Appendix C: Interpretive Planning Recommendations

David W. Lewes

Stories of the Past, Meaning for the Present: Interpreting the History of City Point

In July 2002, the City Council of Hopewell, Virginia, voted to fund an exploration of the city's past. Under no obligation from federal statutes on historic preservation, the city requested an archaeological investigation of some publicly owned lots in the historic City Point neighborhood. One of the driving forces behind the city council's decision lies in a growing appreciation of public history. With a better understanding of the city's underground heritage, the councilors hoped to plan for future development, but more importantly the research might enhance public interpretation and attract visitors. After all, much of the region's tourism from Richmond to Yorktown depends on widespread interest in some of the nation's earliest historic sites. With a broad range of resources including prehistoric and possible early colonial sites, plantation houses, and evidence of a massive military occupation during the Civil War, it seemed that City Point had much to offer these potential visitors. The council astutely perceived that the city's public history was underdeveloped—despite the potential resources and the presence of several interpreted sites. The current archaeological investigations have already begun to enhance interest in the city's heritage. However, key to any future public history success will be the development of an interpretive plan. To paraphrase a planner for Colonial Williamsburg, public historians must decide what history will be taught and say why it is important. (Carson 1998:17). The following treatment outlines and justifies interpreting City Point and nearby properties in Hopewell and Prince George County as a microcosm for the social history of Tidewater Virginia in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The plan draws from recent scholarship to advance engaging strategies for interpreting this history at various exhibit sites in the city and nearby.

Any plan depends to a large extent on the resources that will be available for interpretation. Hopewell currently possesses an impressive collection of historic properties and archaeological sites interpreted by several entities. Most are clustered around City Point, a strategic point of land jutting into the confluence of the Appomattox and James rivers. Foremost is Appomattox Manor operated by the National Park Service. During the siege of nearby Petersburg, the grounds of the Eppes family's colonial home served as General Grant's headquarters and City Point became a vast staging area for the Union army. Currently, interpretation at the manor dwells on the military installation and its role in the siege. The second most prominent players in the presentation of the city's past are the enthusiastic members of the non-profit Historic Hopewell Foundation. During the warmer months, the foundation interprets two properties. Weston Manor lies within Hopewell but just outside City Point. Described by one architectural historian as "the very essence of the Tidewater plantation mansion," Weston operates as a typical house museum, with emphasis on the aesthetic value of the structure and its furnishings (Historic Hopewell Foundation 1998). St. Dennis Chapel was built to serve Irish Catholic sailors in the Union Navy stationed at City Point after the Civil War (Mary Calos, personal communication 2002). Since its restoration in the early 1990s, the foundation has used the chapel to house two exhibits on archaeological sites excavated by the College of William and Mary's Center for Archaeological Research. Currently, the rather crowded space includes selected panels from the earlier archaeology exhibits, a display of prehistoric artifacts, a Civil War soldier's tent, Victorian clothing, and early twentieth-century photographs of the city. The

foundation is also restoring a mid-twentieth-century cinema and owns a historic residence near St. Dennis Chapel. Besides sponsoring archaeology in 2002, the City government has installed outdoor signs for a walking tour of the National Register-listed City Point neighborhood. Structures in the 39-acre district mainly date to the nineteenth century, with some eighteenth- and twentieth-century examples (Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission 1978).

With so many parties interpreting individual properties, it is hard for the visitor to come away from Hopewell with meaningful historical insights about the town as a whole. At the same time, the City's history can have only limited impact for visitors in its current guise as a series of loosely related historic sites. Yet through the development of a focused comprehensive plan, it is possible to conceive a more coherent interpretation—one that will distill an important, distinctive history lesson and be appealing to visitors. The following plan constructs a valuable history lesson to be told collaboratively by the city, Historic Hopewell, and the National Park Service.

For at least six thousand years, City Point has been an attractive place for human settlement (Stuck et al. 1997). The two great rivers washing its shores served both as food sources and transportation arteries, with deep waters allowing access by the large vessels of later European settlers. Despite this long and virtually continuous history of human presence, interpreting all of its components would be a mistake. Even with collaboration, the three organizations possess far too limited resources for such a project. Nor are all periods equally evident. Although prehistoric and seventeenth-century colonial archaeological sites exist, only three have been investigated thoroughly (Blades 1988; Linebaugh 1995; Stuck et al. 1997). Documentary and archaeological evidence also exists for a late eighteenth-century port. However, the most important work in this area (archaeological investigations sponsored by the National Park Service) has yet to be published. In contrast, the story of nineteenth century and its resolution in the early twentieth century is richly documented with topics that are representative of wider stories in the region's history. Those topics, outlined next, should form the core of interpretation.

During the mid-nineteenth century the Eppes family's plantation encompassed much of City Point. The extensive plantation records of Dr. Richard Eppes between 1849 and 1896 reveal a complex picture of Tidewater plantation life (Eppes 1849, 1851-1896, 1851-1861). While Eppes considered himself enlightened for offering monetary incentives, his diaries show that his slaves still suffered brutal punishment. For example, in the "code of laws" he wrote for his plantation, Eppes punished slaves for fighting by stripping them naked and locking them in a room where they would whip each other until ordered to stop (Nicholls 1981:75). These detailed records and other evidence discussed below allow for a provocative interpretation of slave life. Application of scientific farming techniques by Eppes (and his more famous local contemporary Edmund Ruffin) provides insights into the Tidewater's antebellum struggle with soil exhaustion (Lutz 1957:118-119; Nicholls1981:68). Eppes' ambivalent attitude toward secession also reflects the Old Dominion's lukewarm enthusiasm for going to war (Bowman 1988:32, 34). Currently, interpretation of these topics is minimal.

The direct result of some Virginians' commitment to an economic system supported by human property—the Civil War and City Point's military occupation—does receive sustained interpretive attention by the National Park Service. On the other hand, the important economic and political outcomes of the war, especially for the large African-American population, deserve to be better interpreted (Lutz 1957:192-195, 201-203).

Another important theme of City Point's nineteenth-century history is the quest for urban and industrial development. As evident from its natural features so eagerly exploited by the Union Army, the area had the potential to become a great hub of transportation and industry. Apart from the brief episode of the Civil War, however, City Point's population never exceeded 300 during the nineteenth century. Early incorporation of the town (1826), a railroad beginning at the City Point wharves (1836),

and a dredging company on the Appomattox (1825) failed to attract large-scale interest (Lutz 1957:122, 132-134, 150).

Construction of dynamite and guncotton manufacturing plants by DuPont in 1912-1914 marks the close of an expanded nineteenth century. Demand for these products soared during World War I, and the company fulfilled its labor demand far afield. Workers flooded the new boomtown called Hopewell, including many Greek, Italian, and Turkish immigrants. As many as thirty-five languages were spoken among the work force, prompting DuPont to offer "round-the-clock" English classes. Immigrant business owners also gave Hopewell the cosmopolitan feel of Manhattan rather than a typical Southern town (Calos et al. 1993:56; Crump 1981:40). The new city suffered a setback when DuPont's operations closed shortly after Armistice. But the area continued to attract investment and has remained an industrial town (Calos et al. 1993:47-48, 93-95). Many immigrants remained after DuPont left, making Hopewell an exceptionally diverse Virginia community.

In their zeal for planning, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation has shared its history teaching policies and goals beyond their museum through their publication *Becoming Americans* (Carson, ed. 1998). Although Colonial Williamsburg operates on a comparatively vast scale, the museum's planning principles can be usefully applied to a more modest historic site presentation like City Point. An important goal of *Becoming Americans* is to communicate a clear and consistent message to visitors. In a living history environment, there is an obvious need to provide a general framework for character-interpreters (Carson, ed. 1998:14-15). Otherwise their improvisations might diverge to the point of confusing or misleading the visitor. Yet at City Point, where the site will likely be interpreted by several organizations in more static exhibits, there is also a need for clear agreement over what important history to tell.

Being selective about topics and lessons should not be seen as an obstacle, however—it is in the very nature of history. Unlike the past, which comprises the totality of everything that ever happened, history always is a necessary selection events that make the past intelligible within the cultural milieu in which it is told (Dening 1996:36-37). Allowing this relativism does not debase the kind history presented in this plan as biased. Interpretations must still be grounded in the evidence that supports them, but allow flexibility as historians and the public naturally shift focus with changes in the cultural climate.

In recognition of this connection of history to its cultural milieu, the plan for City Point identifies topics that will resonate with contemporary visitors' concerns. Topics are chosen to "give visitors a perspective on themselves and on American society" (Carson, ed. 1998:4). In *Becoming Americans,* Revolutionary achievement is not portrayed as a completed project frozen in the past. Instead the ideals of equality in the Declaration of Independence are presented as an ongoing contest over the boundaries of citizenship, bringing relevance to the story of Colonial Williamsburg (Carson, ed. 1998:6). By interpreting slave-based agriculture and its ramifications for the area's development through the beginning of the twentieth century, City Point can tell an inspirational and meaningful story. Much interpretation, especially by the National Park Service at Appomattox Manor, has centered on the dramatic transformation of the village landscape during the Civil War and the role of the military complex in ending the conflict. Other sites at City Point can enrich that story by showing how the war and later Reconstruction transformed society, more specifically the lives of ordinary people, especially African-Americans. Likewise, the conditions of society (namely slave-based agriculture) largely determined City Point's involvement in the Civil War. Despite past efforts by some historians to minimize the role of slavery, it is hard to conceive that the war would have wrought such chaos in Virginia if it had been a free state on the side of the Union (Goldfield 2002). Economic transformation following the Civil War also eventually allowed City Point's assets (deep water port, rail connections) to attract the industrial investment that characterizes the City of Hopewell today. Out of a system that held more than

half the population of the encompassing county in bondage emerged a gradually more equal society by the early years of the following century. For an increasingly cynical citizenry, the contrast of slave suffering with the increasing equality of recent decades allows visitors to imagine, to be inspired to overcome suffering and injustice both in our nation and the wider world.

Lest we dismiss this inspirational goal as overly ambitious idealism for a museum, let us first explore the public's relationships with the past. In the face of much despair over the public's supposed disinterest in history in recent years, historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen surveyed how people really felt about and what uses they made of the past. Broadly defined, engagement with the past involved more than ninety percent of a broad social spectrum of the 1,453 Americans surveyed (Rosenzweig and Thelen 1998:18-19). The survey showed that Americans engage with the past on a more intimate level than the abstractions and trends that may interest academic historians. For example, evidence of Americans' connection to the past included informal activities like taking photographs to preserve memories and attending a reunion of people with whom they had shared an experience as well as more structured engagement like membership in a preservation group. But Americans not only connect with the past—they make use of it. According to the survey, the past provided a reservoir of experience made up of "narratives that could be used to shape the present and imagine the future." Those surveyed used these narratives to realize their "ability to make a difference," to shape priorities, and to learn from mistakes. Therefore, when people engage with the past, they are often seeking inspiration and guidance for their everyday lives. Why should a museum not meet these visitors on that rather lofty plane?

Indeed, it should. The survey shows that many museum goers are ready to make serious uses of the past, but many felt little connection to history as presented in school textbooks. The role of public history is to adapt culturally relevant lessons of academic history to the learning styles of a popular audience. Rosenzweig and Thelen's survey revealed a major contrast between the public and academic historians in their organization of the past. It appears that the general public often uses experiences rather than events as the "basic units for engaging the past." This attitude allowed many of the subjects of the survey to connect with the past. "By recognizing and interpreting experiences—their own and others'—respondents drew the past toward the present" (Rosenzweig and Thelen 1998:38). Few public history events demonstrate this better than Ken Burns' documentary television series *The Civil War.* David Glassberg probed 444 letters Burns received from viewers to understand the series' astonishing popularity (more than 40 million individuals watched at least one evening's segment of the initial broadcast). The key was Burns' ability to "bridge between public and family history" by weaving the experiences of obscure as well as famous people with the events of the war (Glassberg, 2001:92). Through the narration by familiar voices of intimate letters and diaries, and slow closeup pans of thousands of period photographs, viewers felt close to the experiences of the actors of this national drama. In short, Burns appeared to offer the public a largely unmediated account of the war.

Among the "talking heads" in *The Civil War,* Shelby Foote was far and away the most popular with the viewers. As a novelist-turned-historian, Foote excelled at storytelling, another key to public history (Glassberg 2001:101-102). Rather than presenting a linear interpretation of connections between events, public history is more memorable when told through narratives with conflict and emotional dynamism (Weldon 2002). This principle helped guide the selection of the nineteenth-century themes outlined above. Besides being important to academic historians, the transformations of nineteenth-century City Point are compelling stories of conflict and dramatic changes in the lives of its citizens.

Exhibits at City Point's venues should draw on these insights about how the public best connects with the past. Like Burns' Civil War documentary, the exhibits can be enriched by presenting the first-hand accounts of those who lived through the community's transformations. For example, inter-

views conducted in the 1930s with former slaves can present a compelling account of plantation life to visitors. As one scholar has noted, "if one wishes to understand the nature of the 'peculiar institution' from the perspective of the slave, to reconstruct the cultural and social milieu of the slave community, or to analyze the social dynamics of the slave system, then these data are not only relevant; they are essential" (Yetman 2002). Some of the local narratives include stories of slave insurrection, resisting rape by slaveowners, or less dramatic but more joyous occasions like a slave wedding (Berry 1937:3). Whether presented in written text or even more powerfully through sound recordings, the narratives can be juxtaposed with Eppes' journals detailing his relationships with his slaves. Other resources include thousands of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century photographs of City Point collected by former city archivist Mary Calos in researching a photo essay on the community's history (Calos et al. 1993). When used judiciously, artifacts from recent archaeological excavations can evoke the lives of anonymous inhabitants of the community's past. To these resources may be added historic furniture, clothing, and other objects in the collections of Historic Hopewell Foundation and the National Park Service.

The general public's connectedness to the past experiences of people like themselves coincides with parallel trends in academic history over the last thirty years. Historians have shed former obsessions with the powerful and with great events in favor of "social" history. They have become more concerned with "ordinary people" who played just as big a role in history as the powerful, "ordinary activities, institutions, modes of thought," and attitudes (Stearns 1983:4-5).

Much public interpretation in the state has adopted this social historical approach. However, none have focused their social history on the nineteenth-century Tidewater, leaving an underdeveloped niche of public history that is well suited for City Point. Further west at Staunton, the Museum of American Frontier Culture interprets the history of different ethnic groups (Germans, Irish, English) that shaped American culture moving west of the Valley. Pamplin Historical Park and the National Museum of the Civil War Soldier in Petersburg does some interesting social history interpretation, but mainly from the viewpoint of Civil War soldiers. More particularly, the more troubling stories of plantation slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction have been avoided in many of the plantation museums along the James River. But these themes are integral to understanding the course of Virginia's and the nation's history. Of course, Colonial Williamsburg now engages the public with a socially diverse and not always harmonious past—including slavery and women's history—but their realm is the eighteenth century. By promoting a unique historical specialty, Hopewell could more effectively target the throngs of tourists who visit the Historic Triangle, the Route 5 plantations, and central Virginia's battlefields.

The City could promote this new, more focused interpretive approach through advertising brochures and a website and by presenting a gateway exhibit to the area's historic sites. A modest series of displays could be designed by a historical consulting firm. The displays would provide an overview of the principal themes outlined here. Such an exhibit might be mounted in the current visitor center or, more desirably, in a larger space to be reserved in a planned library building. Visitors could be directed to historic sites with more extensive displays appropriate to the structures where they are housed. The destinations might include relevant destinations outside City Point such as Weston Manor, or outside Hopewell such as Edmund Ruffin's home at Beechwood. To ensure coordination, an advisory board should be formed, consisting of city councilors, National Park Service representatives, and members of the Historic Hopewell Foundation. With a clear interpretive focus and cooperation among the parties involved, Hopewell would not only attract visitors and effectively present their historic sites. The city might also secure grant support for a more ambitious museum project that could include limited living history programs, ongoing archaeological research, and/or more elaborate exhibits. These are some of the potential fruits from stepping back

to formulate a more comprehensive interpretive plan of City Point.

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