mansion of the 1930s, had few defenders when Colonial Williamsburg found itself with a budget deficit that needed to be fixed. The solution: sell Carter's Grove, destroy both the on-site interpretation and its museum to make the property fit the 21st-century taste of another rich new owner. The story of Carter's Grove had gone full circle. As for its museum, according to one unconfirmed rumor, the underground building is to be filled with dirt. Dust to dust, dirt to dirt.

In mentioning the new massacre at Martin's Hundred, I do so not to bemoan what some may see as the repudiation of everything I had spent fifty years teaching, but rather as a warning to all

archaeologists that enthusiasm for our accomplishments may be only skin deep, lasting just as long as the media smiles on us, and that what we find fits the current management message. It is a disturbing fact of economic life that *the future must earn from the past*.

I find solace in the fact that Bill Kelso and his great team of archaeologists now carry the torch that I have laid down. This is Bill's year and he deserves to enjoy his moment. I pray that his Jamestown legacy will be allowed to endure long after mine is forgotten. But to do so the APVA must recognize its obligation to allow time and secure the funding to provide a fully researched and published report on Bill's accomplishment. Popular books are great, but they are not enough.

That leads me to one last thought. As Bill will be the first to own, his achievement has not been his alone. Bly Straube, Nick Lucketti, Jamie May, Eric Deetz, Carter Hudgins, and many others helped make it happen. The media always wants to focus on the director, the head honcho, and feels cheated if asked to interview a second banana. That has been true of my own career, much of its success due to the labors of others. We are nothing without the support of our wives, our field assistants, our conservators, and above all the crews who labored through frozen snow and burning sun to make us look much cleverer than we are. To them all, allow me to say a final, heart-felt, but too-long-delayed "Thank you and goodbye."