



Daniel G. Roberts Award for Excellence in Public Historical Archaeology: The I-95 Girard Avenue Interchange Improvement Project

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The Daniel G. Roberts Award for Excellence in Public Historical Archaeology was created to recognize outstanding, sustained accomplishments in public historical archaeology by individuals, educational institutions, for-profit or nonprofit firms or organizations, museums, government agencies, and private sponsors. Public archaeology entails a commitment to broad dissemination of the lessons learned from archaeology and the importance of preserving the archaeological record. The 2022 recipient of the award is the I-95 Girard Avenue Interchange Improvement Project (I-95/GIR), undertaken by the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (Fig. 1).

PennDOT Engineering District 6-0 and the FHWA are executing a long-term, multiphase project to improve and rebuild Interstate 95 in Pennsylvania. In compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and the National Environmental Policy Act, the project's Section GIR encompasses improvements to 3 mi. of highway centered around the Girard Avenue Interchange, which passes through the historic Philadelphia neighborhoods of Old City, Northern Liberties, Kensington-Fishtown, and Port Richmond. I-95/GIR has been the focus of 15 years of intensive archaeological investigations and local public outreach conducted by AECOM, the project's

cultural resource consultant. So far, over 2.5 million artifacts dating from ca. 8,500 years ago to the early 20th century have been recovered.

PennDOT District 6-0 and the FHWA are dedicated to preserving the archaeological record and history of these rapidly changing communities for generations to come. With agency support, the AECOM team has organized or participated in more than 100 public-outreach events attended by tens of thousands, contributed to journals and magazines, produced educational artifact postcards and calendars, and published four volumes of *River Chronicles: The Journal of Philadelphia Waterfront Heritage and Archaeology*. Three key elements of the larger public-outreach effort best highlight PennDOT and the FHWA's role in getting this wealth of information beyond the realm of preservation professionals.

For most cultural resource management (CRM) projects, interesting and pertinent archaeological information is often consigned to technical reports that can take years to complete and which are not readily accessible to or easily understandable by members of the general public. PennDOT District 6-0, the FHWA, and their consultant team are attempting to rectify this shortcoming by adopting an innovative, Web-based approach to sharing archaeological discoveries known as "Digging I-95" (<<https://diggingi95.com/>>). Serving as a digital portal for members of the public and professionals alike to access continuously updated archaeological information and interpretations, the site contains completed site reports, photo galleries, historical maps, and interactive 3-D images. As the project progresses,

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Fig. 1 The PennDOT I-95/GIR Project Archaeology Center in the Fishtown neighborhood of Philadelphia open to the public, 2019. (Photo courtesy of AECOM.)



hierarchical links and dynamic mapping that allow users to dig deeper and explore details of individual sites, properties, features, and occupants will be added, thus providing a greater understanding of life along the Delaware River waterfront through time, while enhancing the understanding of how to make archaeological data more user friendly and relatable.

In an effort to illustrate how the past remains preserved beneath the modern urban landscape, PennDOT, the FHWA, and the AECOM team have organized multiple public-artifact and interpretive exhibits over the past 15 years. These exhibits have included a series of one-night “pop-up” displays held in partnership with local community institutions, as well as two multi-month gallery exhibitions hosted by well-known public museums. Of the latter, *Digging the City: Archaeological Discoveries from the Philadelphia Waterfront* was staged at the Independence Seaport Museum in Philadelphia from September 2012 to February 2013 and was supported by a series of illustrated public presentations—each of which was dedicated to further exploring specific themes, periods of time, or distinct aspects of the recovered artifact collection. In 2016, discoveries from the I-95 Project were shared again with the public via an exhibition, *From the Ground Up: Archaeology, Artisans, and Everyday Life*, at the Museum of American Glass at Wheaton Arts and Cultural Center in Millville, New Jersey. In addition to interpreting Native

American artifacts, the exhibition focused on the glass and pottery industries that once thrived in the project’s historical communities and addressed personal and social issues that are still relevant today. The AECOM team supported this exhibit with self-guided gallery activities, in-service training for educators, guidelines for curriculum-based school tours, and family programs highlighting recently found artifacts.

Building on these experiences with temporary and short-term outreach programs, PennDOT, the FHWA, and AECOM anticipated and evaluated the many advantages of establishing a long-term public-outreach venue for the project, and in 2019 established the I-95 Girard Avenue Interchange Archaeology Center in the heart of the project area. Staffed by AECOM archaeologists (see the video at <<https://diggingi95.com/>>) and representing an ideal means by which to enhance the public’s understanding of the importance of preserving the archaeological record, the archaeology center is a working laboratory for processing artifacts recovered from the surrounding neighborhoods. Further, the center represents best CRM practices in terms of reducing transportation of artifacts and keeps their processing within the near neighborhoods. It also offers a unique interpretive experience in which visitors can discover more about the larger project, interact with archaeologists and follow each step as artifacts are processed, and learn about the archaeological excavations and material culture of the past through

artifact displays, an interactive kiosk, videos, and hands-on activities. Between April 2019 and the advent of COVID-19 in March 2020, the archaeology center was open free to the public 8 hr. each week and by private appointment, welcoming over 700 visitors during this period. In light of this ongoing success, PennDOT and the FHWA have committed to continue hosting the archaeology center for the duration of I-95/GIR construction, in or about 2029.

The entire project team looks forward to continuing a sustainable outreach program that will engage the public in the coming years while construction is ongoing.

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