

DISTILLING THE PAST: GEORGE WASHINGTON'S 18TH-CENTURY WHISKEY DISTILLERY FROM EXCAVATION TO RECONSTRUCTION

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This excellent group of papers is situated within the long history of historical archaeology and its beginnings in restoration archaeology. The pioneering work of early archaeologists at sites like Mount Vernon, the Saugus Iron Works, Williamsburg, and Jamestown, formed the basis of our discipline, but was quickly and thoroughly rejected as historical archaeology sought to find a home within anthropological archaeology. The rhetoric was clear and often venomous—no longer would historical archaeology be in servitude to other disciplines like history and architecture. This strong position set restoration and reconstruction archaeology against an imagined ideal of pure theoretical research structured within an anthropological framework. As such, it relegated restoration archaeology in the minds of many to a sort of second class status. Yet, as we have heard today and gleaned from other projects at Mount Vernon, Colonial Williamsburg and elsewhere, historical archaeology has an important and central place in the restoration process, one that addresses significant research issues in innovative ways.

The differences between the restoration and reconstruction of old and in the present can be both glaring and subtle. For some, there is still a level of particularism linked with this type of project that is troubling. However, the Mount Vernon distillery

project is distinguished by its broad multi-disciplinary research approach, and by the integration of this plan into the larger interpretive scheme for the site. The work engages issues ranging from entrepreneurship and mercantilism to the history of technology and the central place of enslaved African labor in this industrial operation.

Dennis Pogue's paper does a fine job of contextualizing the site in terms of Washington's social, political, and economic agendas, and he carries this out to the regional system as well. This is a fascinating yet largely untold story about a man who we might suspect has been so thoroughly studied that there is nothing new to learn. There has always been that bit about Washington moving to grain cultivation, but little about the true level of diversification that he sought and achieved. Symbolically, we associate wheat with the "heartland" of America: Wonder Bread, apple pie, and Chevrolet, and this symbology has been extended, of course, to George Washington. Dennis shows us that the true nature of Washington's complex enterprise was one that seems more akin to corporate models with diverse brands, like General Foods, than to the simple myths of Washington and his place in the plantation economy of Virginia that are standard fare. Among Washington's underlying motives were increasing his cash flow and decreasing his dependence on slave labor, a position, Dennis notes, that was affected by his career as the leader of the nation. A larger historical question in my mind in terms of contextualizing this site, drawing here on a quote that Dennis read "to a Sale of the Whisky there can be no doubt if the quantity was ten times as much..." is the story of alcohol consumption in Colonial American society. I will return to this a bit later, but one hopes that this will come out more in later research and interpretation to the public.

The second paper by Gardiner Hallock and Laura Seifert gathers and distills the essence of a marvelous collection of documents that provide an unprecedented level of information on the construction and operation of the site. Like their archaeological colleagues, the authors sift the sources to reconstruct the principal buildings of the distillery complex. Along with contemporary sources, they use distilling manuals and architectural prototypes, and draw on the archaeological evidence to develop a nuanced understanding of how this industrial site functioned.

Eleanor Breen's excellent paper on the archaeological excavations at the site establishes the truly industrial nature of the enterprise - this was no home brewing setup! Eleanor and her colleagues structured the work within an industrial archaeology framework that utilizes "feature systems" to elucidate the various technical processes in the production of whiskey. She discusses four systems, the distillation complex, mashing and germination, distillation, and the industrial household, in terms of various distilling manuals and specific archaeological features. The primary evidence focuses on the actual whiskey making process and less on the household, thus not too much can be said of the distillers and laborers at this time (although more work is clearly planned).

The first three papers lay out the history, architecture, and archaeology in a clear and compelling manner. One that makes it obvious that they have the goods, as it were, in terms of the reconstruction and its interpretation. The separate presentation of these three streams of evidence detracts a bit from the level of sharing and synthesizing that I know my colleagues have been engaged in for oh these many years. A lack of

cooperation between researchers in various disciplines has been a hallmark and downfall of many previous restoration projects. While I know that these folks are working closely together, I am more than a bit curious (and may ask them to speak to this in a minute) about the intersection of their research with the restoration architects who will design the final structure. This doesn't come out in the papers, and my guess is that it is still ongoing. It is clear to me that this is a critical and often problematic point in the reconstruction process. In one email to me, Esther noted that "they had been meeting with historical architects all day" and I can't help but wonder about these discussions. In the best of worlds these meetings would provide an equal seat at the table for all players and be a negotiation of sorts based on both the evidence derived through careful research and the realities of constructing a building open to the public. In days of old, this is where the battle lines were drawn and it seems that the architects more often than not held the day! It will be interesting to see how the uneven cobbled floor that Eleanor showed us will end up being interpreted and integrated into the final structure? Of course, the ultimate test of this entire process will be the finished reconstruction. If the participants are not already doing so, I would encourage them to tape record their meetings, particularly with the reconstruction architects, or at least to produce copious minutes. The discussions in these meetings are an important part of the process and will be of great interest to future researchers.

Kim Christensen's paper nicely lays out the issues of funding sources, educational programs, and the public. As she notes, the participation of the Distilled Spirits Council makes a potentially controversial project even touchier. The project has

many positive goals: learning about and interpreting an 18th-century distillery, examining Washington's entrepreneurial endeavors, adding to Mount Vernon's interpretation of slave life, and explaining the research process (not just the archaeology) to the public. With the media focusing on the Washington/ alcohol connection, the staff developed several programs to turn the attention of visitors toward other learning outcomes. In addition to a popular website, they used an innovative approach to educate the media and orient them to the project and project goals. A way to hook the media on the organization's agenda for the site.

While the funding group has been "remarkably hands-off," as Kim notes, they clearly have an agenda with this project: to gain a close link with an American icon. The project they write "shows that from the earliest colonial times, spirits were an important part of a normal, healthy lifestyle." Wow! Now there is a statement that could engage some interesting and important dialogue—I imagine some heated discussions around the lunchroom tables at the Mount Vernon archaeology department. But we shouldn't be surprised that corporations or trade associations have agendas—the use of history in corporate America is not new (Michael Wallace has called it the "Corporate Roots" movement) and has figured in some very important marketing campaigns. An interesting parallel to the statement by the Distilled Spirits Council is one by the American Iron and Steel Institute about the Saugus Iron Works restoration from the 1950s: the restoration is," they write, "a reminder of the great advances which the iron and steel industry has made and will continue to make. Helping to provide the sinews of our national security and the basis for our unmatched standard of living." Interestingly,

these corporate links to the past fade fast and don't seem to survive the restorations and reconstructions themselves. An inquiry on Saugus to the American Iron and Steel Institute, during my recent research, revealed that their part in the restoration was virtually unknown by current staff.

One has to be careful of being too cynical about the motives of the funding organization, however, as Mount Vernon clearly couldn't have done the project without the sponsorship of the Distilled Spirits Council. These sponsors have made possible an important research and education project at a very important site. Yet, the symposium participants and the Mount Vernon staff have clearly had to walk a fine line in working with the sponsor, although for the most part it reads as a generally positive experience so far.

In the final paper, Esther White makes it clear that what has stifled our knowledge and appreciation of Washington's entrepreneurial achievements before now is the product itself, alcohol. The "disappearance" of the distillery and celebration of the gristmill says it all, and links back to the heartland symbol of wheat cultivation. From the temperance movement of the 19th century to the flow of spirits during the roaring twenties to Prohibition, we as a nation have had an interesting love hate relationship with spirituous drink. I will be very interested to see the degree to which the interpretation at the distillery and exhibit will articulate with this important dialogue in American culture. I can't help but think, however, that this interpretive direction might not be a bit problematic for both the Mount Vernon organization and the sponsors. For example, I am imaging an exhibit that uses the distillery to frame a discussion about

alcohol in colonial society, one that could articulate easily with the present. A literature already exists on this subject from Charles Sydnor's (1952) *Gentlemen Freeholders* with its chapter "Swilling the Planters with Bumbo" to David Conroy's (1995) recent *In Public Houses: Drink and the Revolution of Authority in Colonial Massachusetts*. I am thinking here in particular of the wonderful exhibit at the Valentine Museum in Richmond, several years ago, titled "Up in Smoke" that bravely tackled historical and contemporary issues of tobacco and smoking. This type of exhibit may already be in the works and I know that it has certainly occurred to the presenters—I hope that this is one of the "more complex issues" for interpretation that Esther was talking about at the end of her paper. Perhaps we can get them to comment on this as well. Along these lines, I am also a bit troubled about omitting the discussion of alcohol from the interpretation of the building to children. Again, there is an important lesson in this that it seems to me we need to tell. Yet, clearly it is a very controversial and potentially inflammatory issue, particularly in the current political climate just up the road from Mount Vernon, one that could easily get out of control and do real damage to the organization and its larger mission.

In the final analysis, the distillery project has much to offer and is the type of reconstruction project that we should be undertaking. While some scholars question the use of reconstructions for reasons of site preservation and historical accuracy, they are clearly very popular with the public and are potent interpretive devices. The sense of industrial space and place that the distillery and gristmill complex will convey is very powerful. The ability to tell the story of Washington as entrepreneur will be significantly enhanced by this physical reconstruction. The careful and thoughtful approach to reconstruction taken by Mount Vernon, (Esther mentioned the long term discussions

about the blacksmith shop reconstruction - which she details in John Jameson's (2003) new book "The Reconstructed Past," the detailed historical, architectural, and archaeological studies that we have heard about today, previous excavations at the site, and the juxtaposition of the site with the gristmill, itself a restoration of a 1930's reconstruction), all balance concerns about site preservation and speak in favor of the reconstructed distillery. The research and interpretive value of this project is real and goes beyond Mount Vernon and George Washington. Thanks to the presenters for this interesting case study in reconstruction - it is a project that we will certainly hear more about in the future.

References

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