



SOCIETY *for*  
HISTORICAL  
ARCHAEOLOGY

February 27, 2012

Ms. Kassie Canter  
Executive Vice President, Communications – Viacom Entertainment Group

Paul Mullins

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Dear Ms. Canter;

The Society for Historical Archaeology is an international organization dedicated to the study of the historic past. Formed in 1967, the SHA is the largest international scholarly association focused on the archaeology of the modern world (A.D. 1400-present). We are fortunate that so many people throughout the world find historical archaeology and everyday heritage fascinating and respect the process of archaeological interpretation and preservation. The Spike network program *American Diggers* professes to share this concern for documenting our national heritage, but it actually promotes the destruction of that heritage. It uses the knowledge compiled by historians and archaeologists to find and plunder the past and risks misunderstanding archaeological research, preservation law, and the community heritage that we all aspire to protect.

Historical archaeologists are fascinated by seemingly prosaic things like ceramics, food remains, and buttons because such objects reflect historical experiences of everyday people who might otherwise pass unnoticed. Many people who are not professional archaeologists become committed and reflective partners with archaeologists—digging alongside archaeologists, reading popular magazines, or watching thoughtful television programming—because they are also fascinated by everyday heritage and respect the complicated process of interpreting and preserving the archaeological past for all of us.

Mr. Savage's passion for history reflects that legions of archaeologists and historians provided stories that fueled his interest. Nevertheless, his show risks using that interest to destroy that past and reduce archaeological artifacts simply to commonplace things to sell. Every historical archaeologist will confirm that the overwhelming majority of the things we excavate are "valuable" not because they can be sold but because they are in many cases the only evidence to interpret some historical experiences and moments. *American Diggers* hazards fueling a misplaced audience desire to reduce history to something that can be bought and sold, and you risk misleading the audience about local preservation laws. As I am sure you have already found out, it is not easy to locate, let alone uncover, significant artifacts. However, all your audience will see is the American Savage team recovering astounding things from typical backyards and missing all the complexities of archaeological method, complicated local preservation laws, and the reality that few archaeological artifacts hold commercial value.

Archaeologists are meticulous because we care as much about the context of the artifact as the artifact itself. When something is taken out of context, its meaning is

simply lost. An archaeologist is not just interested in the artifact; rather, we interpret what a whole host of objects and documents can tell us about the past. Your series claims that "throughout the series, items of great historical and cultural significance will be found," but it is difficult to believe that any communities will learn more about their past after your team randomly picks out a few things that are aesthetic and potentially have some modest commercial value.

We are very disappointed that a show that purports to value our country's heritage seeks only to commercially exploit that heritage. We are advising all history-lovers to not watch the series and instead seek out one of the thousands of historical archaeologists in their community who share their commitment to preserving and interpreting the past for all of us.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Paul R. Mullins". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial 'P'.

Paul R. Mullins  
President