

Title – War in the Shadows: Interpreting Colonial Conflict in and Around New London, Virginia

Program of Study – History

Presentation Type – Print Poster

Mentor(s) and Mentor Email – Professor Donna Donald (ddonald@liberty.edu)

Student name(s) and email(s) – Luke Dixon (ladixon1@liberty.edu)

Category – Textual or Investigative

Abstract: This project investigates the challenges of interpreting history to the public without the help of related historic artifacts or structures. It centers on the explanation of the effects of military conflict in and around New London, Virginia during the French and Indian War and the American War for Independence. New London was the county seat of Bedford County for over twenty years before the county was divided in 1781 into Bedford and Campbell Counties. As a county seat on the frontier, the town became a hub for military activity in the region, from militia training to munitions storage and manufacturing. During the American War for Independence, the town housed an arsenal which produced gunpowder, bayonets, artillery ammunition, and cartridge boxes, along with various other military equipment. These supplies were distributed to the Virginia militia fighting with General Nathanael Greene during the Southern Campaign in 1781, which culminated in the Franco-American victory at Yorktown. New London's role in this campaign would have been lost, were it not for the efforts of a few local historians who have gathered and preserved copies and transcriptions of historic documents which attest to New London's military significance. The story of the New London arsenal is an important piece of local history, but it is challenging to interpret this history in a meaningful way for the public. None of the arsenal buildings have survived to the twenty-first century, and no archaeological

investigations have yet been conducted in the arsenal's suspected location. The only remaining building in the town which dates to the eighteenth century is Mead's Tavern, a structure recently purchased by Liberty for restoration. Public history seeks to spark a connection between the past and the present, but it is difficult to create that connection without the help of related historic structures and artifacts. Faced with these challenges, my team members and I sought to create an engaging interpretive exhibit which could tell the fascinating story of New London's military history to the public, in the absence of such items from material culture which often provide the context for historical interpretation. After researching both interpretive methodology and the military history of New London, we decided to form the exhibit around three dioramas, each depicting an event related to the town's military history, flanked by two posters which incorporated maps and images alongside interpretive text. Each diorama was made using historically accurate, painted 28mm miniatures, buildings, and terrain. These visually appealing dioramas successfully captivated the public during New London Day, the town's annual local history celebration, and many visitors were intrigued by the town's military past. The significant interest expressed by the public through conversation and through New London Day surveys indicates the potential for a more extensive interpretive program on the colonial history of New London in general.