



David A. Poirier and Kenneth L. Feder

Sharing the Past with the Present

Poster courtesy
Connecticut
Historical
Commission.

It is not that long ago that one of us heard the following perspective expressed at an archeology conference (where, not coincidentally, all of the attendees were either professional archeologists with higher degrees or graduate students): “Amateur participation in archeology is about as appropriate as amateur participation in dentistry.” The assertion was simple and clear; non-archeologists could not—and should not on any level—be involved in archeology. That was the exclusive purview of us knighted professionals.

Though perhaps at one time a widespread belief, almost certainly such a view has been largely abandoned by most professional archeologists. It should be clear by now that we are able to devote our careers and our lives to a profession that produces little more than knowledge because large numbers of non-archeologists think that this

knowledge is interesting—and they are willing to pay taxes and museum admissions, take courses, and purchase books in an attempt to share in that knowledge.

It is, therefore, self-defeating or even, in a disciplinary sense, suicidal to attempt to eliminate the public from the archeology that they support with their dollars and their fascination. A public-less archeology would survive about as long as would, for example, public art, if painters supping at the public trough refused to display their paintings to the taxpayers, arguing that the masses simply were too unsophisticated to appreciate the import of their creations. Try running that by the current U.S. Congress!

And, in fact, American archeology has undergone important changes in recent years. No longer are archeological sites the restricted intellectual province of the scientific community. To our credit,

archeologists have done far more than merely grudgingly accept public participation in archeology; most of us have embraced it. Instead of waiting for the public to knock on our doors meekly inquiring of us archeological brahmins to please share in our great wisdom, we often have taken the initiative and knocked on theirs, inviting them to come along with us on our intellectual odysseys to the human past. From the often haphazard lecture circuit, to well-funded and marvelously organized archeology weeks springing up all over the country; from the preparation and distribution of detailed curriculum materials to PBS documentaries; from living museums to open sessions at the SAAs; from actual tours to real places to virtual visits on the Internet, a truly “public” archeology has emerged—an archeology open and accessible to the public, not just paid for by them. Many of the most important and successful approaches to this new public archeology are presented in this issue of *CRM*.

For part of the history of our discipline, archeology survived because wealthy individuals wished to participate in great discoveries by writing the checks that allowed for these discoveries to take place. Today, archeology survives under far more egalitarian circumstances. Our discipline survives—and even thrives—because we have many friends in the public who recognize the importance of what we do, and like to be reminded of it. No discipline was ever hurt by cultivating too many interested friends. Perhaps we have finally figured out that we accomplish this goal simply by making what we do accessible to them.

We believe this new outward-looking perspective is critical to the future conservation and preservation of the nation’s diverse archeological heritage. Putting people first is vital if archeologists are to create an educated and caring constituency for protecting archeological sites. The past is dead; therefore, we must demonstrate and share its continued relevance to a diverse public in a meaningful way or witness further degradation of our fragile cultural heritage.

Most archeologists, whether academic or public servants, recognize that long-term preservation of the country’s archeological treasures will require both legislative foresight and educational creativity. Archeologists must reach out in a multi-

tude of ways to America’s diverse public to ensure the broadest possible exposure to and sharing of archeological insights on America’s past.

Scholar, Steward, Storyteller—these are the personalities which every archeologist must vigorously embrace if America’s past is to be professionally interpreted, skillfully managed, and meaningfully shared with the public. Education and public outreach must be increasingly sophisticated in order to successfully reach its intended audiences. Archeologists must exercise creativity and discover new and challenging approaches for accessing the technologically-enabled, visually-oriented public of the soon-to-be-present 21 st century.

Simultaneously, archeologists, land managers, and site interpreters must increase direct public accessibility to the nation’s sites and archeological data. Significant public participation in hands-on archeological activities, whether characterized as heritage tourism or leisure tourism, reflects American fascination for all aspects of archeological research. This increasing public interest in local heritage must be further enhanced by the archeological community for the mutual benefit of both the public and site preservation.

Archeologists should seek to improve their communication skills with the general public. Non-technical popular reports and educational materials must be recognized as an integral aspect of all archeological research projects. The academic and bureaucratic realms of American archeology must share the responsibility for providing the various “publics” with a collective appreciation for and understanding of all aspects of archeology, particularly the significance of a conservation ethic for archeological resources.

David A. Poirier is Staff Archeologist and Environmental Review Coordinator with the Connecticut Historical Commission (State Historic Preservation Office).

Kenneth L. Feder is a professor of anthropology at Central Connecticut State University.

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