

Daniel G. Roberts Award for Excellence in Public Historical Archaeology



The City of Alexandria Archaeology Partners—representatives of the Alexandria City Council, City of Alexandria staff, members of the Alexandria Archaeological Commission (AAC), and Friends of Alexandria Archaeology (FOAA)—receive the inaugural Daniel G. Roberts Award for Excellence in Public Historical Archaeology. *Left to right:* Paul Nasca, archaeologist; Francine Bromberg, archaeologist; Seth Tinkham, AAC; Lance Mallamo, Office of Historic Alexandria director; Pam Cressey, city archaeologist; Garrett Fesler (kneeling), archaeologist; Mary Jane Nugent, FOAA; Kathleen Pepper, past-chair AAC; Vince LaPointe, chair AAC; Alicia Hughes, city council member; and William B. Lees, SHA president (Photo courtesy of Andrew J. Robinson, 2012).

The City of Alexandria and Alexandria Archaeology

Established in 2011 by the Society for Historical Archaeology (SHA), the Daniel G. Roberts Award for Excellence in Public Historical Archaeology was created to honor Daniel G. Roberts, one of the pioneers in public historical archaeology, particularly within a cultural resource management framework. Roberts first recognized the enormous appeal of archaeology to the American public in the summer of 1967 during his Beloit College field school in northern Wisconsin, where he was introduced to the enthusiasm of site visitors at several First American sites under excavation. His recognition of the public's interest in archaeology grew with his first historical archaeology project, in 1971, at the National Park Service excavations at Franklin Court in Philadelphia. The Franklin Court Project was one of the first in the nation to use an archaeological site as an open-air museum and was a landmark public archaeology project. His early commitment to archaeology for the public was cemented in the mid-1970s, when he completed a graduate program at Idaho State University that focused on public archaeology and cultural resource management, one of the first such programs in the country.

The importance of public archaeology was not lost on Roberts as he began his professional career in historical archaeology at John Milner Associates, Inc. (JMA). In 1983, JMA was retained to excavate the 19th-century First African Baptist Church Cemetery at Eighth and Vine in Center City Philadelphia (and subsequently another cemetery, two blocks away, associated with the First African Baptist Church). Roberts proactively engaged the current First African Baptist Church parishioners, the African American Museum in Philadelphia, the Philadelphia Historical Commission, and the general public in both on-site and off-site outreach programs at a time before such programs became standard on archaeological projects. The programs included on-site interactive presentations, homecoming ceremonies of both a spiritual and secular nature, the production of a professionally produced video (subsequently transferred to DVD), the development of reburial ceremonies, participation in the 200th anniversary celebration of the First African Baptist Church, the production of a “traveling trunk” exhibit for the enjoyment of school children around the commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and development of exhibits at both the Philadelphia History Museum (also known as the Philadelphia History Museum at the Atwater Kent) and the African American Museum in Philadelphia.

The First African Baptist Church public program has been used as a model for numerous subsequent urban cemetery excavations across the country, including the celebrated African Burial Ground in Lower Manhattan. This project featured an unprecedented public outreach program. Employing as many as two dozen full- and part-time educators over more than a decade, the Office of Public Education and Interpretation for the African Burial Ground (OPEI), under the direct supervision of Dr. Sherrill Wilson, provided presentations on the African Burial Ground and New York City’s African American history to countless school groups, hospitals, civic and community groups, churches, charity organizations, and a host of other institutions in and around New York City. OPEI staff also often traveled across the country and abroad to present seminars on the African Burial Ground, and many thousands of informational packets were sent to people worldwide, thereby making the African Burial Ground one of the most widely publicized and recognized archaeological sites in the Americas. Roberts and his colleagues at JMA worked closely with Dr. Wilson and her staff in a support role in the daily management of the OPEI.

The Daniel G. Roberts Award for Excellence in Public Historical Archaeology was established by SHA in recognition of Roberts’s pioneering initiatives in public historical archaeology and endowed by his colleagues at JMA. In defining the scope of the award, public archaeology has been described as any endeavor in which archaeologists interact with the public, and any research (practical or theoretical) that examines or analyzes the public dimensions of doing archaeology. The award recognizes outstanding public archaeological accomplishments by an individual, educational institution, for-profit or not-for-profit firm or organization, museum, government agency, private sponsor, or project. The award is to be bestowed on an annual basis, provided a qualified candidate can be identified, and no more than one award will be made each year. Additional criteria for the award are posted on the SHA website (<<http://www.sha.org>>).

The inaugural award was presented at the 2012 SHA annual conference in Baltimore to the City of Alexandria and Alexandria Archaeology. The citizens of Alexandria, Virginia, have been sponsoring and doing archaeology in their city for 50 years. They have supported the citizen-based Alexandria Archaeological Commission since 1975 and a city archaeologist and staff since 1977. Alexandria Archaeology is a division within the Office of Historic Alexandria. Together they have made the public archaeology program in Alexandria one that has engaged the public in myriad ways. It has contributed to an understanding of the city’s history and has shown a degree of understanding and concern for archaeology that is unusual and admirable in a local government agency.

Beginning in 1961, citizens convinced the city to purchase and therefore preserve the Civil War-era Fort Ward. A bastion was excavated by one of the founding members of SHA, Edward Larrabee, and the fort was partially restored. In the 1960s, under the impact of urban renewal and with the approaching American bicentennial, the citizens enlisted Ivor Noël Hume and the Smithsonian Institution to help preserve archaeological evidence of the 18th century that otherwise would be destroyed. This partnership lasted until 1971, when the Smithsonian had to withdraw. The

work was continued, however, through donations by private citizens and contributions by the city.

In 1975, the Alexandria City Council passed a resolution creating the Alexandria Archaeological Commission. The commission was charged with promoting archaeology and establishing goals and priorities for using Alexandria's archaeological resources to contribute to the history and heritage of the city. The resolution enabled the city's archaeology supporters to directly advise the city council on issues relating to archaeology and develop plans for protecting and promoting archaeology within the city. They realized that to do that more effectively they needed a professional archaeologist on staff, and the city established that position in 1977 with the hiring of Dr. Pamela Cressey, who received her advanced degrees from the University of Iowa.

Dr. Cressey proved to be an excellent choice. She began implementing a city-as-site approach to the archaeology and built on the foundations for public outreach that had already been established. The initial call for volunteers to help excavate one of the urban-renewal blocks led to an outpouring of individuals that almost overwhelmed the project.

In the 1980s, the Alexandria Archaeology program received several grants to conduct surveys of the city and identify historic neighborhoods, patterns of land use, and areas of archaeological resource potential. Surveys included comparative documentary, archaeological, architectural, and oral history research. The research demonstrated the historical presence of multiple groups within the community and drew attention to the need to interpret that history.

A museum was added in 1984 that provided displays, opportunities for volunteers, and educational programs where the public could observe archaeologists working with the collections. In 1986, the not-for-profit Friends of Alexandria Archaeology was formed to help support the program, and it soon became a vital part of Alexandria's archaeological initiatives.

In 1989, the archaeological commission spearheaded the development and passage of an Archaeological Protection Ordinance tied to the development process. This added a significant dimension to the staff members' workload, creating responsibilities on top of their public outreach activities for reviewing permits, developing scopes of work, and reviewing archaeological reports submitted by consultants working for developers and other clients. While much of the staff's focus now shifted to review and compliance for professional archaeological endeavors, the public outreach programs did not suffer, as shown by the increasing number of volunteer hours reported over several periods. During the 10 years between 1979 and 1988, volunteers donated almost 1,000 hours of labor per year; in 1988, it was over 5,000 hours; and over the last three years (2009 through 2011), between 9,000 and 10,000 volunteer hours were devoted to the city's archaeology-related activities each year.

Volunteerism has been a mainstay of the Alexandria Archaeology program from the beginning. Important contributions have been made by volunteers in many areas of activity, including archival research, fieldwork, laboratory processing, museum displays, education, and oral history. Educational programs include Archaeology Adventure Lessons for children and adults, Alexandria Archaeology Summer Camp, and Family Dig Days, when members of the public join staff archaeologists at a site currently under excavation and are provided with opportunities to screen for artifacts. Lesson plans on topics relating to Alexandria's history are made available online. Other opportunities to learn professional archaeological techniques and to observe archaeologists at work include a field school conducted in cooperation with George Washington University, field trips, and site tours. Alexandria Archaeology also sponsors lectures, internship opportunities, and, importantly, a yearly volunteer-recognition party.

One important project currently underway that is providing significant learning experiences for volunteers is an oral history project conducted in cooperation with the Lyceum and the Alexandria Black History Museum. In this project, volunteers are collecting and transcribing oral histories of some of Alexandria's longtime residents to add yet another dimension to the ongoing archaeological and historical programs.

Three recent projects further illustrate the city's commitment to archaeology as a positive influence on the quality of life for Alexandria's residents. One is the development of the Heritage Alexandria Trail. This is a 23 mi. tour of a selection of Alexandria's archaeological sites, complete

with an annotated map and a 72-page guidebook tied to the sites along the trail. Another is Alexandria Archaeology's efforts in aiding the city's African American community in preserving and memorializing the forgotten Contraband and Freedman's Cemetery, which had been buried under a gas station for decades. The third project is one on which Alexandria Archaeology worked in cooperation with the Office of Historic Alexandria, the Alexandria Historic Preservation and Restoration Commission, and the Alexandria Archaeological Commission to prepare an archaeological component for the new Alexandria Waterfront Plan, thus bringing the waterfront's archaeological resources to the fore as the city redevelops its maritime assets.

These efforts and many more over the years amply demonstrate that the City of Alexandria has been a longtime leader in community archaeology. It supports an ongoing program of research and preservation that studies and preserves archaeological sites and interprets them for the public, thereby helping to build positive community identity through public involvement with archaeology. Alexandria Archaeology has long been a model for other city-sponsored public archaeology programs in the nation, and it has been doing state-of-the-art archaeology in the public arena longer than any other city that comes to mind. Congratulations to Dr. Pamela Cressey, her staff at Alexandria Archaeology, and the City of Alexandria for showing everyone the way in developing programs that are highly effective in reaching out to the public.

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