



# Daniel G. Roberts Award for Excellence in Public Historical Archaeology: The Montpelier Archaeology Department

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The Montpelier Archaeology Department has been actively engaged in public archaeology since the early 1990s, and over the past two decades has built the LEARN Archaeology Expedition Program (<http://montpelier.org/dig>) into one of the most robust public historical archaeology programs in the country. This has happened under the leadership of director of archaeology Dr. Matthew Reeves. As a department, Dr. Reeves's team has worked not only to ensure that archaeological research is a pivotal part of telling the whole-truth history at Montpelier (<http://montpelier.org>), the birthplace of the U.S. Constitution, but that a diverse set of publics participate in telling that story, be they descendants of people enslaved at Montpelier, visitors, volunteers, or metal detectorists. In so doing, the Montpelier Archaeology Department has clearly demonstrated a commitment to public archaeology deserving of the Daniel G. Roberts Award for Excellence in Public Historical Archaeology (Fig. 1).

Public archaeology at Montpelier began in the early 1990s, when the property was operated by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Each year, Montpelier hosted a week-long work-study program, and a small number of people began participating. By 2006, after the Montpelier Foundation had begun



**Fig. 1** The Montpelier Archaeology Department, recipient of the 2023 Daniel G. Roberts Award. (Photo courtesy of James Madison's Montpelier.)

operating the property, this program grew in partnership with Earthwatch. A few years later, the Montpelier Archaeology Department began offering the LEARN Archaeology Expedition Program on its own, offering 10–15 week-long residential programs each year for up to 15 participants. The LEARN program focus on covering four phases of the archaeological process: “Locating,” “Excavating,” “Analyzing,” and interpreting through “Reconstructing” archaeological sites. Through these programs, a “Network” of community members is built with Montpelier and archaeology. Since the program's inception, there have been between 100 and 150 participants each year, and there are dedicated “returners,” including the same group of participants that has been coming since the 1990s.

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Four different types of programs are offered: Location programs work with metal detectorists and archaeologists, conducting archaeological metal-detector survey. Excavation programs, the bulk of the offerings, bring non-archaeologists into the field to participate in archaeological excavations alongside professionals. Analysis programs engage the public in analyzing and caring for artifacts, ranging from ceramic mending to iron conservation. The reconstruction program engages the public in using historical trades to build wooden structures at archaeological sites. Participants receive broad exposure to the entire archaeological process (<<https://www.montpelier.org/learn/unearthing-the-past>>), not only learning archaeological techniques, but attending tours and lectures with archaeology staff about how archaeological methods are conducted, how results are determined, how descendant collaboration takes place, and how the power of place is critical to exploring the past. By the end of each program, participants have not only learned how to dig in a unit, but why that process is critical to the collective understanding of the past, and, in particular, how it relates to the nation's consistent struggle with slavery and racism.

Addressing these issues has been a focus of the department over the past 20 years, as the institution has increased its efforts to partner with descendants of the people enslaved by James and Dolley Madison. The archaeology department has been active in this partnership, beginning as long as two decades ago with collaborative excavations with the Gilmore family at their post-emancipation ancestral home, located on Montpelier grounds (Reeves 2004). This emphasis on understanding the whole truth about American history and doing so in partnership with descendants resulted in the Mere Distinction of Colour exhibition, a permanent exhibit launched in 2016 that has won six national awards. Archaeology was a critical component of this exhibit (<<https://ncph.org/history-at-work/mere-distinction-qa-part-2/>>), resulting in the complete excavation and reconstruction of six buildings: two double quarters and a single dwelling that housed enslaved laborers, two smokehouses, and an extant kitchen. Archaeology was also on display throughout the exhibit, both with visible objects as the focus of a number of displays and as the primary source for interpreting the interiors of buildings. In each instance these interpretive decisions were addressing the requests of descendants

to make their ancestors visible on the landscape and to emphasize their humanity. Through the LEARN Program, expeditioners, descendants, and volunteers were also part of the entire process: excavating the sites, participating in the analysis, and building the structures. As a result, the homes of the people held in bondage by the father of the U.S. Constitution are visible and prominent on the landscape, and visitors have no choice but to reckon with the whole truth of this nation's founding.

This work also created a critical intersection of public and descendant-engagement archaeological research that continues to guide the work at Montpelier. From this form of engaged archaeological practice, Montpelier archaeologists were part of a group of scholars, descendants, and museum professionals that met at Montpelier in 2018 to discuss best practices in interpreting slavery for the public. The final outcome emphasized both multidisciplinary research and community engagement as components of best practices for interpreting slavery at historical sites, published in *Engaging Descendant Communities in the Interpretation of Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites* (James Madison's Montpelier 2018) (<<https://www.montpelier.org/learn/tackling-difficult-history>>). Montpelier archaeology has sought to practice this form of collaboration in subsequent research and interpretive projects (Brock et al. 2022), receiving multiple grants for research and public interpretation from the National Endowment for the Humanities and Institute for Museum and Library Sciences for projects that include and emphasize collaborative research.

Montpelier has also sought to bridge a divide between archaeologists and metal detectorists. The location program has sought to align these two groups to work together to build community through a shared interest in the past (Reeves 2015). Dr. Reeves has been a vocal proponent of this partnership and has used Montpelier's focus on collaboration and community to host programs where archaeologists and metal detectorists work together to identify archaeological sites. This includes partnerships with MineLab, hiring metal detectorists on staff, and using the archaeology program as a model for cooperation in television programs. This form of mutually beneficial collaboration has resulted in the identification of numerous sites across the property and unlikely partnerships throughout the two disciplines.

Montpelier also builds public archaeology into the daily process of doing archaeology at a museum. Archaeology sites are open to visitors, as is the archaeology lab. Visitors are encouraged to talk to Montpelier staff—and the staff are trained in how to work with and communicate with the public. The archaeology lab has upward of 30 volunteers each year, processing samples, taking photography, and doing data entry across the country. Using digital tools, Montpelier is very active on social media and in exploring new ways to make the different steps of the archaeological process visible to the public. This publicly focused mindset ensures that no step or part of archaeology is kept behind closed doors and casts a wide net for the public to engage with archaeology from anywhere at any time.

Centering the public and stakeholders with archaeology would not have been possible without dedicated leadership and staff. The Montpelier Archaeology Department has been focused on ensuring that they not only bring onboard archaeological professionals, but also staff who are interested in collaborating with a variety of publics, communities, descendants, and organizations, while also advocating for anti-racist practice in archaeology (Minkoff et al. 2022). Through training programs, such as the Montpelier Field School, which focuses on both technical archaeological skills and instruction in public, and the internship program, which employs five recent graduates for a year doing public-archaeology work, Montpelier is also trying to ensure public archaeology is part of the discipline's future.

With a public-focused department, Montpelier has not only built a program that provides opportunities for the public to participate in archaeology, but has built a community whose members are invested in each other and in the work of exploring the past to make a better future. Lifelong friendships and communities have been built through this program. This type of community is no more visible than on the weekly Lunch and LEARN online lectures, which were attended throughout 2020 by between 60 and 100 participants, or in the continued collaboration with descendants, who recently formed their own 501c3, resulting in a vote to support structural parity (<<https://www.montpelier.org/learn/montpelier-board-restructure-parity>>) between the Montpelier Foundation and the Montpelier Descendants Committee (<<https://montpelierdescendants.org>>).

The fullest demonstration of the effectiveness of public archaeology at Montpelier came when the

Montpelier Board of Trustees went back on its agreement with the Montpelier Descendants Committee (MDC). The members of the archaeology department stood firmly in support of the MDC to the point of losing their jobs and facing suspensions. While this demonstrated the staff commitment to public archaeology, it was the outpouring of support and action from former staff, students, program attendees, and visitors who had learned, through their participation in Montpelier's archaeology programming, the importance and value of telling collaborative, descendant-led, truthful history at Montpelier. It was through their vocal support that parity with the MDC has now been reached at Montpelier.

This is the kind of transformative public-archaeology work for which public archaeology strives—not only to teach people about archaeology, but to see how it can be a tool to make the world better. At Montpelier, this has been done not only by being accessible to the members of the public, but by valuing their expertise, lived experience, interests, and contributions—be they metal detectorists, descendants, or visitors—and inviting them into the fold. It is through collaborative effort that Montpelier has built a community that not only understands the value of archaeology, but also how collective, communal, and cooperative LEARNING about the past can lead to stronger communities.

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