Thanks to the generous contribution of the Archaeological Institute of America and the Jane C. Waldbaum Scholarship fund, I had the good fortune to attend the Fort Davis Archaeological Project field school (FODAAP) during July and August of 2015. Under the direction of Dr. Laurie Wilkie and Ph.D candidates Katrina Eichner and Erin Rodriguez, FODAAP’s research focuses on the lifeways and interactions between residents of the Post and Town at Fort Davis, Texas after the Civil War (1867-1891) in order to investigate daily life and interrelationships among residents of different ethnic, racial, and gender identities. Of particular interest to the project has been the experiences of African-American Buffalo Soldiers, working women living on the frontier, and the changing ways in which people in the community related to each other in this diverse and shifting landscape.

The project began in 2013 but the 2015 field school was the first time excavations within the Fort Davis National Historic Site could take place. Three locations on the site were selected due to their potential for comparison: the Laundress Quarters, Men’s Barracks, and the Married Men’s Quarters. Throughout the project fellow students and I became exposed to standard archaeological field and lab procedures including: excavation, mapping, surveying, field photography, careful note taking, and historic artifact cleaning, cataloguing, and analysis.
Fig. 1: The author excavating.

Fig. 2: A student mapping stratigraphy.

Fig. 3: Panoramic shot of lab work at the National Park Service housing. Some students are cleaning artifacts and others are working on paperwork. Half of us lived at the NPS housing and the other half at cabins a 5 min drive away. We would usually work outside but it was raining heavily this day. It could be somewhat challenging having 13 people in one room but we made the best of it.

Fig. 4: The sun greeting us as we walk to the excavation site one morning.
It took about a week to become acclimated to the work schedule and the beautiful isolation of West Texas. We worked 6 days a week - in the field by 7:00 A.M. and done with lab around 5 P.M. Waking up at 6:00 A.M. was difficult for me at first as I had become accustomed to a leisurely 10 A.M. start during my senior year. But awaking earlier had its benefits. Each morning we were greeted with a beautifully stunning sunrise as we walked to the site and most of the fieldwork for the day was completed before it became too hot.

By the end of the second week I had become confident in independently excavating a unit and by the end of the season I felt as if I could teach someone else the basics of excavation reasonably well. However, what I believe will make my experience with FODAAP a lasting one is not simply the methods and skills I acquired. Those I am sure can be found at any field school. Rather, the project and directors’ emphasis on public outreach and engagement is what makes FODAAP special.

Since we were excavating in a very public area, it was not uncommon to have curious park guests stop by to see what we were doing. Each student was free to showcase what we were working on and to describe the focus of the project, essentially acting as a liaison between the archaeological community and the outside world. Along with these impromptu visits were more formalized forms of engagement. For example, each student was required to write a blog post, (that can be seen here https://ucbfodaap.wordpress.com/) and uploading photos to other social media sites was highly encouraged. We also had “public days” where the field directors and staff members would lead tours around the fort and explain what archaeologists do and how they come up with their interpretations. In a similar vein, we would share meals and cook with members of the community at least two to three times every week. Sometimes we would do the cooking and on other occasions we would get invited over to someone’s house or backyard to dine with them and their families.
Fig. 5: At a BBQ with NPS personnel and Fort Davis residents. One resident brought a collection of artifacts that he found on his property. We sorted and identified the objects for him. Katrina Eichner (left), one of the project directors, discuss with the resident about some of the more interesting pieces.

Fig. 6: A photo of a tour during a “public day”.
Fig. 7: Display made for public day showing off some common archaeological tools.

Fig. 8: Some team members posing in matching shirts made for the field school. We wore these both while working and around town. They helped us identify one another and acted as conversation starters with park visitors and Fort Davis residents.
For me, this emphasis on public engagement is one that I hope to incorporate in the future as I begin to pursue a career in archaeology. Attending the 2015 Fort Davis Archaeological Project in Fort Davis, Texas has been one of the most valuable and rewarding learning experiences I have had to date. I sincerely thank the Archaeological Institute of America for their generous contribution through the Jane C. Waldbuam Field School Scholarship for giving people like me, who could not otherwise attend a field school, an opportunity to experience archaeology first hand.

Fig. 9: Some locals going for a walk after the workday.