

John L. Cotter Award in Historical Archaeology



Shannon Lee Dawdy 2008
(Adriana C. Photography, 2007.)

The Society for Historical Archaeology's John L. Cotter Award is intended, according to the award guidelines, to honor historical archaeologists who make a single, truly outstanding achievement early in their careers. On that basis, one might argue that Shannon Lee Dawdy's many accomplishments in less than four years as assistant professor of anthropology and of social sciences at the University of Chicago overqualify her for this honor. Fortunately SHA's Awards Committee (acting on a nomination submitted by Rebecca Allen and Vergil E. Noble) had the wisdom to recognize Shannon not for one of her major publications, of which there are several, but for her brilliant, insightful, and heartfelt ability to express the value of history and archaeology to all people—a rare aptitude evident throughout her work. Many of us try to communicate our knowledge and fascination with the past to the public, and that is a worthy and important goal, but Shannon does more. She reads the meaningfulness of the past in the lives of the people she meets and helps us all understand.

Much of Dawdy's young career as archaeologist and historical anthropologist has been devoted to the study of New Orleans, from its beginning in the French *régime* to today. After one year as a project manager with Earth Search Inc., she developed and for three years directed the Greater New Orleans Archaeology Program for the University of New Orleans. Those experience introduced Dawdy to the city's archaeology and forged her bonds to the community. When she left to pursue advanced degrees in history and anthropology at the University of Michigan, she drew upon those strong ties to guest-edit a thematic issue of *Historical Archaeology* devoted to creolization, while writing her dissertation. Now forthcoming from the University of Chicago Press

as "*Building the Devil's Empire: French Colonial New Orleans*, this work promises to reinvigorate the Gulf Coast's corner of French colonial history. Her greatest impact on archaeology occurred in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, which nearly destroyed New Orleans at the end of August 2005. During those first few terrible days, as everyone watched with horror and some wondered if "the city that care forgot" would be abandoned by a nation that seemed to have forgotten how to care, Shannon's first impulse was to help the people of that city—in her words, those "wonderfully expressive, improvisational, irreverent, impetuous, and eccentric" people of New Orleans who "live their lives with all five senses."

At the invitation of one of her professional mentors, the late Tom Eubanks, former state archaeologist of Louisiana, Shannon left the regular duties of her university post and embedded with the Federal Emergency Management Agency as a liaison to the state's historic preservation office, where her skills as historian and archaeologist and anthropologist would be tested. From that unique vantage point, at the heart of a debate about how, and whether, to save the material fabric of New Orleans' most damaged communities, Shannon sent the country and the world a series of remarkable first-hand accounts that included interviews by the *New York Times* and the BBC World Service and reflective articles later published in *Archaeology* and *American Anthropologist* as well as on the web at archaeology.about.com.

That life-changing experience, at once intensely frustrating and immensely inspiring, will continue to influence her approach to the past. She has drawn on the soul and spirit of that great creole city to give new purpose to historical archaeology. Through her future writings and her actions, our field will continue to benefit from the humanity of Shannon's archaeological sensibility. The Society for Historical Archaeology gratefully presents to Shannon Lee Dawdy the 2008 John L. Cotter Award in Historical Archaeology.

GREGORY A. WASELKOV