

John L. Cotter Award in Historical Archaeology



Carol McDavid 2007

Carol McDavid has established herself as an outstanding professional by using historical archaeology to engage local communities. She has also made significant contributions to our field by presenting papers and writing articles about her work in public archaeology. The Society for Historical Archaeology took great pleasure to honor Carol by awarding her the John Cotter Award in Historical Archaeology at the 2007 annual meeting in Williamsburg, Virginia. The award is presented to individuals at the beginning of their careers in historical archaeology for a single achievement that is truly outstanding in its respective category. Carol's accomplishments are noteworthy. She is one of the brightest new professionals helping to stimulate discussions about Diaspora studies and critical theory in public archaeology. Her high energy and enthusiasm for her work is evident in her scholarship about communities and her service to the public. She is a major force in helping to explore new avenues of inquiry in historical archaeology.

Since 1991 McDavid has been involved with the Levi Jordan Plantation archaeology project as the project's public archaeologist, first recruited by Ken Brown at the University of Houston, the project's principal investigator. As Brown continued to study the archaeology of the slave and tenant quarters at the site, McDavid helped develop a collaborative approach to the plantation's management and public interpretation. Drawing on critical theory and an increasing disciplinary acceptance of public archaeology as a legitimate scholarly activity, she helped form the Levi Jordan Plantation Historical Society, a nonprofit 501(c)3 organization. She took the question of power seriously; an early decision of the fledgling group was that if the African American descendant community did not want *any* public interpretation of the site to take place, none would. McDavid's initial research focused on finding out if this sort of effort would be possible at all. Once she discovered that the community wanted this public interpretation to happen, she, along with the society's three founders, worked tirelessly to recruit additional board members. By 1997 the society had evolved to what it is now—a multicultural group that includes descendants of both the enslavers and the enslaved.

The development of an inclusive board was vital to the success of the society and instrumental in the decision to sell the site to the State of Texas in 2002. The site is now managed by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, which is working with the society as it develops a museum and park. When opened, the Levi Jordan State Historical Park will be the only state park in Texas focusing specifically on African American life and history. A large portion of McDavid's work since the sale has been to insure that the society's focus on multiculturalism and inclusivity continues within a large governmental agency. She now serves on the society's board of directors and continues to provide input related to the organization's public archaeology programs.

Her work during the early period of the Jordan project was reported in her 1996 master's degree thesis at the University of Houston, entitled "The Levi Jordan Plantation: From Archaeological Interpretation to Public Interpretation." The work was also reported in an article, entitled "Descendants, Decisions, and Power: The

Public Interpretation of the Archaeology of the Levi Jordan Plantation," which was included in a themed issue of *Historical Archaeology* that McDavid coedited with David Babson in 1997. This issue (In the Realm of Politics: Prospects for Public Participation in African-American Archaeology) was the journal's first major publication on the public archaeology of African America. It included a number of other important papers which, taken together, helped create a scholarly and ethical agenda for public archaeology. During this period, McDavid began to focus on the critical examination of public archaeology—that is, to find new ways to both *do* public outreach and to *examine* it in scholarly arenas.

After completing the master's, McDavid studied in England at Cambridge University, working with Ian Hodder. She began to explore public archaeology in terms of the new technologies and to look at whether Internet websites can be a useful way of creating public interpretations of "sensitive" historical and archaeological material (in this case, the archaeology of slavery and its aftermath, tenant farming/sharecropping). She wanted to see if the Internet could be used to create a public archaeology discourse that was more democratic, open, multivocal, and relevant to diverse audiences than "traditional" public archaeology presentations.

In order to study this, McDavid worked with her Brazoria collaborators to create the Levi Jordan Plantation website <<http://www.webarchaeology.com>>. The site provides information about the lives of all the people associated with the plantation, including the Jordan family, the enslaved African Americans, and the postbellum tenant farmers and sharecroppers. It also includes scholarly articles written by Ken Brown and his students about the archaeological and historical research. Although the website has been instrumental in making the place better known to the public, the main thrust of McDavid's effort was to develop strategies to create the site in a collaborative way. Awarded a PhD in 2002, her results are reported in her doctoral dissertation, entitled "From Real Space to Cyberspace: The Internet and Public Archaeological Practice," and in a number of papers in journals and edited volumes.

In 2000 Carol became the codirector for public archaeology for the Yates Community

Archaeology Project, located in Freedman's Town, Houston, Texas. The project operates under the auspices of the Rutherford B. H. Yates Museum, Inc. <www.publicarchaeology.org>. By the end of the 19th century, Freedmen's Town developed as a vibrant center for the African American community. At the time Freedmen's Town was placed on National Register of Historic Places in 1986, it held more than 530 buildings constructed by its town's founders. Today, insensitive gentrification has left fewer than 30 structures. Drawing on the insights she learned in her work with the Jordan Project, McDavid is focused on making the public aware of the need for the preservation of this historically important black community. In 2003, because of her strong commitment to the larger Houston community, she was also appointed a member of the board of directors for the Harris County Heritage Society.

Carol's engagement with and interest in the archaeology of African America is not only intellectual and professional—it is personal as well. Like others of her generation, she lived through the tensions of the 1960s Civil Rights movement in this country. She sees the contemporary problems caused by racism and bigotry as not only the products of a divided, tormented past, rooted

in the horrors of slavery, but also as artifacts of the present. She believes that open, democratic, and multiple-voiced conversations about the past will, over time, gradually help society come to terms with the hurtful histories we share and act on that new understanding in our everyday lives. Her most recent writing and archaeological activism focus on finding ways to use public archaeology of African America to dismantle white privilege and address racist attitudes and assumptions about both past and present.

McDavid's work has made significant contributions to understanding the African Diaspora and public archaeology. Her civic engagement work addressing contemporary social issues is a model for a new generation of archaeologists who want to be socially responsible and engaged with descendant communities. She has made valuable contributions to the discipline, and she is committed to using historical archaeology to making the world a better place through her critical approach in public archaeology. Carol McDavid is a deserving recipient of the 2007 John Cotter Award in Historical Archaeology.

PAUL A. SHACKEL