



June 19, 2013

Mr. Matt Sharp
President
Sharp Entertainment
1071 Avenue of the Americas
7th Floor
New York, New York 10018

Dear Mr. Sharp:

I write to you as the president of the Society for American Archaeology (SAA) to express our concern about a new television series entitled “Dig Wars”, which premiered recently on the Travel Channel. We ask in the strongest possible terms that you take steps to alter the format of the program, which is highly destructive of our shared American heritage and contrary to the ethics of archaeological practice.

“Dig Wars” is described as follows in the television listings: “Three teams of relic hunters travel around the country to historic locations, racing to find the most valuable artifacts.” It is our understanding that two episodes have aired, covering excavations at Fort St. Philip, Louisiana, and Eastover Plantation, Virginia.

The SAA, founded in 1932 and one of the largest archaeological associations in the world with more than 7,000 members, has long-standing Principles of Archaeological Ethics. “Dig Wars” violates three of them: Stewardship, which involves working for the long-term conservation and preservation of the archaeological record; Commercialization, which opposes the buying and selling of archaeological objects and recognizes that such commodification results in the destruction of archaeological sites; and Public Education and Outreach, which underscores the importance of promoting public support for the protection, preservation, and interpretation of the archaeological record. Simply put, “Dig Wars” literally presents excavation as a treasure-hunting competition.

The archaeological record is precious, fragile, and non-renewable. Excavations are conducted after thorough exploration of other alternatives and consultation with descendent and other appropriate communities. Their scope and scale are carefully calibrated to achieve the maximum contribution to knowledge with the minimum necessary damage to the site—much like surgery. Once excavations are completed, including the careful and systematic recording of the location of features, ecofacts, and artifacts removed, the portion of the site that was excavated cannot be re-excavated. Archaeologists are careful to preserve buried history so that future techniques and approaches can tease more information

from the ground. All components of the excavation process are recorded and documented for future reference. Artifacts collected during archaeological projects are curated and stored so they can be made available for future researchers, educators, and public exhibits. Excavating in the manner demonstrated by this television show, with little or no regard for science, preservation, or future approaches, is unethical and robs our descendants of knowledge.

When the TV programs “American Digger” and “Diggers” premiered in the US, the SAA brought similar public scrutiny to the show’s producers and sponsors. We engaged successfully with the National Geographic Channel to alter their show, “Diggers”, so that it promoted archaeology and the public’s interest in the past without supporting or encouraging looting. Unfortunately, the producers of “American Digger” were not interested in a similar discussion. As a result, that show continues to alienate professional archaeologists and the much larger community of archaeological amateur enthusiasts. We hope that a similar situation does not occur with “Dig Wars”.

We strongly request that you contact and work with professional archaeologists. Your show can demonstrate that professional archeological discovery can be just as or more exciting than mere treasure hunting. SAA stands ready to consult with you on making your series a responsible reflection on how we can learn about the past through archaeological discovery. so that your show can demonstrate to the viewing audience how the methods they use to discover and excavate artifacts preserve, instead of destroy, our shared cultural heritage.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jeffrey A. Altschul". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Jeffrey Altschul, Ph.D., RPA
President