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Printing the Past to Engage the Public

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Abstract

Public involvement and engagement is a key aspect of George Washington's Boyhood Home at Ferry Farm near Fredericksburg, Virginia. Ferry Farm is a public archaeology site that allows volunteers and the public to participate in the actual field research. Three dimensional printed artifacts provided through a partnership with the Virtual Curation Lab at VCU help non-archaeologists understand the kind of artifacts found previously at the site. The ability for physical models to be used in the field allows the public to connect with the past inhabitants of the landscape. Creating this connection and involving the public in the history of their community helps raise people's awareness of the importance of cultural heritage locations such as George Washington's Boyhood Home.

Brief History of Ferry Farm

George Washington occupied Ferry Farm between 1738 and 1754. He spent much of his childhood there along with his mother, Mary Ball Washington, and her four other children. A non-profit organization, the George Washington Foundation, controls the property and directs the research surrounding George Washington's boyhood home (Brown and Galke 1-2). In 2008 it was announced that through archaeological excavation the location of the Washington house had been identified. The focus of archaeological excavation at the site has now shifted from understanding the main structure of the Washington home to recognizing the location of other buildings from the Washington era and to further understand the activity patterns from that time (Brown and Galke 3-4).



On July 4th, 2013 a George Washington reenactor stands in front of the Surveyor's Shed at Ferry Farm, George Washington's Boyhood Home, for a flag retirement ceremony. Photo courtesy of Ashley McCustion.

Brief History of Ferry Farm (cont.)

Ferry Farm is located along the Rappahannock River in Stafford County, Virginia. Because of its ideal location, the history of the site surpasses the Washington era. Evidence for American Indian inhabitation has been found at Ferry Farm. Through excavation Clovis projectile points have been found dating the earliest human occupation of Ferry Farm to at least 10,000 years ago (Brown and Galke 1). Colonial occupation prior to the Washington's has been noted and discovered as well. After the Washington era the site can be traced through the historical record. It was a significant site for the Battle of Fredericksburg during the Civil War as Union troops camped at Ferry Farm and associated the location with the Washington's (Brown and Galke 2).



Assistant field director Eric Larsen explains the history of the site to two children while screening excavated soil on July 4th, 2013. Photo courtesy of Bernard Means.

Public Archaeology

Ferry Farm is a public archaeology site. The main objective of the George Washington Foundation is to allow the public to have a better understanding of the adolescent life of America's first president. Not limiting the archaeological record solely to the Washington era, artifacts from the earliest occupation of the site to the 20th Century have been found. Sharing these artifacts and the excavation process allows the public to further engage with the history of the site. The excavation process in the field is open to visitors with volunteer opportunities available. Guests are welcome to assist staff in screening dirt and searching for artifacts allowing them to help discover the Washington's past.

Printed Artifacts

Through a partnership with the Virtual Curation Laboratory at Virginia Commonwealth University, artifacts excavated from Ferry Farm have been scanned and three-dimensionally printed. Members of the VCL have used NextEngine software, a MakerBot 3D printer, and other various programs to create three-dimensional animations and printed plastic artifacts. The animations are helpful in a classroom or laboratory setting. They can also be used to promote site findings online; however the printed plastic artifacts prove to be the most useful in the field at this time.

The plastic artifacts printed at the VCL are helpful in a field setting for a multitude of reasons. When interacting with the public at a public archaeology site it would be useful to have artifacts to share to help demonstrate abstract ideas and allow for a more clear understanding of obscure objects. The problem with having actual artifacts in the field is mainly their fragility and the opportunity for them to be lost or stolen. Additional study of artifacts occurs through lab work further limiting the possibility of artifacts as teaching aids in the field. Three-dimensionally printed plastic artifacts remove these problems. These artifacts are lightweight, more difficult to break, easily replaceable, and accessible to the public at George Washington's Ferry Farm. Visitors can now hold 3D replications of artifacts from Washington's era or American Indian inhabitation or Civil War occupation. It makes the history of the site more accessible to the public which for a non-profit such as the George Washington Foundation key to its future.



A comparison of a Masonic pipe found at Ferry Farm. The left is the 3D printed replication; the right is the artifact. Photo courtesy of Bernard Means.

For more information on Ferry Farm visit:
http://www.kenmore.org/ff_home.html

For more information on the Virtual Curation Laboratory visit:
<http://vcuarchaeology3d.wordpress.com/>

Works Cited:
Brown, Dale K., Galke, Laura J. "Chapter 1. Ferry Farm History." *Archaeology at George Washington's Boyhood Home: A Field Manual for the Ferry Farm Archaeological Site 44S174*. 2013. Field Manual. George Washington Foundation. Fredericksburg, Virginia. 2013. Print.