

**Tourists, Schoolchildren, and Liquor Lobbyists:
The Various Publics of the Mount Vernon Distillery Site**

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Abstract: By virtue of its affiliation with the Mount Vernon Estate, the site of George Washington's Distillery is uniquely poised to reach a number of different "publics". Archaeological findings and current research are disseminated to the public through on-site interpretation, as well as educational and volunteer programs. Additionally, the Distillery project's funding by the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States (DISCUS) has added a new dimension to the site's public audience. This paper examines the various audiences of the Distillery site, strategies for public education used, and the issues involved with the private sponsorship of archaeological research.

Mount Vernon's Distillery site, as a part of the greater Mount Vernon property, is typical of many of the excavations undertaken at historic venues open to the public in terms of its public focus. The site is understood to have a variety of audiences, including tourists and school groups, and approaches to reach and educate these publics have been developed over the years. The sponsorship of the excavations and eventual reconstruction of the building by the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States (or, DISCUS), however, has imparted this project with two audiences not previously dealt with on such a large scale – the media drawn into the project by the DISCUS-Mount Vernon association, and subsequently, the public drawn into the project by the media coverage. This partnership has been an interesting negotiation of goals and expectations, and ultimately, expanded our conception of "the public(s)" to which we are interpreting our archaeological research.

History of the Distillery Project

In 1995, the Commonwealth of Virginia approached the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association regarding transferring the land parcel, owned and operated by Virginia as a state park, that was the site of George Washington's eighteenth-century Gristmill Complex – the industrial nucleus of the plantation. The park contained 1932 reconstructions of Washington's gristmill and miller's cottage, and the site of the 1797 whiskey distillery. Although the state had periodically approached Mount Vernon about transferring this land since the 1930s, it was not until an evolution in the interpretive interests of the Mount Vernon Estate had occurred that the idea was welcomed. By this time, a general shift in the interpretive focus on George Washington had taken place, from his traditional image as a statesman and founding father, to including his primary career as a farmer and entrepreneur. Given this shift in interpreting Washington's life, the acquisition of the state property containing the gristmill and distillery – examples of Washington's diversification of plantation products - was seen as a chance to help further this goal. From an archaeological standpoint, the presence of the distillery site was also seen as a benefit to gaining this property.

In 1997, a comprehensive archaeological survey was conducted of all 6.5 acres of the property, and the site of the distillery was verified. Several test units were excavated as part of the survey, and portions of the distillery's intact foundation base and other features were uncovered. Mount Vernon archaeologists realized that the distillery site had the potential to add greatly to the interpretive focus on Washington as an entrepreneur, as well as contribute to knowledge of early American industry. If enough information could be gathered from both documentary and archaeological

evidence to enable a reconstruction of the building, it could add to Mount Vernon's presentation of Washington's plantation and the diverse pursuits carried out within it.

The problem, however, was funding – the commitment of time and resources required in order to undertake a comprehensive excavation of this large building site was beyond the scope of previous projects undertaken by Mount Vernon archaeologists. The usual backing of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association and small external funding sources would not be enough. It was decided that new outside funding was necessary, and excavations were conducted in 1999 and 2000 to further assess the potential of the site, as well as provide more information to bolster our proposal to prospective funders.

Ongoing research on distilleries in the United States had established contacts with Brown-Forman Distillers, owners of the National Historic Landmark Labrot & Graham Distillery in Versailles, Kentucky. While Brown-Forman did not have the financial means to support the excavations itself, they contacted the distilling trade association –the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States – on our behalf. DISCUS found the Mount Vernon distillery research proposal compelling, and agreed to provide 1.2 million dollars in funding for the project, including the excavation, research, and reconstruction of the building, and began by funding the 2001 field season. Their ultimate interest lies in the planned reconstruction, as it will be the only site that interprets eighteenth-century distilling processes in the country. In the meantime, they are interested in gaining media exposure of their partnership with Mount Vernon, and to this end, have held various press events since the partnership was formed in 2001.

In May of 2001, the commencement of DISCUS' funding of the project was celebrated in a 'groundbreaking' of the distillery site. This event included the arrival of barrels of liquor from DISCUS' member companies, floated down the Potomac and offloaded at Mount Vernon by actors in period costume (including one of our archaeologists), under the watchful eye of George Washington himself.

The barrels of whiskey, bourbon, and rum were stored at Mount Vernon until October 2002, when they were tapped, tasted, and bottled with labels commemorating Washington's distillery. That evening, the bottles were auctioned off at a gala dinner given on the east lawn of Mount Vernon overlooking the Potomac. The money raised from the auction by DISCUS is going to the 'George Washington as Entrepreneur' gallery of the new Mount Vernon Education Center now in its final planning stages.

In September of this year, a replica of an eighteenth-century pot still in the Smithsonian collection, made for Mount Vernon, was unveiled at the Kentucky Bourbon Festival in Bardstown, Kentucky. In October, Master Distillers from Jim Beam, Maker's Mark, Virginia Gentleman, and Brown-Forman fired it up, only yards from the ongoing excavations at the site. Commemorative bottles of product were once again auctioned off that evening to benefit the planned education center.

The partnership between Mount Vernon and DISCUS has benefited both parties in various ways. Mount Vernon archaeologists have received the funding necessary to undertake this large-scale excavation and reconstruct the building, while the funding organization itself has been remarkably hands-off (except for holding the press events). We have gained from the coverage generated by these events, which has expanded the reach of Mount Vernon beyond its usual venues. DISCUS has gained from the

association with the sober image of one of our founding fathers – as President Peter Cressey put it in one publication, quote, “It shows that from the earliest colonial times, spirits were an important part of a normal, healthy lifestyle” unquote. While the various events showcasing the association have served to increase visibility of both DISCUS and the project, the tone of exposure has not always been what Mount Vernon archaeologists expected or wanted. Ultimately, this experience has been interesting for those of us at Mount Vernon, as it has required us to examine the ways in which we educate the public about archaeology, and devise solutions to better convey our message.

Educating the Public

The key here is reaction – reaction by the public to our excavations. As with all of Mount Vernon’s other archaeological projects, a large public archaeology component is built into the distillery excavations, which combines signage and informal interpretation by archaeologists at the site. While we as archaeologists become used to the jokes of site visitors about finding buried treasure, dinosaurs, etc., our particular site typically elicits comments along the lines of “Hey – where are you giving out the samples?” Likewise, in the early print and television coverage given the project as a result of DISCUS-organized media events, we had received, in the immortal words of Rodney Dangerfield, ‘no respect.’ The tone of reaction could best be summed up as ‘George Washington and alcohol – tee hee.’

Understandably, this was not the sort of reaction that we had aimed for. It typically overshadowed the actual scope of the archaeological and documentary research process, and we found it difficult to relay the significant aspects of this project

to the public – the fact that this is one of the earliest example of commercial distilling in the United States, and represented an innovative means of diversifying plantation production. Additionally, this site can add to Mount Vernon’s interpretation of slave life, as the majority of the workers who operated and likely lived in this building were young male slaves. This problem prompted us to examine our means of reaching the various audiences of our project, and devise new ways of getting our message across.

The primary issue, we found, was the split between on-site and off-site audiences. While we can easily control the information being presented to visitors at the site itself, the much broader group of people that learn of the project through media coverage – and may never actually visit the site – was considerably harder to get a handle on.

On-Site Interpretation

In dealing with interpretation to our on-site visitors, our tact has not really changed. Given that we are already having a face-to-face conversation, we can acknowledge the amusing connection of Washington and whiskey, and then direct interpretation toward the history of the site, archaeological methodology, and our findings. Activities specifically geared toward families visiting the site, such as the “Artifact Bingo” game designed by intern Gwyneth Maccubbin for Archaeology Month, direct focus to broader archaeological concepts and the information that can be gained from such research.

A large part of Mount Vernon’s annual attendance is school groups, and the estate’s Education Department has developed programs catering to this population. The lesson involving archaeology, entitled “Digging Through Time: Archaeology at

George Washington's Gristmill," takes place at the distillery site as well as inside the gristmill. Designed for fourth through sixth graders, relating the nature of the distillery's function within the lesson was of concern to the Education Department. Mount Vernon, in sum, does not want to be in the business of educating schoolchildren about liquor. The lesson, then, has been tailored to relate the processes and tools of archaeological research to school groups as a way of learning about the past, and the specifics of the building we are uncovering at the distillery site are more or less glossed over. This way, the site serves as an example of the archaeological methodology we discuss while not broaching the messy subject of alcohol consumption.

However, as the project includes plans to reconstruct the distillery building within the next few years, the question of how to interpret the site to school groups is one that will need to be confronted. The Education Department's plan currently involves incorporating the site into the existing theme of interpretation of Washington as an entrepreneur. It will focus on the site's significance as an example of early American industry and plantation diversification, while again glossing over the nature of the product and the issue of alcohol consumption.

Off-Site Interpretation

As mentioned before, the various events held by DISCUS and Mount Vernon for the media generated a good deal of coverage of the project, but the tone of that early coverage was not what we wanted. The problem was that the amusement with the idea of Washington being associated with alcohol took precedence over the (serious) research being undertaken. As public archaeology and education are critical components of archaeology done at Mount Vernon, getting greater visibility for the

project was a good thing – but the nature of the visibility, for the most part, was not. As DISCUS’ desire was simply for media attention to its association with the image of George Washington, they were typically uncritical of the *tone* of publicity given to the project. Mount Vernon archaeologists, however, wanted to bring the focus back to the research being conducted, while still utilizing the ‘hook’ provided by the association of Washington and alcohol to spark initial interest. Two different projects were undertaken this summer with the intention of accomplishing this.

“Distilling the Past”

The first undertaking was visualized as a form of reaching the public that wasn’t able to actually visit the site first-hand. The idea of producing an internet weblog – where we could give periodic updates on our progress in the field, summarize the pertinent historical documentation, and generally bring the public into our process of research—was proposed for the 2003 field season. This would dovetail nicely with our summer internship program, which itself included a large public archaeology component, and was seen as a means of providing training for archaeologists at the beginning of their careers in this type of public-centered archaeology.

Somewhat serendipitously, Eric Powell, Associate Editor of Archaeology Magazine, contacted us in March regarding being the subject of one of their online “Interactive Digs.” Since this opportunity would allow us to do even more than a weblog, and would reach more people due to its affiliation with the magazine, we eagerly accepted their offer. Our Interactive Dig, entitled “Distilling the Past,” was active from April of this year until the end of November, and incorporated an approachable, but professional tone. The website included historical background on the site, weekly reports from the field,

information on archaeological methodology, and staff bios. Additionally, the site included a message board where visitors in cyberspace could pose questions to staff members. Writing for this site forced us all to brush up on, and in some cases learn to, write to a public audience, and, most importantly, allowed us to control the type of content being presented to visitors. The site is no longer being updated, as the field season has finished, but it is still accessible online. According to the site's webmaster, the site averaged about 2400 hits per month.

Archaeology Boot Camp

The second undertaking of this summer was a field school for media members held in June. While it was a press event organized with DISCUS, the central focus was on the archaeological research being undertaken, rather than simply the association of DISCUS with Mount Vernon.

Ten journalists – from newspapers, magazines, radio, and television networks such as Reuters news service, American History, BusinessWeek, NPR, and CNN - came to Mount Vernon for two days, and underwent an intensive orientation to the Mount Vernon Estate, the distillery project, and archaeological methodology. Executive Director of Mount Vernon James Rees first gave the group a tour of the Estate. Associate Director of Preservation Dennis Pogue then gave a dinner lecture on how we use archaeological and historical research to provide information for interpretation and restoration on the property. The following morning, Director of Archaeology Esther White gave an 'Archaeology 101' orientation, and the field school participants then joined the crew out at the Distillery site to partake in hands-on experience excavating. Afterwards, they were given a tour of the archaeology lab and shown what processing

of finds occurs after excavation. The one non-archaeological event was a whiskey tasting presided over by Jimmy Russell, the Master Distiller of Wild Turkey.

By all accounts, this event was a success. In the words of one staff archaeologist, we succeeded in, quote, 'slip[ping] some information into their booze while they weren't looking,' unquote. The Reuters News Service article that came out of the field school ran in many newspapers and on websites across the country, and the CNN piece on the project was subsequently picked up by news stations nationwide. This created a domino effect, and stories were subsequently run on Fox Cable News, 'As It Happens' on Canadian National Radio, and 'Here & Now' on Boston Public Radio, as well as other national radio stations and in news articles as far away as China and Russia. In addition to the benefit of this extensive coverage, the content of such coverage was of a much higher quality than that previous to the field school. For the most part, stories included a good amount of historical background, and a general appreciation for the archaeological research being conducted. One journalist, writing for BusinessWeek, said, quote, "I had the feeling of literally sifting little bits of history through my fingers," unquote. This was much better than the tangential place given to the archaeological research in stories before the field school.

Discussion

Our experience speaks to the broader problem within the field of archaeology of relating our work to the public. While it is now generally agreed within the discipline that we need to step outside of the profession and share our process and results with non-professionals, exactly *how* to undertake this task effectively is not always obvious. There can be problems of translation between the typically dry, jargon-laden writing of

research reports, and a product that will interest non-archaeologists without ‘dumbing it down.’ In our case, while we had the ‘hook’ of George Washington and alcohol to generate initial interest in our research, the hook was not effectively utilized to our benefit by media outlets. Our solution has been to, when possible, direct off-site outreach ourselves – as in the case of the online interactive dig – and shift our focus to also include educating the middleman – namely, journalists – when direct control is not possible. In the end, our realization of the scope of the audiences of our project has expanded.

Conclusions

What, then can be learned from this experience? In our case, we found that our partnership with DISCUS on the distillery project has had considerable benefits, through funding and media coverage of the project, while the nature of that coverage was something that we needed to exert more control over in order to meet our needs. We found that, in order to direct the knowledge of the public more favorably toward our ends, we needed to both increase our public archaeology efforts and think of new ways of reaching the public. This culminated in the online interactive dig and our media field school. While public archaeology has been an integral part of archaeological research at Mount Vernon since the late 1980s, this project – and our partnership with DISCUS – has brought us to rework our notion of public archaeology and expand our view of ‘the public.’ We now focus on both on-site *and* off-site audiences to a greater extent, and this has led us to create ‘better’ means of interpretation.