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## Intern to Interpretation: A Take on Public Archaeology at Strawberry Banke

Elizabeth M. Donison

*Interning at Strawberry Banke Museum offers a unique and important experience. While providing insight into museum archaeology, public archaeology also plays an important role in interpreting sites. Planned work at the Penhallow House through the Heritage House Program was the reason for excavating and holding a field school in 2016 and 2017. The intern acts as the teaching assistant for the field-school students, a position that offers an advanced research and leadership opportunity for students with prior experience. Field-school participants are of various ages and backgrounds, making it pertinent to emphasize the archaeology department's role in transmitting Portsmouth and New Hampshire history. The field school and an additional archaeology camp run by the education department help to inform museum visitors about ongoing research and discoveries in the Puddle Dock neighborhood. This article highlights the role that the archaeology department and its ongoing internship program hold relative to public archaeology's importance at Strawberry Banke.*

*Un stage au Strawberry Banke Museum offre une expérience unique et importante. Tout en donnant un aperçu de l'archéologie muséale, l'archéologie publique joue également un rôle important dans l'interprétation des sites. Les travaux prévus à la Penhallow House dans le cadre du programme Heritage House ont été la raison pour laquelle les fouilles et la tenue d'une école de fouille ont été menées en 2016 et 2017. Le stagiaire agit en tant qu'assistant pédagogique pour les étudiants de l'école de fouille, un poste qui offre une opportunité de recherche avancée et de leadership pour les étudiants ayant une expérience préalable. Les participants à l'école de fouille sont d'âges et d'origines divers, il est donc pertinent de souligner le rôle du département d'archéologie dans la transmission de l'histoire de Portsmouth et du New Hampshire. L'école de fouille et un camp d'archéologie supplémentaire géré par le département de l'éducation aident à informer les visiteurs du musée de ses recherches et des découvertes en cours dans le quartier de Puddle Dock. Cet article met en évidence le rôle que le département d'archéologie et son programme de stages en cours tiennent par rapport à l'importance de l'archéologie publique à Strawberry Banke.*

### Introduction

Strawberry Banke Museum has played an important role in transmitting New Hampshire's history to many different audiences and age groups. Aside from improving the museum's authenticity, archaeology has guided and promoted the historical preservation that is crucial to Strawberry Banke's mission statement. In addition to preserving buildings on the waterfront, the museum engages in important conversations that most visitors would not have experienced on the outside. Since the first museum excavations in the 1960s, archaeology has contributed information about Puddle Dock's history and continues to promote research, exhibits, and public programs about the former inhabitants' diverse lives. Without it, the stories of the under-documented people in Portsmouth and

their contributions to New Hampshire's history would not be known.

Because Strawberry Banke is a living history museum, much of the archaeology is conducted to disseminate research to an audience that is not always scholarly, but is interested in learning about the past. This audience, or community, is not geographically based, but defined and linked through shared experiences (Smith and Waterton 2009). The community includes stakeholders, descendants of the inhabitants of the Puddle Dock neighborhood and Portsmouth, and those that care about or relate to any part of the neighborhood's history. The collections department uses a community-based approach that goes beyond educating and presenting information to the public through exhibit making. Successful community engagement (not to be confused with community archaeology) must be an

exchange of ideas, rather than the one-way communication that more often takes place at museums (Bollwerk et al. 2015; Singleton 1997). Community engagement is a part of public archaeology at Strawberry Banke, which will be the focus of this article.

Public archaeology at Strawberry Banke started in 1964, when the museum secured insurance for visitors to observe the student excavations lead by Lawrence Straus (*Portsmouth Herald* 1964). Community engagement through public archaeology continued to develop through the years and remains an integral part of the collections department's work. The current collections department staff is very small, with Alexandra Martin being the sole archaeologist. This limits what the department can achieve. Because the staff is small, the volunteers, field-school students, and interns are a vital resource. Similarly, there is more dependence on other museum departments to promote public archaeology and research goals. Creating multidisciplinary public programs expands public education, and, in turn, helps in the development of broad research goals (Edwards-Ingram 1997). Collaboration beyond the collections department also produces polyvocal research, similar to the tradition of collaborative research projects that have produced meaningful products for the participants; see, e.g., Edwards-Ingram (1997), Mullins (2011), Reeves (2015), and Laroche and Blakey (1997).

For this article I use Carol McDavid's definition of public archaeology 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" (McDavid 2012). By holding public programs, Martin enables and empowers the involved community to engage in meaningful discussions about history. This pedagogical approach to community engagement is facilitated through a variable and active teaching process at the museum. Altering teaching approaches for different audiences requires that the collections department understand how different commu-

nities learn. Henry Giroux describes pedagogy as "central to any political practice that takes up the question of how individuals learn, how knowledge is produced, and how subject positions are constructed" (Hamilakis 2004). Using a pedagogical approach for engaging with the public requires the "research" to which McDavid referred, because it involves multiple museum employees' critical thinking and expertise in history, archaeology, and education. Applying this expertise through a pedagogical approach to the various public programs creates an active environment for the mutual exchange of knowledge (Cobb and Croucher 2014). Public archaeology at Strawberry Banke encourages this exchange through open discussions and community engagement with past and present excavations.

Important dialogues on Portsmouth's past are encouraged through such programs as the archaeology internship, archaeology camps and workshops, exhibits, and the field school. A variety of programs like these initiate more interaction with the public and allow different audiences to participate and engage with history (Edwards-Ingram 1997). Throughout this article, I argue that public archaeology at Strawberry Banke upholds McDavid's definition by meaningfully engaging the community and using a pedagogical approach.

### Archaeology Internship

One of the ways that the collections department practices community engagement is by hiring interns and creating opportunities for them to participate in the research and public archaeology process. The internship program is a unique opportunity for experienced archaeology students because they are fully immersed in a historical museum setting. Reflecting on the 10 weeks I spent as a museum intern under Martin's direction in 2017, I recognize the impact the internship made on my outlook on archaeology and working with the public. The background knowledge required to be a field-school

teaching assistant, along with the task of assisting the collections department in a professional capacity, pushed me to use all that the museum had to offer. By taking advantage of outside learning opportunities, museum resources and collections, and living in the city itself, I felt as though I could shape my view of museum information in a way that empathized with the widespread effects of the museum on the Portsmouth community. The internship is part of Strawberry Banke's public archaeology program because it relies on an exchange of ideas and knowledge by involving interns in field school instruction, personal research projects, workshops, and work with the community.

Martin and the collections department specifically enabled me to better engage with the research process for the Penhallow House, a project that is part of the Heritage House Program. The work undertaken through this program requires collaboration with the museum archaeologist before construction and therefore initiates excavations like the Penhallow House field schools in 2016 and 2017. The department's pedagogical approach in this case involved me doing outside readings on the house and memorizing information to share with the public. I also explored different aspects of the project that personally interested me, including attending an historic preservation workshop that discussed future work on the Penhallow House and participating in an oral-history workshop to better understand the ways oral histories contribute to furnishing museum exhibit spaces. Once I expressed an interest in these topics, the collections department encouraged me to attend the workshops. The one on oral history, in particular, made me realize how important community involvement in museum interpretation is.

The internship program is flexible enough to be highly personalized in regard to projects and interns' interests, demonstrating that the success of community engagement is not formulaic. Laurie Wilkie (2004) wrote that community involvement should not have a single

approach, which is clear when one sees how people's interests and expertise continue to contribute to public programs. Engaging with the volunteers and professionals at Strawberry Banke made me realize how important interdisciplinary work is to the field of archaeology. I saw how their different areas of expertise, ranging from geographic information systems to geology to chemistry, provided meaningful interpretations and a space where collaboration was a two-way exchange. A pedagogical approach to public archaeology, whether it is engaging with volunteers, writing on the archaeology blog, speaking to museum visitors, or making a site brochure, considers how others learn and process information (Hamilakis 2004). Each public program was tailored to the community's needs, and I also saw how different departments collaborated to provide more meaningful experiences for participants. After learning about the museum's archaeological process and the commitment to public archaeology, I could, in turn, articulate archaeology's role to the public and students through my teaching assistant role, blog posts, and photography.

I also gained knowledge about data entry in the Past Perfect database. I expressed my interest in digital archaeology, and part of my personal engagement was contributing to the database. The collections department is currently working to put all of its notable artifacts in an online database for research and management purposes, and, in pursuit of this goal, I entered over 2,000 artifact photographs and information from excavations as early as the 1960s. The artifacts in this database are from some significant New Hampshire excavations, such as the Deer Street site in Portsmouth's North End and the Marshall Pottery site on the museum grounds. By enabling access by outside researchers as well as standardizing the artifact data entries, the collection can help with future research and understanding about colonial and indigenous history.

Although the internship is a generally successful part of public archaeology at Strawberry Banke, there are some issues to be addressed.

Since the collections department has limited resources, the internship provides a stipend and free housing for the summer. This is more than other museums can provide, but it may deter interested students who need to earn money over the summer for school or their families. As a result, interns are largely from the same demographic: mostly white and from middle- to upper-class families (Alexandra Martin 2017, pers. comm.). The exchange of knowledge is therefore limited, because interns from other backgrounds could certainly contribute to, and benefit from, public archaeology at Strawberry Banke. Ideally, the internship would be similar to that offered through James Madison's Montpelier, which pays its archaeology interns an hourly wage and also provides free housing. That internship is also highly focused on community engagement because the interns work with the public on "expedition programs" throughout the year (Reeves 2004). However, the Montpelier archaeology department has received large donations and grants due to its historical significance as the residence of a former U.S. president. Strawberry Banke does not have similar resources to hire multiple archaeologists and provide year-long internships. I acknowledge that the internship at Strawberry Banke is a mutually beneficial part of public archaeology, but recognize that constructive criticism can result in useful contributions to the museum and community. It would be ideal if the Strawberry Banke collections department had more resources and diverse voices contributing to the internship program.

### Archaeology Camp

Every three years, the education department collaborates with the collections department to host an archaeology camp for 10–13 year olds. Aside from learning basic excavation skills, the campers are exposed to the investigation skills that archaeologists use in a museum context. This unique educational opportunity provides an alternative teaching method for young students who have not been

introduced to the historical archaeology process. Basic investigative skills include using historical documents to research a site, making assumptions about excavation locations around the site, performing a mock dig, cleaning and mending artifacts, and gathering information and processing it for interpretation. They learn the importance of teamwork and collaboration throughout the entire process, as exemplified and demonstrated by the staff members of both departments. This aspect of the camp was an especially important educational tool for young students, since it teaches them how open and cooperative work is essential in archaeology (Donison 2017).

Along with learning field skills, the campers are also engaged with the museum archaeologist in an anthropological conversation about the meaning of culture. Most students around their age rarely engage in conversations about subjectivity in the present and past. All the campers were interested in what Martin discussed with them, and this facilitated their mock preliminary research about the Rider-Wood site. For example, when they excavated unknown artifacts from their small excavation units, there were several discussions about how the past residents could have used the objects differently than the way they are used today. This pedagogical approach to Strawberry Banke's camp facilitated important conversations on the implications of archaeological research for young students.

The collaborative work involved in the archaeology camp enables a holistic approach toward the discipline and a more successful learning process. By performing mock investigative research, the campers see the teamwork between the museum curators and archaeologist as they examine historical documents from the collections building. The joint effort between the education department and archaeologist especially helps to instruct the campers as they engage with basic archaeological skills and theories. I saw the different departments' ability to relate complicated

themes and methods to an audience of children and, when I assisted, I could model my own teaching based on my observations. I also noticed that this camp program instructed both the campers and education staff who did not have prior archaeological knowledge. Public archaeology in this context went beyond just presenting information to the campers, since other staff members learned about archaeology to help apply it to this public program.

It could be argued that, to improve children's experience of public archaeology, they should be allowed to participate in some aspect of the actual excavation. This might require the involvement of a parent or guardian, but could eventually stimulate more interest in the field and a better connection to uncovered artifacts. Other historic house museums, like the Fairfield Foundation, host multiple free dig days for children and the public (David Brown 2020, pers. comm.). These are intended to motivate the community's interest and involvement in archaeology

using real sites. Although it would be beneficial to the community interested in Strawberry Banke's history, it is less feasible for the museum to host multiple public events like these. Even if free public-dig days have the potential to educate and build ties in the community, there are staffing limitations and there is not a year-round active excavation. However, the museum might consider ways to include children whose parents cannot afford summer camps, offering opportunities to demographics beyond the participants in the archaeology camp in 2017.

### Archaeological Field Schools

Strawbery Banke's summer field schools are a significant part of its commitment to community engagement because they promote public archaeology with a focus on Portsmouth's history. The participants learn the importance of public archaeology in a museum setting and practice it by engaging with visitors. The field school emphasizes the



Figure 1. A field-school student informing visitors about the Penhallow House excavation. (Photo by Elizabeth M. Donison, 2017.)

importance of Strawberry Banke's dynamic history while the students learn and converse about the multifaceted lives of the neighborhood's past residents. The museum is dedicated to promoting accurate restorations and interpretations, and the archaeological field school is an important contributor to the museum's mission of ongoing preservation (Charles 2010). Aside from educating the various high-school students, university students, and adults involved in the annual field schools, the public nature of the excavation sparks conversations and insights from curious museum visitors (FIG. 1). Many visitors were very interested in the project, and some mentioned that they did not know that archaeological excavations still happen in the area. Community engagement includes those that feel connected to any part of history, so encouraging students and visitors to converse can establish ties between their personal interests and Strawberry Banke. Although this is a more one-sided aspect of public archaeology, having brief conversations like these promotes awareness of ongoing archaeology and research at historical sites.

Another important aspect of the field school includes the readings assigned for group discussions. These articles reflect the collections department's goal of highlighting the stories of under-documented people in history, so they focus on topics like women's roles, children, enslaved and free people of African descent, and interpretive errors in recent archaeology (Franklin 1997; Gable and Handler 1996; Leone et al. 2005; Shackel 2001; Wheeler 1995; White 2008). The readings also highlight the local history of Portsmouth (Charles 2010; Wheeler 1995). This pedagogical approach uses critical reflection to challenge the field-school students' understandings of the past and present, and uses discussions to help them understand and explore the topics in depth. While I was the teaching assistant for these discussions, I realized that most of the students were not familiar with many of the topics, including critical theory in archaeology. This made these discussions even more



Figure 2. A field-school student with a recently recovered artifact. (Photo by Elizabeth M. Donison, 2017.)

important and applicable to Portsmouth's own history, since the students could debate contemporary archaeology's take on such topics as gender, Black history, indigenous history, immigrant history, and the associated potential issues with museum interpretation. For students working toward anthropology or archaeology degrees, this dialogue prepares them for their future academic careers. However, for the field-school students who were high schoolers or adults without an archaeological background, these relevant discourses provide information that they might not gain elsewhere. This was part of community engagement, because the goal of these discussions was to educate and create an inclusive environment for students to share their opinions.

Most New Hampshire residents do not continue their state history education after the fourth-grade curriculum, but the field school provides unique grounds to continue this exploration. The students that come from out

of state become part of the Portsmouth community when they relate to and learn about the neighborhood's history. The local students can apply their previous knowledge with a more critical eye and gain something from the histories often left out of school curricula.

Aside from theoretical approaches, students learn from more experienced archaeologists about excavation methodology and the importance of teamwork in the field. They learn to communicate with each other, often sharing their artifact finds and basic assumptions about the site with the entire team (Fig. 2). The internship allowed me to watch this collaboration from an outsider's perspective, even though I was usually alongside the field-school students offering advice. Overall, participating and helping to interpret the Penhallow House site was an opportunity for me to apply my course studies to an important part of Strawberry Banke's mission that promotes authentic representations of the neighborhood's history.

Inclusivity in field schools is an important part of community engagement, because it creates a space for those outside anthropology and history to participate and learn about archaeology. One beneficial aspect of the field school was that participants could choose to enroll for either two or four weeks. This enabled more adults and high schoolers to participate, since they often have other obligations during the summer. In this way, the shorter program is similar to the expedition programs that Montpelier hosts, where participants get a sense of archaeology without the pressure to participate in an excavation for a longer amount of time. However, I would have liked to have seen more Portsmouth community members participate, aside from the volunteers that were involved. It would have been especially nice to have seen more Black participants work on this specific excavation, since the Penhallow House's history is a part of the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail and will eventually be rehabilitated to include a furnished 1940s residence of a black Portsmouth Naval Shipyard foreman. The col-

lections department is working with black community leaders and descendant community members in Portsmouth for the exhibit, but their involvement with archaeology would undoubtedly have influenced the excavations.

Another way the field school has improved accessibility to the archaeology field school is through the support of an annual scholarship. Tom Lynch, who was a field-school student in 2015, offered to make an annual donation to the department earmarked for student tuition. The department selects recipients who are current students and has been able to fully or partially fund every student who has applied for the scholarship over the last five years (Alexandra Martin 2017, pers. comm.). By providing a scholarship for those that may not be able to afford field school tuition, the program becomes more inclusive. Within archaeology, inclusion itself is a struggle, and I hope that, in the future, community engagement at Strawberry Banke will continue to cultivate spaces for those who, historically, have not been involved in archaeology.

## Conclusion

The archaeology internship and the various public programs give the public an opportunity to care about Puddle Dock's dynamic history. Sheila Charles noted that the success of the museum's programs can be attributed to several factors, one being the "strong and varied community that has been involved in the research and preservation of the property and its recovered collection" (Charles 2010). Without museum archaeologists' emphasis on public involvement and education, the commitment to preservation and authentic interpretation would be artificial. If research and interpretation are for the public, then inviting critical reflection allows the interested community to understand Puddle Dock's history, question it, and reflect on its present societal impact.

This internship broadened my view of archaeology's ability to create relevant dialogues for the public, whether they are about local misconceptions concerning enslavement



or the religious implications of the Jewish *mikveh* excavated in 2014 (Martin [2022]). The collections department at Strawberry Banke provides the resources for archaeology students like myself to learn skills in the field and lab, but, most importantly, it involves a community from a variety of different backgrounds and religious affiliations. Public archaeology at Strawberry Banke is a two-way exchange wherein the community and the museum continuously shape and affect historical and contemporary knowledge. Acknowledging the community's concerns and opinions is essential for understanding which histories need to be elevated, such as the Penhallow House's connection with Portsmouth's mid-20th-century Black community. Looking back on my experiences at Strawberry Banke, I realize that, to meaningfully understand the past using archaeology, archaeologists must recognize the necessity of public voices in archaeology and continuously strive for better interpretation and inclusivity through community engagement.

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