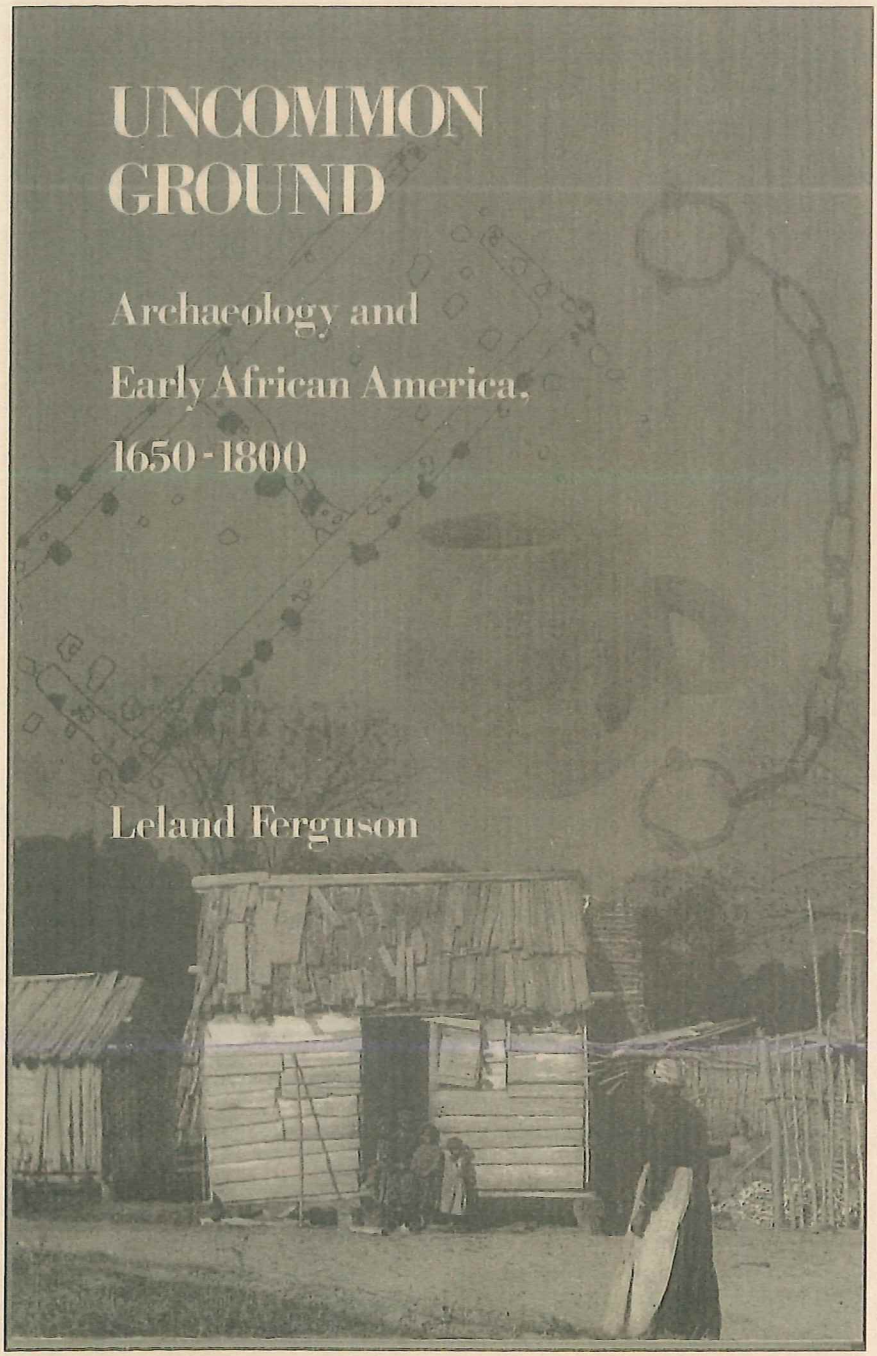
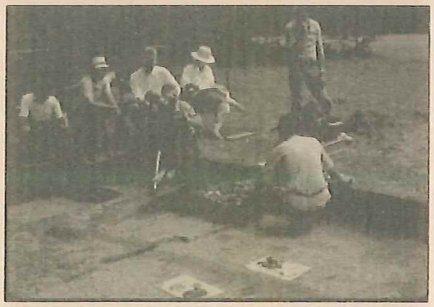
# South Carolina Antiquities

The Journal of the Archaeological Society of South Carolina



## The Life and Times of Leland Ferguson:
### From Mississippian to Moravia

Contributed Papers Concerning the Archaeology of South Carolina and the Adjacent States

Volume 45 • 2013

# Building Bridges and Bearing Archaeological Witness

Geoffrey Hughes

Since 1991, Leland Ferguson has been engaged in archaeological work aimed at assisting Old Salem Museums and Gardens in their restoration and interpretation of the St. Philips Church and Graveyard Complex. The primary focus of the project lay in relocating the interments for visiting "strangers" and African Americans, enslaved and free. In his capacity as the project's director, Ferguson creates an inclusive environment; one in which the archaeological process, from fieldwork to interpretation, becomes a way of mediating between the agendas of various interest groups. From historic preservationists to contemporary Moravians, from academics to an alienated African American community, he worked to create bridges between these communities by bearing archaeological witness to a past that, if left ignored, would only continue to divide them. Injustice is painful. And whether that injustice was committed in the past or it takes the form of denial, even erasure, in the present; there is no getting around that fact. As for archaeology, it can only do so much to heal wounds that are so deep. But there are many, more now than in the past, who believe that, even with its limitations, archaeology has a role to play. Leland Ferguson has been and remains one of them. I see this approach as an extension of his philosophy on teaching: one that has and continues to serve his students well.

## A Quiet Current

When prospective students first meet Leland Ferguson, I think they are sometimes taken aback by his unassuming manor and approachability. I know I was. After all, he is the author of the wildly popular *Uncommon Ground* (1992), a book on the required reading list for many introductory courses on historical archaeology. My own reaction upon finally meeting him seems somewhat ironic now, since it was the approachability he expressed through *Uncommon Ground* that invited me into the world of African American archaeology. It was this same welcoming voice that suggested he might be just the right sort of teacher for me. *Uncommon Ground* made such an impression on me, in fact, that when it came time to apply to graduate school, there was only one name on that list.

When I finally arrived and got to know Leland Ferguson, the more I came to realize that the approachable and welcoming prose, those same words that served as my first guide to the discipline, was not some literary performance or a shallow appeal for the sake of popularity; they were an authentic, artistic expression of the author himself. Ferguson didn't wander the halls of the department, handing out pre-autographed copies of *Uncommon Ground.* He didn't reference his book in every other sentence or even make it an assigned reading for that matter. You will not find him leading some procession of groupies or "holding court" at the bar in some conference hotel. In fact, if you did not know who you were looking for, you might not realize that this unassuming, well kempt, bearded fellow with glasses, dressed in a modest button-down shirt and tie, and sporting a pair of loafers, was one of the gurus of African American archaeology. While I know that he is particularly fond of some of literature's more towering figures, authors such as Whitman and Melville; when I think of Leland, the literary figure that comes most often to my mind is that of Tolkien's Gandalf, the beloved, unassuming, kind and wise wizard who takes a genuine interest in the goings-on and welfare of some of the smaller folk that inhabit Middle-earth. Like Gandalf, I think he is often quite happy walking down some of the more hastily overlooked paths and working behind the scenes so that his students and friends might succeed on their own adventure.

On the syllabus for one of his seminars in historical archaeology, Leland Ferguson described his own work as one of the discipline's "quiet currents" rather than one of its "loud waves." In reexamining the conflation of ethnic-

ity with an entire class of material culture, he not only opened up new avenues of interpretive possibility, he also laid bare one of the discipline's more deeply held assumptions. The responses he received to his inquiries and initial findings regarding Colono-Indian Ware continue to serve as a reminder to me of the profound effect that even so-called "quiet currents" can have. His findings continue to inspire healthy debate to this day (e.g., Esphenshade 2007; Ferguson 1980, 1991a, 1992, 1999, 2007; Mourer et al. 1999; Singleton and Bograd 2000). And while Ferguson's conclusions added substantially to the discipline, he only asserted them after eliciting as much feedback from others as possible. It is not his method to simply write something without consulting those that have a stake in his findings. This was certainly the case as he exposed the assumptions we brought with us to our reading of the documentary record in Salem (Ferguson 2008).

I have yet to meet another scholar as willing to seek out constructive criticism; or, as skilled in its delivery as Leland Ferguson. His willingness to value the input of others was something that we, his students, witnessed on an almost daily basis when we worked with him in the field. As students, he always welcomed our input, observations and impressions. But even more than this, I think he realized that he was not the only teacher out there. Ferguson seemed to sense, like the ideal classroom seminar transplanted into the field, that as a group, we would learn from each other. And then there was the site itself. Yes, he showed us the most efficient way to shovel schnitt as we struggled through the hardened red clay that had been laid down overtop of the graveyard. He showed us how to wet down the site every day, covering and uncovering the exposed surface repeatedly until, as if by some magic passed down from one old field archaeologist to the next, the micaceous sheen of a grave shaft slowly showed itself—a slightly darker, slightly glowing red rectangle surrounded by a field of red, piedmont clay. Through the particular properties of the site, he showed us where and how the interface between the overlying landscaping and the surface of gravefill would cleave cleanly away. Working inside the 1891 addition, looking for long hidden graves, two, three and sometimes four sets of eyes strained to distinguish between building and demolition episodes—a head cocked to the right, another to the left. Perhaps more importantly than teaching us how to throw dirt, he taught us how to read it.

The fieldwork at St. Philips was methodical and thoughtful. Every unit or trench that was excavated was done so because of its potential to reveal a key piece needed to decode the site's story. It was in the process of making these decisions, bouncing observations made in the field off of the historical record, that I think Old Salem proved especially conducive to the thoughtfulness of Ferguson's approach. Old Salem attracted not only the resources but also the personnel essential to support such careful excavation, as well as a commitment to the complex's long-term interpretation. From its proximity to the Moravian Archives and an active church congregation to housing the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts and employing a variety of public historians, each intimately acquainted with the town's history, Old Salem proved to be an ideal place to foster thoughtful collaboration. Of the many collaborative relationships that emerged around the excavations at St. Philips, the partnership between Leland Ferguson and Michael Hartley is one of the most memorable to me. Hartley supported the project and assisted with the fieldwork from the very beginning (Ferguson 1991b). This relationship only grew stronger when Hartley became Old Salem's Director of Archaeology. He was a regular fixture at St. Philips and one of the project's most loyal supporters. If you visit St. Philips today, you may to find Michael and Martha Hartley greeting visitors and answering questions since they are instrumental to the ongoing, public interpretation of the site. Even when he had his own field school to attend to, Hartley made a point of stopping by to see how we were doing and if we needed anything. If Ferguson were unexpectedly called away from the field—as sometimes he was while serving as a department chair—we all knew that the door to Hartley's lab was always open. In 1995, Ferguson and Hartley coauthored an interim report on St. Philips and Hartley directed the field school at the site (Ferguson and Hartley 1995; Hartley 1995). The mutual respect and cooperation that I observed between them continues to serve as a reminder to me of what professional collaboration between colleagues can and should look like.

## The Road to Salem

In preparing to write this paper, I found myself rereading passages from *Uncommon Ground*. As I stated earlier, it was part of my introduction to historical archaeology as well as my introduction to Leland Ferguson. I suspect it played a similar role for many others as well. But rereading it now, and having come to know Ferguson as one of his students, I cannot help but notice how Salem shaped *Uncommon Ground* and how deeply personal the road back to Salem must have been. In the epilogue, Ferguson writes of a time before he was an archaeologist, during the summer of 1962 when, in a cafeteria in Winston-Salem, he came face-to-face with the civil rights movement:

> ...I pored over those lunchtime events. I had never thought much about either segregation or where black people ate, and those social issues were not the focus of

> my reflections. No, I kept seeing that young man, my own age, sitting calmly at the table while people stared and the manager shouted at him with threats to call the police. It was his courage that held my attention; I had never before had "colored people" and courage in the same thought. He had been so calmly defiant of authority; where did he find that courage? Was I that courageous? (Ferguson 1992:123)

I think Leland Ferguson's work reflects that courage. It takes courage to quietly negotiate between Salem's varied interest groups. It takes courage to return to your own backyard, so to speak, and uncover past injustices. It takes courage to write from your heart and share your personal experiences with a world that may not fully appreciate them.

As a mentor, Leland Ferguson has influenced numerous students as fieldwork at Old Salem involved area high school students, undergraduate and graduate students alike. And his research continues to reach countless visitors every year. And while his work at St. Philips has been a success, one that will likely continue for years to come, I imagine that there may have been times during the process when he thought that it may have been easier had he not returned to Salem. But I have a feeling that he would agree that he is better off for having made the journey. I believe that, even though there are still bridges to build, Old Salem and the communities that find meaning in the interpretation of the St. Philips complex are better for having made the journey with him. I know that for many of us that were privileged to come along as his students, to learn and grow and share as he traveled back and forth along the road to Salem, that we are better for having made the journey too. As the folklorist Henry Glassie once mused, "The reason for our science is to make us good humanists. The reason for humanism is to make us good scientists. The reason for our study is to make us good people" (Glassie 1977:27). Leland Ferguson may not have been the first archaeologist to explore the African American past, although he has been and continues to be one of the field's more influential shepherds. He may not be the only one engaged in public archaeology. But the ideal he consistently demonstrated, the courage to build bridges while bearing archaeological witness, is one of the best our discipline has to offer. And that is worth celebrating.

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