

Summary of Brainstorming Session: Responses to Digging in America
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Subcommittee on Collaborative Preservation
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Controversial television programs like *American Digger* on Spike TV and *Diggers* on the National Geographic Channel sensationalize metal detecting and the for-profit exploitation of historic material culture. This session was conceived as a way to open dialogue and spark conversation among archaeologists about how to respond to what we believe is an irresponsible destruction of cultural resources. How do archaeologists honor their commitment to education when public interest is monetized? Grounded in the mission of the Council for Northeast Historical Archaeology (CNEHA), the session aimed to identify themes, legal and ethical issues, and practical grass-roots responses to the shows and to the broader metal detecting/recreational digging phenomenon.

The session began with a group viewing of the Jamestown, Virginia, episode of Ric Savage's *American Digger* show, "[New World Treasure](#)" (Season One, Episode 8). Digging on private property, Savage and his crew discover a complete late 17th-century wine bottle mere inches under the ground surface (adjacent lead shot gave a metal detector signal) and a late 18th-century 12 pound British carronade in a small pond. Savage carried his findings to an antique dealer and was told he would be given \$10,000 for the artifacts removed from this property. A statement at the end of the episode revealed that Savage and his crew dug on other properties in town not shown in the episode and took home a total of \$18,000 from the sale of the artifacts they acquired.

Attendees discussed the show's rhetoric, including its use of the terms "recovery" and "artifacts," the show's position that underground materials are "going away" and effectively lost unless excavated, and the notion that the group's methods are non destructive. Professional and student archaeologists at the session believed the featured artifacts were planted and that a great deal of manipulation and sensationalism (fiery fake explosions, dramatic music, a countdown of how long one of the crew members had been diving in the frigid pond) was used to heighten the tension for viewers. There was also surprise and a positive feeling that, in the first few minutes of the episode, Savage and his crew knocked on doors in a cul-de-sac that historical research predicted was a good location for buried 17th-century remains. Several landowners there turned down requests to dig on their property, with one individual objecting to Savage destroying history on his property. Overall, however, attendees concluded that *American Digger* was an extreme example among a cohort of reality television programs that celebrate the commodification of historic material cultural.

Hodge and Samford moderated the discussion and reported on some official responses made to these two television series by archaeological organizations like the Society for Historical Archaeology (SHA), CNEHA, and the Society for American Archaeology (SAA) (for a Time Line with links, see below). While Spike TV reportedly never responded to letters from

archaeological organizations who objected to the show's depiction of metal detecting, the National Geographic Channel quickly stopped production of its show, *Diggers*, and convened a collaborative meeting between the show's producers, archaeologists, and metal detecting groups and individuals.

Two major points came out of that meeting: archaeologists demanded ethical behavior with regards to cultural resources and National Geographic needed the show to be monetarily profitable. The ethical concerns included recording the context in which the artifacts were found and making sure the recovered artifacts were not sold. Solutions that were acceptable to the collaborating representatives included:

- Having a local supervising archaeologist present during all metal detecting and digging.
- Having a full-time crew position for an individual with an archaeology degree and field experience. The role of that person will be to keep a detailed catalog and map of every item located. Artifacts are to be processed properly.
- An archaeologist will discuss the historical importance of the artifacts at the end of each episode, and to place them in their historical context.
- No monetary value will be placed on the objects found, with a focus instead, on the "historic value" of the items, and the stories they can tell.
- "Responsible metal detecting tips," shown in each episode, about laws pertaining to metal detecting: where it's *not* okay to go, what to do if you stumble across an important archaeological site, etc. The purpose of these tips is to help actively discourage illegal relic hunting/looting and stress that respect as key to metal detecting responsibly: respect of the law, of the landowner, and of our common cultural heritage.

Samford reported on a meeting held in St. Mary's County Maryland in June of 2012 between a representative of Half Yard Productions (the company that produces *Diggers*) and the St. Mary's County Historic Planning Commission. As a result of the collaborative meeting at National Geographic in the spring of 2012, the producers have made a number of changes to the second season to accommodate the concerns of archaeologists. With one exception, the representative concurred that the changes shown above were going to be made. He did state that the value of the artifact would be shown in a pop-up at the base of the screen, ostensibly to show how little financial value there actually is in most metal detected artifacts. The representative stated that they were only going to work on private property and wanted to work on a site that was threatened by development and would not otherwise get any archaeological attention. Despite these concessions, the Half Yard representative met with no support in St. Mary's County (many of the commission members are archaeologists and a number of other local professional archaeologists attended the meeting to speak). During CNEHA session discussion about this meeting, the potential ethical contradictions of any collaborative plan were discussed; the analogy of professional archaeologists working with underwater "treasure hunters" or recovery companies was drawn.

Session attendees brainstormed ideas and strategies for countering the negative effects of these shows and the broader practices of avocational/recreational digging:

- Posting "no trespassing" signs on site that describe relevant laws and penalties.
- Hiring overnight security guards (who might also clean artifacts, if written into one's project proposal).

- Regularly teaching the importance of context, the finite nature of the archaeological record, and archaeology's powerful contributions to human understanding at public talks and events (such as state and national archaeology days), explaining what we view as the negative impacts of metal detecting, bottle hunting, etc., as well as what to do if you discover an archaeological site or find. Educate the public as citizen-scientists.
- Preparing a tool kit/information sheet and offering training for local law enforcement officials, so they will have a better understanding of how metal detecting etc. damages cultural resources and intersects with illegal trespass and property laws, as well as whom they should contact if metal detectorists are encountered in their work (SHPO's, THPO's, etc.).
- Launching a public relations "counter-attack," so to speak, that celebrates an enthusiasm for history by creating our own media and outlets, which stress the vital contributions of archaeology and historic preservation and the overall logic of archaeological excavation. Ideas included developing proposals for television shows and creating and posting YouTube videos. It was felt that the YouTube route might be more easily attainable, useful in classroom settings, and popular with teens and young adults (who apparently don't watch television anymore). One audience member stated that if we went the online video route, we might explore working with [The Archaeology Channel](#) and pre-existing YouTube partners, such as the [VlogBrothers](#) (their most recent video had almost 81,000 viewings within 16 hours of it being posted!) or [VSauce](#) (with 1.2 million subscribers and 194 million video viewings). Working with a partner would be advantageous, since these groups already have an established infrastructure and know the basics of creating videos that are appealing to audiences (proper length, use of language and energy levels). Problems and strengths of both the American and British versions of the *Time Team* program format were debated.
- Someone else mentioned a Canadian television special entitled [Curse of the Axe](#), which aired in the summer of 2012 on History Television. This program had an appealing, mystery-driven narrative. It not only chronicled an historical archeological dig, but also followed the narrator and his team as they tried to identify where a metal axe originated and how it ended up in Ontario. This special was felt to be a model for the type of television show archaeologists should work with and/or produce.
- An attendee highlighted the need to quantify archaeologists' experiences of illegal looting on sites. It is suspected that looting and trespass on sites are underreported by the archaeological community. Quantitative data may carry more weight than anecdotal when assessing the impact of detecting and hunting practices.
- At future conferences, CNEHA might offer workshops on responding to looting/digging, local looting laws, or producing YouTube videos.
- CNEHA might create a dedicated web space pertaining to these issues, including: information sheets/FAQ's; links to professional organizations, to the TV programs, and to relevant online resources; and a blog of stories "from the field."

CNEHA session participants raised questions that are, as yet, unanswerable, including: Does working with diggers who sell and/or trade artifacts fatally conflict with our avowed professional ethics? How representative of the general recreational/avocation digging community are these shows, and how do they reflect the logic and ethos of professional metal detecting companies (some of whom work with professional archaeologists)? Should we work with or compete with

these and similar shows? Are we only interested in discouraging illegal looting, or any sort of recreational digging? Should we prioritize top-down reactions or bottom-up strategies?

A questionnaire was handed out to the session participants, which we expect will be posted soon on the [CNEHA website](#) and [Facebook page](#) for additional participation. The Subcommittee on Collaborative Preservation will summarize these responses and continue working with the CNEHA board, membership, and other interested parties on these issues.

TIMELINE

February 2012: CNEHA responds to in advance of programming debuts on Spike TV ([American Digger](#)) and National Geographic ([Diggers](#)) that encourage looting, profiteering, and the destruction of archaeological heritage.

» [Letter to Kevin Kay, President of Spike TV](#)

» [Letter to the National Geographic Society](#)

February 2012: SAA also responds to [Nat Geo](#) and to [Spike TV](#) decrying their shows' premises and expressing concern regarding the acquisition of appropriate permits and permissions.

February 2012: *Diggers* premiered on the National Geographic Channel on 28 Feb, 2012. The episode is "[Digging Dixie](#)," in which "KG and Ringy hit the beaches along Charleston, S.C. Hurricanes may be a nightmare for homeowners, but they are heaven-sent for treasure hunters. Storms far out at sea often churn up the shoreline, revealing all kinds of treasure, or juice, as they call it. With potential riches and shifting sands, the South Carolina beaches could be a treasure trove. In no time, it looks like they are onto something. Could it be gold?"

March 2012: *American Digger* premiered on Spike TV on 21 March 2012. The episode is "[Ice Cold Gold](#)," in which Ric Savage and his team "hunts for valuable Alaskan Gold Rush artifacts left behind by prospectors in the late 1800s, but blizzards, freezing temperatures and reclusive homeowners could dash their dreams of striking artifact gold."

March 2012: American Anthropological Association also responds to [NatGeo](#) and to [Spike TV](#) decrying their shows' premises.

March 2012: Matt Reeves submits a blog post at SHA about the [Montpelier/Minelab Experiment: An Archaeological Metal Detector Training Course](#)

March 2012: In a *New York Times* article, "[TV Digs Will Harm Patrimony, Scholars Say](#)," Ric Savage states, "I understand where the archaeologists are coming from," he said. "You've got two groups of people who want to be part of history, to dig it up and hold it in their hand. The only difference is I'm doing it to make a living. They're doing it to write papers and make it to associate professor and get tenure."

March 2012: NatGeo's *Diggers* airs episode 2, "[Montana Juice](#)," in which "Ringy and KG are headed to an old prison in Montana to help the local museum curator uncover buried treasure . . .

Who knows what the boys will find that once belonged to the prisons infamous residents Contraband? Bullets? A shank?" They dig this state prison site without first contacting state authorities, including the Department of Correction. The [state SHPO sent a letter](#) to state authorities and the show describing the violation of state statutes and their concern.

May 2012: NatGeo organized a Conference that brought together professional archaeologists, metal detecting enthusiasts, and network executives to discuss the outcry over the television show *Diggers*. In a [blog post](#), SHA President-Elect Charles Ewen's response was "I think the biggest takeaway that I had from the meeting was how badly we as archaeologists have failed in getting our message out to the general public," and "it's become apparent that these shows are not going away."

July 2012: SAA President Fred Limp sent a [memo](#) to membership describing the outcome of the May conference and planned "revamp" of the show to address ethical concerns. Key planned changes include: hiring an advising archaeologist for the show; involving a local supervising archaeologist for planning, permitting, and cataloguing; targeting only threatened sites; and maximizing historical value over monetary.

August 2012: Spike TV [announces](#) that *American Digger* has been picked up for a second season of 13 episodes.

August 2012: 22 August 2012, "[Metal-Detector Ethics and Tips From the Diggers](#)" posted on the NatGeo blog.