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Partners in Preservation: The Binghamton University Community Archaeology Program

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13.1. Introduction

We often hear the statement that one of the greatest threats to the archaeological record is an uninformed and disengaged public (Davis, 1997: 85; Hoffman, 1997: 73; T. Price et al., 2000; K. Hoffman et al., 2002: 215). This statement derives from the fact that most archaeological research in the USA is publicly funded through legislative mandates that seek to identify and preserve significant aspects of the past for the public good. In fact, the premise on which historic preservation is based clearly states that the collection and protection of information about the past is in the public interest (http://www.cr.nps.gov/local-law/FHPL_HistPrsrvt.pdf). Preservation legislation on both the federal and state levels has established a role for archaeologists as stewards of the past, agents on the ground who discover, interpret, and protect pieces of our collective cultural heritage.

The phrase, “in the public interest,” is a broad concept, open for varied interpretation. First-line beneficiaries of these legislative mandates tend to be archaeologists, historians, and architectural historians who are presented with opportunities to conduct research deemed to be important to the interpretation of the past. As many of us have already concluded, what archaeologists perceive as important is not always the same as the significance attached to the past by others. We have all come to realize that there are diverse types of “public values” people attach to the preservation of sites, among them the value to descendent communities and cultural descendants, the value to the educational community, and the value to general community constituents.

The Public Archaeology Facility (PAF) is a research center on the campus of Binghamton University, one of the four state universities in New York. In 1996, PAF formed the Community Archaeology Program (CAP), an umbrella for the many presentations done throughout the year. CAP is based on the premise that the public has more than a passing interest in the research conducted by archaeologists, and the program provides a way for constituents to become stakeholders. The CAP umbrella still covers traditional slide
presentations, site/lab tours, visits to local schools, and a traveling exhibit. In addition, CAP offers a supervised field opportunity for community members (children and adults) to build “sweat equity” in a local site and contribute to the research and interpretive process. CAP also provides an opportunity for graduate students to receive training in the philosophy and practice of meaningful community outreach. This paper will detail the CAP program and discuss the principles we have formulated that guide our partnership with the public in the research, interpretation, and preservation of the cultural heritage in our local communities.

13.2. Values and Archaeology

Generally speaking, people tend to be advocates for causes that they understand. Individuals and groups attach value to items and issues with which they can empathize on a personal or professional level. Archaeology and historic preservation are no exception (Davis, 1997: 85; Jameson, 1997: 17). Archaeologists and other professionals who share information with the public about the importance of preservation, engage a diverse constituency in the stewardship of the archaeological record. This responsibility is so important that the Society for American Archaeology acknowledged the need for public interpretation and outreach in two of their eight principles of archaeological ethics (Lynott and Wylie, 1995). However, we often assume that all people will view the importance of the past in the same manner as professional archaeologists, who are well-schooled in assessing the significance of archaeological sites and historic properties through the eyes of researchers. We can all share examples of the many times a member of a local community has confronted us with the questions, “Why are you doing this? Why is it important to me? Why should my tax dollars pay for it? What do I get out of it?” The research conducted by archaeologists does not always make sense to people who have a more personal connection to our study area, or who lack an obvious connection. The perceived “value” of traces of the past can be expected to vary depending on the views and agendas of the involved parties. It is incumbent on the front-line researchers to give coherent answers to these questions. For instance, descendent communities, associated ethnic communities, and members of historically intact neighborhoods may all value the past in different ways and for diverse reasons. Archaeological study is enriched when informed by these different views. However, archaeologists need to translate the data we acquire from sites into formats that have meaning to local communities. Access and participation in the process of discovery and interpretation create the opportunity for a rich dialogue about the past, and encourage passive constituents in a community to become shareholders, or part “owners” of the past to which they are linked.

The public’s perception of the “value” they receive from archaeological research and historic preservation is directly dependent on how well