



# Courting the Public

*Well-planned PR Pays Off  
for Archaeologists in Delaware*

by Kevin Cunningham, Diane Halsall, and Michael Petraglia

Archaeologist John Rutherford guides students through a tour of the Hickory Bluff excavation in Dover, as part of a carefully planned public relations campaign.

**T**hey came in trickles and streams to the Hickory Bluff dig in Dover, Delaware – school kids, Boy and Girl Scouts, parents, retirees, homemakers, politicians, reporters. They toured the pre-Columbian site, talked to archaeologists and even tried their hand at excavation.

Thousands of planned and unplanned visitors worked at least briefly during the 10-month project, and most went home as enthusiastic fans of the past and of our efforts to preserve it.

Archaeological sites contain information about our collective heritage as a people, community, and country. When people, young or old, understand this, they develop a sense of ownership and responsibility. By demonstrating that visitors/volun-

teers can be an important part of uncovering this heritage, archaeologists empower the public with an active interest in the past. Allowing them to excavate in a supervised, hands-on manner, and to offer their interpretations, solidifies this relationship. People come to care about the site.

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tions. In Delaware, we've elevated it to a carefully planned and integral part of our work.

Archaeology fascinates the public: People want to know what archaeologists are finding in their neighborhoods and who lived long ago on the place they call home.

Tapping into that fascination with a broad-based public outreach program can accomplish much more than just giving folks a nifty trip to an archaeological site. An informed

appreciation for the past among the public, the press and government officials can translate into greater support for the tax dollars that finance so much archaeological research in the United States.

Federal and state transportation agencies are the number-one sponsors of American archaeology. Throughout the country, these agencies routinely hire professionals to study planned roadways for cultural resources before bulldozers plow over the ancient evidence.

Delaware is no exception. Backed by cultural-preservation laws, the state Department of Transportation over the past 20 years has supported hundreds of archaeological surveys that located and preserved or excavated thousands of prehistoric sites. Most sites are avoided or protected, while those facing imminent destruction are excavated. Without such active official support, much of Delaware's past would disappear, as in some

other states, beneath roadways, shopping malls, and subdivisions.

Delaware, one of the smallest states, has witnessed some of the largest-scale excavations of prehistoric sites in the country. These wide-

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ranging excavations help us track the changing cultures through the course of prehistory, from mobile, hunter-gatherers to semi-sedentary groups that added cultivated crops to their diets.

Incorporating public education into these archaeological undertakings has been going on for years at

the Delaware Department of Transportation, and the media from the beginning have been of enormous help in spreading the word that the past is worth preserving.

For most people, archaeology means little more than the pyramids and mummies they see on television. Few Delaware residents are aware of the wealth of archaeological evidence in their state, and when they learn of it – on local radio or television, in newspapers or magazines – their interest is piqued.

The recent Hickory Bluff excavation is an example of the effort. Major excavations were performed for 10 months at the five-acre site on the east bank of the St. Jones River in the capital city of Dover. More than 100,000 artifacts were recovered and 300 cooking hearths, pits, and possible residences were excavated, with a probable age of about 6,000 years ago.

Building on local, regional and national models, we designed the successful public outreach campaign for the Hickory Bluff site to include three primary initiatives, each one feeding into and branching out from the others.

The first initiative involved dispatching archaeologists to speak at schools, scouting events, career fairs, senior centers, and Native American gatherings. These visits not only educated people about archaeology, but also advertised the site.

Then the public was invited to visit and even dig at the site, which was opened to the public daily. A desig-

**A Delaware archaeologist plots the location of artifacts excavated at the Silo Pit at the Lums Pond pre-Columbian site. The dig, which dates to about 850 B.C., has been popular with the public.**





Archaeologist Joelle Browning gives school-children their first taste of archaeology at the Lums Pond site, where older students (bottom) also work at the excavation. Thousands of visitor/volunteers sampled the archaeological process as part of Delaware's popular outreach program.

nated greeter, equipped with an interactive site tour, was always present during visiting hours.

After a press release was distributed early in the public campaign, the site was continually visited by print and broadcast reporters who spread the word statewide.

For the third initiative, brochures, educational activities, bulletins, interactive learning tools, and other easily understood materials were developed for different age groups and interest levels. They were distributed at almost every forum imaginable.

At the Hickory Bluff site, visits by school and other groups, as well as unscheduled drop-ins, were a regular occurrence. A similar protocol was followed with all of them. A colorful, interactive display was erected close to the site entrance, giving visitors an obvious place to convene. Site orientations of 15 to 20 minutes were presented there by a designated archaeologist. Field archaeologists volunteered for this assignment and rotated the responsibility.

The display area included a representative sample of artifacts visitors might encounter. The artifacts were displayed in secured cases, with the designated archaeologist responsible

for keeping a continual eye on them.

An effective way to educate visitors to the importance of exercising great care at the site is to explain the nature of "context." Simple analogies help the uninitiated capture the meaning: for example, compare the locations of artifacts to evidence at a crime scene, such as footprints and a smoking gun. If the evidence was moved or hidden, the detectives will have a hard time figuring out what really happened.

A talk on safety was delivered at the end of the orientation so it would remain fresh in the minds of visitors, particularly young people. Visitors were instructed not to run, never to enter a unit unless invited by an archaeologist, and never to attempt to use a tool they had not been asked to use.

It is always important to explain why archaeologists do things the way they do; if people understand the rationale, they are more likely to remember the instructions.



After the orientation, visitors were given a site tour and then offered an opportunity to dig. They were matched with archaeologists, usually on a 4-to-2 ratio. Typically, one archaeologist would supervise the digging of two visitors, while two others, supervised by another archaeologist, would screen the excavated soil for artifacts.

Through resourceful coordination of activities and maintaining a careful

watch over visitors at all times, site damage was virtually nonexistent.

Now we are developing an interactive website for the public and profes-

for teachers and students.

In addition, as part of our outreach efforts, we are developing "Internet reports" – living docu-

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sionals. The *Archaeology of Delaware* site pulls together 20 years of research, offering an overview of the state's prehistory and history, a listing of professional reports and publications, and lesson plans and materials

An aerial view shows the excavation in progress at Delaware's Lums Pond archaeological site.

ments no longer tucked away in some obscure archive.

We plan to make the Hickory Bluff artifact catalog and site grid available to any on-line computer user. These users can analyze the data sets, display graphs, tables, maps, and photographs, and compare our artifact catalog to other site assemblages. The

goal is a resource that is understandable and useful to many people, including non-archaeologists.

The public is a largely untapped resource, and by including them in archaeological planning and projects, we are in effect contributing to conservation of the past. Public outreach in Delaware has paid both hidden and obvious dividends, from increasing public support for archaeology to instilling in young people an interest in their own cultural heritage.

In our increasingly technological society, where cultural and natural resources too often are being treated as afterthoughts, archaeology can be an invaluable link not only to the past, but to the environment of the future. □

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