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Uncovering Early Colonial City Point, Virginia

by DAVID G. ORR,
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At the confluence of the James and Appomattox rivers, the jut of land called City Point, Virginia has drawn attention for millennia. Recently it has become the subject of study by National Park Service archaeologists, with the aid of a crew of college students and high school volunteers. Ideally suited to command communications on the river, City Point was first settled in prehistoric times. In 1607 Christopher Newport explored the James River, and he and John Smith spent several days at the Appomattox Indian settlement on the opposite shore. Newport made note of the Point, and shortly thereafter the first European settlers arrived. A land patent for City Point was granted in 1635 to Francis Eppes, who established a plantation there.

With the exception of a brief displacement during the Civil War, City Point remained in the possession of the Eppes family until 1978, when the property was sold to the National Park Service. This impressive tenure constitutes one of the longest ownerships by a single family in America.

During the Civil War Siege of Petersburg, City Point's strategic position led to its being chosen by Ulysses S. Grant as his headquarters. The Point became a telegraphic communication post and one of the busiest military supply depots in the Civil War. Today this episode is a major theme of the National Park Service's interpretive program. Previous archaeological work had identified the site of General Grant's headquarters cabin, which has now been replaced on its original location. The original cabin had stood in Fairmount Park, Philadelphia, since 1865, the year it was moved from City Point. The cabin was a gift from General Grant to George Stuart, a prominent Philadelphian and head of the Sanitary Commission during the Civil War.

The soil at City Point holds the archaeological record of people and events for the entire time span from prehistory to the present. In 1983 the National Park Service initiated an archaeological survey to inventory these resources and to determine their extent. One question to be answered was the degree and nature of the occupation during prehistoric times. Other objectives were to determine the earliest period of historical

occupation on the Point and the subsequent changes since the Civil War era.

For seven weeks during the summer of 1983 a team under the direction of author David G. Orr, Mid-Atlantic Regional Archaeologist, and assisted by authors Brooke Blades and Douglas Campana, tested the area for prehistoric and historic remains. Augmenting the regular Park staff were eight college and graduate students from around the country who were hired as summer temporary assistants.

The excavation was highlighted by a two and one-half week period when a group of 15 high school volunteers from Lower Merion High School, Ardmore, Pennsylvania, joined the crew. During this time the students were given hands-on experience in archaeological field methods while helping the Park Service to achieve its survey goals. Their teacher, Steven McCarter, coordinated the students' activities and the National Park Service staff provided daily instruction and evening lectures.

Punctuating the volunteers' work in the trenches were demonstrations of remote sensing technology, talks on Civil War history and life in the ante-bellum South, and a lively discussion with Elise Eppes Cutchin about her remembrances of life at City Point during the early twentieth century. Both the students and the Park Service profited greatly from this interchange. Working in close association with the team of professional

archaeologists and archaeology students, the high school group learned a good deal of field technique and gained a better understanding of the archaeological conservation ethic. On the other hand, the Park Service was able to stretch its limited survey dollars much farther thanks to their voluntary assistance.

Unlike the rugged conditions of so many archaeological sites, City Point is a place of outstanding natural beauty. Appomattox Manor, the Eppes family residence until it was acquired by the Park Service, stands on the bluff overlooking the river. Richard Eppes built this house in 1763, as indicated by a chimney brick inscribed with his initials and that date. Family tradition, however, held that an earlier dwelling had stood on this site. The nineteenth-century owner, also named Richard Eppes, wrote in his 1858 diary, "On coming in possession of the City Point estate my grandfather removed from Eppes Island and settled at City Point. He pulled down the old mansion and erected the one we now live in..." Mrs. Cutchin mentioned that artifacts were turned up in the backyard during the landscaping in the 1930s. Otherwise the site of the earlier house was unknown.

The first step in locating the old house, as well as other possible structures, was a remote sensing survey of the Point. Bruce Bevan of Geosight, Inc., under contract to the Park Service, used ground-penetrating radar ap-

Staff and intern archaeologists at work on the eighteenth-century well. The City Point site yielded a variety of European and aboriginal artifacts, including a newly-recognized type of Indian pottery belonging to the Late Woodland period.





Summer high school interns excavating at City Point. In the background is Appomattox Manor, now the property of the National Park Service. Working with professionals, the student volunteers gained hands-on experience in archaeological field methods.

paratus and a magnetometer to locate and map any sub-surface anomalies. Unlike all other radars the signal from a ground-penetrating radar is beamed into the soil, rather than into the air. The radar signal is simply a series of very short pulses. When any of these pulses meets an abrupt change in the earth, part of the signal is reflected back to the radar. Anomalies can result from buried brick or metal, or from marked changes in the soil strata. Utilizing this method, Bevan found a large, nearly rectangular area north of the present manor.

A similar survey had been conducted a few years earlier at Petersburg National Battlefield. An anomaly found there, much like the City Point example, proved to be a buried house cellar when excavated. It seemed highly probable, therefore, that the radar had located the site of the earlier Eppes house. An initial test trench sited at one corner of the anomaly confirmed our suspicion.

Limited site testing had been conducted at City Point in 1979, which suggested that it was the site of extensive aboriginal occupation. It was desirable, therefore, to trace the extent and integrity of the prehistoric remains. A regularly spaced array of small test squares, independent of the radar survey, was laid out over the area. As the Park Service's archaeological philosophy is oriented toward preservation rather than research, this procedure permitted the archaeologists to ascertain the nature of the site, while preserving intact as much as possible.

Because both historic and prehistoric components were involved, the crew was broken down into historic and prehistoric teams, although their functions often overlapped. The temporarily-hired archaeologists had been trained primarily in either American prehistory or American historical archaeology, but

most had experience in both.

So that they might gain as wide an experience as possible, the high school students were rotated from one group to the next on a regular basis. During the course of the program each graduate student was assigned two assistants, who helped with the troweling, screening, extensive note-keeping, and making sectional diagrams and plans. On rainy days the entire crew moved indoors to wash and number the excavated artifacts.

Excavation results

The newly-discovered dwelling site reveals that the structure had measured 30 by 18 feet, and had stood one and one-half stories in height in its final form. A cellar lay beneath the dwelling and a chimney projected from each gable end. Although the chimney had also stood upon brick foundations, the presence of straw-impressed clay daub within the northeast corner of the cellar revealed that at least the north chimney was timber-framed and covered with daub. Architectural fragments from the cellar indicated that the dwelling occupants benefited from the presence of leaded casement windows and interior walls covered with whitewashed plaster. The frame walls of the structure had rested upon brick foundations which appear to have been added in the second quarter of the eighteenth century; the nature of the earlier wall underpinning is unclear. The dwelling was probably constructed in the late seventeenth century, but associated artifacts suggest that European occupancy may have begun as early as 1650.

Archaeologists removed approximately one-sixth of the cellar fill. The earliest layers contained a scattering of objects reflecting occupation from the late seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century. The overlying cellar fill consisted of destruction debris from the

dwelling and domestic trash. Although Richard Eppes deposited the cellar fill and artifacts ca. 1763, the domestic items—many already broken—were probably left on the site by the former occupants.

Little is known of these individuals, but glass bottle seals provide clues. Prominent landowners in colonial Virginia often decanted wine into bottles bearing a family name or initials. Two seals were marked "PT 1742"—the original owner is as yet unknown. Another seal, however, bore the initials "FE" which strengthens the scant historical data that suggest a Francis Eppes occupied the Point during the decade prior to his death in 1737.

The artifacts within the cellar refuse deposit—fragments of glass bottles and ceramic vessels, brass buttons, buckles, pins, lead musket shot, and an iron fish hook—all dated no later than ca. 1760. The ceramic component reveals a lower percentage of coarse utilitarian earthenwares than of English tin-glazed earthenware punch bowls, tea wares of English white salt-glazed stoneware, tin-glazed earthenware and Chinese porcelain. The consumption of punch and tea suggested by these vessel fragments reflects two of the most status-related activities among Chesapeake Tidewater society.

Indeed, other aspects of the material record indicate that the City Point plantation represented a substantial step toward fulfilling the domestic and social aspirations shared by many planters in the Tidewater. A house measuring 30 by 18 feet may not seem spacious by modern standards, but it must be remembered that architectural form served to delineate sharply only the very rich and the very poor in early eighteenth-century Virginia. Planters of varying economic and social levels between these extremes resided in houses of similar appearance. The dwelling at City Point was probably the focal point for various support outbuildings, as well as connecting fences, gardens and orchards. Definition of these features and the patterns of activities around the plantation dwelling awaits further excavation.

The prehistoric occupation

All the prehistoric trenches—ranging in size from three feet to six by nine feet—yielded hundreds of quartzite chips and cores and aboriginal pottery, with an occasional projectile point. Most belonged to the Middle Woodland period (300 B.C. to A.D. 700), but the pottery evidence indicated that aboriginal occupation may have continued on City Point until the arrival of the European settlers. Numerous Archaic points were also found, some dating back to earlier than 6500 B.C., but none of these were

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The Bookshelf

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give, to celebrate the Year of the Etruscans in 1985. It complements another recent multi-author work—a welcome trend in Etruscan studies today, allowing experts to substitute facts for a "mystery" which has been wearing thin. *The Etruscan Cities*, edited by Filippo Coarelli with text by Francesca Boitani, Maria Cataldi, Marinella Pasquinucci, and Mario Torelli, features photographs of the landscape, architecture, and special characteristics of each of the ancient cities of Etruria. Both books offer the perfect way to prepare for an Etruscan trip, or to relive one. *Larissa Bonfante is Professor of Classics, New York University, New York, NY.*

Medieval Islamic Medicine: Ibn Ridwān's Treatise "On the Prevention of Bodily Ills in Egypt," translated by Michael W. Dols (English text) and edited by Adil S. Gamal (Arabic text). xv, English text 186 pages, Arabic text 63 pages, 2 maps. University of California Press, Berkeley, CA 1984 \$35.00

Late in the tenth century, a Tunisian doctor, Ibn al-Jazzār, wrote at length on the causes, prevention and treatment of epidemics. In passing, he reiterated a long-standing complaint among foreigners that Egypt was a particularly unhealthy place. This claim stimulated a sharp response from the Islamic physician, Ali Ibn Ridwān (A.D. 998–1068), in a treatise entitled "On the Prevention of Bodily Ills in Egypt." Ibn Ridwān did not shrug off the profound effects of the several bouts of pestilence and famine that struck Cairo and al-Fustāt in his own lifetime, but he asserted that successful patient treatment called for an understanding of the unique temperament of Egypt and its people.

A translation of Ibn Ridwān's treatise is the backbone of *Medieval Islamic Science*. The emphasis is on preventive (*versus* curative) medicine and the treatment of the individual over the disease. It demonstrates how well Arab physicians absorbed the naturalistic views of health prescribed by Hippocrates and the humoral pathology of Galen into their everyday practice, while offering fascinating glimpses into the colorful nature of Islamic culture as a whole. *Stuart Fleming, MASCA, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA*

Ethics and Values in Archaeology, edited by Ernestine L. Green. xii, 301 pages, bibliography. The Free Press, New York, NY 1984 \$34.95

Much of the world today thinks that the work of Indiana Jones is archaeology, yet even his professorial persona has certainly never pondered the issues raised in this book. Real archaeologists,

however, are struggling to define both their professional roles and their responsibilities to society present and future. With the publication of this important volume, the discussions come out from behind the closed doors of professional meetings and specialized journals.

The twenty-five contributors to *Ethics and Values in Archaeology* were among the first to ask the hard questions, and their essays make it clear that the years of debate have produced no easy answers. At the same time, outside forces—such as government regulation, private and public funding, assertion of rights by native groups—increasingly affect archaeology and make clear-cut solutions even more elusive. Are there situations in which an archaeologist should not excavate? How does politics affect research in foreign countries? Do the demands of science justify desecration of burials? Can anything break the vicious economic cycle that causes looting? The book explores these and many other issues that demand the attention of all archaeologists and serious students. Even casual readers will find some chapters here that capture their interest and provoke new ways of thinking about the purpose of archaeology. *Ellen Herscher, American Association of Museums, Washington, D.C.*

In the Field

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in place. The majority, in fact, came from the excavation of the cellar of the earlier dwelling, most probably from the soil removed in digging the foundation of the Manor nearby. This soil was likely used to fill the cellar of the demolished house.

Following the excavation, the prehistoric material has been catalogued and analyzed by summer staff members Jane Erskine and Tracy Millis at Virginia Commonwealth University, under the direction of Daniel Mouer. Among their discoveries has been the identification of a previously unrecognized Late Woodland pottery type. The objects have been photographed and drawn, and their work will form a portion of the City Point site report to be published by the National Park Service.

Both the historic and prehistoric aspects of the survey proved very successful, and the high school intern program was particularly effective. The 1983 season was the third year of the intern program, and each season has been more successful than the last. This program, now in its fifth year, will be focused on Valley Forge National Historic Park this coming summer. The Lower Merion students will be assisting the Park Service in archaeological tests designed to ascertain the location of a possible Revolutionary War redoubt. It is hoped that a new and perhaps more ambitious program can be undertaken in the future. □