Internship with the Texas Historical Commission

When I was eight and nine years old, my family and I lived in Bulgaria and on weekends we would travel to Greece. Every time I saw the ruins of ancient Greek life I fell in love a little bit more with what I would come to know as archaeology. I knew I wanted to learn all the histories of civilizations, but did not know how to go about it. Fast forward a few (or twenty-one, twenty-two) years and I was interning with the Historic Sites Division of the Texas Historical Commission. I was lucky enough to intern for two wonderful curators and experience the many different aspects involved in their day-to-day work life. From newly arrived collections or sending collections out for conservation to visiting historic sites, I was able to experience a bit of everything and that, in the words of one of the curators, is what an internship is all about: getting a feel for what happens and the surprises our field can throw our way.

The Texas Historical Commission deals with, as its name states, Texas History and is dedicated to the preservation of said history. It was created in 1953 as the Texas State Historical Survey Committee and in 1990 its name changed to, as we know it today, the Texas Historical Commission. As I previously mentioned, I have lived outside that United States. However, upon moving back stateside and to Texas, I was still engrossed with history outside of the U.S. A few years ago I finally felt the pull to learn more about the rich history that makes up Texas. When the time came to apply for an internship, I decided that I could learn more about my field and about Texas history by interning with the Texas Historical Commission. I was accepted the same day I was interviewed and put in a few hours helping get the archaeology vault set up. Now, the Historic Sites
Division is located in the newly acquired curatorial repository. They moved into the building the spring of 2011 and during my internship, the fall of 2011, I was able to help finish organizing the vaults and setting up the second archaeology area. Also, the State of Texas just transferred control of much of the state’s artifacts from Texas Parks & Wildlife to the Texas Historical Commission. That also created an influx of artifacts to store that I was fortunate enough to deal with. It was great hands on work that let me experience what all is required to set up a proper work environment for curatorial work.

While the interns (myself and two other undergraduates from the University of Texas) have our own office to work in, for the most part we worked in the lab area. (See photo 1.1) The lab consists of two long tables that have retracted cords hanging from the ceiling for cameras, computers, extra lighting, etc. to plug into.

*Photo 1.1: Our lab work area.*
Along the walls of the lab are more long tables and plenty of shelves. The artifacts and human remains that are actively being worked on are located here, including all paperwork and related research material that has been collected. Everything else is kept in their corresponding vaults. If you needed to find any of us and we were not in the lab or the office, then we could be found in the receiving area located at the back of the building. With the lab still brand new, everyone wanted to bring in artifacts for us to get ready for storage or conservation. It started slow, but during my last month at the lab, we had plenty of drop-offs and pick-ups to keep us busy. It was another great aspect of training to experience first hand, from the unloading and comparing of inventories to cataloguing and packaging to each site picking up and rechecking inventories. It was definitely time consuming, but a “must do” for the job.

When the internship first began, I was constantly in either the archaeology vault helping the archaeology curator organize it fully, or in the office reading material pertaining to proper handling of artifacts and how to perform museum quality work as the artifacts were going out for conservation and some would eventually be placed on display at their related sites or even the Bob Bullock Museum. After I felt comfortable with the lab work requirements, I dove right into my first project, the Levi-Jordan Plantation artifacts. The Levi-Jordan Plantation was one of the largest cotton and sugar plantations in Texas, located in Brazoria County, south of Houston. It was at its peak in the mid-nineteenth century, however due to the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, sugar production declined and Levi Jordan eventually employed some of his twelve slaves as sharecroppers. Up until 2001, Jordan’s descendants owned the plantation when
it was then taken over by the Texas Historical Commission. Dr. Ken Brown, an archaeologist and professor, has done much of the work at the site along with Dr. Carol McDavid who has a website dedicated to the plantation, which can be found at http://www.webarchaeology.com. At the lab, my duties were to cross inventory all the artifacts from Levi-Jordan, so that both the Conservation Research Laboratory at Texas A&M and our lab had correct inventories. Each lab required different information, so it was not just a matter of copy and pasting. At the start of each day of cataloguing, I had to get the laptop set up, make sure the tables were clean, and then I would glove up and select a tray or bag and begin the inventorying. All in all there were well over 400 artifacts to inventory. (See photo 1.2)

Photo 1.2: Levi-Jordan artifacts waiting to be processed
Each artifact needed to have a THC (Texas Historical Commission) tag written out. Once that was completed, the THC tag and the original site tag were placed in a small plastic zip bag. The artifact itself was carefully placed in a size appropriate bag and the bag containing the tags was placed inside with the artifact. The original bags were then added to the recycle bin as they were not up to standards, as the artifacts had been collected anywhere from 15-30 years prior. Once a tray was completed, I would place the freshly re-bagged artifacts back in the tray, mark the tray as inventoried and shelve it, only to start the process again. When it came time to handle the two bags of ammunition fragments, I required a full table length to make sure nothing was lost. Inventorying the ammunition was not as simple as saying “3 bullet casings”. I found that, even with as much experience as I have handling guns, I still needed to do further research on the ammunition types, and the companies that were initialed and/or stamped on each casing. It was quite interesting trying to find out what UMCC and WRA stood for (Union Metallic Cartridge Company and Winchester Repeating Arms Co, respectively), the years in which they were active to narrow down specifications for each ammunition type, and where the closest manufacturer was to Levi-Jordan. Researching and finding out as much information as you can is what creates the historical background of each artifact. All the information for each casing I found was entered into each copy of the inventory. Once each individual smaller bad of ammunition was re-bagged and had a THC tag added to it, all of the smaller bags were placed into a larger bag (versus the larger artifacts held in the trays) and then marked as inventoried and shelved. Once all the trays and bags were inventoried and re-tagged, my next task was to compare the
inventories and make sure all the information was accurate and if anything was wrong, make note of what was missing.

After everything was 100%, I then began the arduous task assigning THC numbers and preparing the artifacts for travel to the Texas A&M CRL (Conservation Research Laboratory). One might wonder why I did not just label the THC numbers on the artifacts when I first made the THC tags for them. When inventorying and re-bagging the artifacts, I was given a somewhat numbered and filled out inventory, so I needed to make sure that there were no duplicate lines in the inventory or that a certain artifact wasn’t listed as being in a different group than it was currently in. As I stated, only once everything was complete could I then assign the permanent THC numbers. The packaging of artifacts for transport required me to create boxes, line them with bubble wrap and other packaging materials. Each box was required to have its own individual inventory as well, so as I added an artifact bag to the box, I had to copy and paste the pertinent information from original inventory into the box’s inventory. Once each box was full and properly secure, I would print out the inventory and also burn the inventory onto a CD. The boxes and CD were labeled with the site name and box number. The labels also included what type of artifact materials were in the boxes and if there was anything extremely fragile inside. This was to help expedite the process once the boxes arrived at the CRL. One of the things I learned as this point in the process, was that each box needed to remain at a user-friendly weight and that my version of user-friendly was too heavy for average person. Thankfully I found this out after I had my curator check my work on my first box. That was a very useful thing to learn. After I was finished
packaging up the artifacts, I ended up with six full boxes. (See photo 1.3) They were all labeled, inventories printed and CDs attached, ready to go. I was not present when the CRL came to pick them up, but last we spoke with them the artifacts were slow going to make sure damage was minimal to them during conservation. Always keep in mind that just because an artifact looks like it is in a decent, does not mean that it is. Underneath all the buildup, the metal or whatever material could be corroded and once conserved you could end up with nothing. The CRL does take x-rays of any artifact that may seem iffy to conserve. They do not want to waste your money or their time.

Photo 1.3: Finished Levi-Jordan artifacts ready for transport

After working on the Levi-Jordan artifacts for almost a month of my semester long internship, I was longing to see the site. We were all able to do a day trip out to the
site on Friday November 11, 2011. We were meeting Jim Joplin of the CRL there since he wanted to look at the sugar kettles at the site to check on their condition and if they would handle the drive back to A&M and survive conservation. (See photos 1.4 and 1.5). As the site is currently closed to the public, it was nice to be able to look around without a crowd.

*Photo 1.4 & 1.5: Sugar Kettles at the Levi-Jordan Plantation*

The house is still up off the ground since they had just finished excavating under it. (See photo 1.6) Due to the extreme weather near the Gulf of Mexico, the house was wrapped up to protect it from the humidity, rain, and insects.

*Photo 1.6 Levi-Jordan Plantation House*
We were given a tour of the site and shown where some of the slave quarters had been located as well as where the cisterns still were, albeit overgrown now. At each place, I wondered if it was where the men or women slept and what artifacts that I had handled had been used as a part of their every day life. Was this area where a female slave had fixed her clothing with some of the needles and thimbles we had? Did the male slaves take a break at night by their quarters and have a quick drink?

Towards the end of the tour, we were shown the bricks that made up the chimney that had been taken down when they raised the house. (See photo 1.7) Incredibly, they found bricks that had fingerprints imbedded in them. It definitely puts a little perspective on life when you come across something indelible like that.
The plantation property was huge at one time and the remaining land still is. Once they finish excavating as much as they can, and get the site running, it will be a great tourist spot, even if it does take a bit of navigating to get to.

After I completed work on the Levi-Jordan Plantation artifacts, I went to task on 4 other projects. They were: artifacts for Fort Griffin that will be housed in their site museum, one of the Tyler Seven Rifles, researching the history of a soldier from the United States Colored Troops, and textiles from Varner-Hogg. I first dealt with the Fort Griffin artifacts, but they were placed on the back burner so I could get a jumpstart on the Tyler Seven Rifle. I did not feel comfortable taking apart the actual gun for my first disassembly, so one of our colleagues brought of a reproduction rifle that he uses for civil war reenactments. I learnt the different parts of the gun, their names and the proper way to disassemble and reassemble them. Once I was confident in my newly honed skills, I went to task on the actual rifle. The Tyler Armory during the Civil War was known for using whatever parts necessary to create and/or fix any weapons. This particular rifle was no exception. Once disassembled, I filled out an Artifact Condition Report in which I notated any and all markings on the weapon. If it was scratched in the slightest bit, it has been permanently documented and I took photos of every marking as well. Before I could reassemble the rifle, I went online and did more research to find what markings should be on that particular rifle and that was when I found out that it was made up of a multitude of pieces and each piece may or may not be marked, depending on when the original weapon it belonged to was made. After searching gun collector websites, gun auctions sites, eBay, numerous visits to libraries around town and a number of gun shops,
I still do not have the complete identification of this rifle. As it is called a Tyler Seven Rifle, there are only seven intact rifles. It has definitely been an interesting journey and I am amazed at the amount of information you can find online, which was not available even five to ten years ago. After I had come to a decent standstill on the rifle, I switched to doing research on a soldier from the United States Colored Troops. As we are currently looking for any of his descendants or any family history at all, I cannot explain much more. Again though, I am surprised by how much information can be found online, yet still feel like there is not enough available!

When the Varner-Hogg textiles arrived, we got more than we bargained for. We three interns stopped our other projects and everyone at our lab jumped on the textiles. Ima Hogg definitely had an eye for some unique pieces and she was also a collector (perhaps even a border-line hoarder considering the number of similar items we dealt with). I was on property to receive the textiles. When they were backing their SUV up to our back door, we didn’t even fathom how much you could actually pack into a vehicle. The backdoors of the SUV opened and once you carefully picked up a stack of textiles, it felt like two more stacks took its place. We had carts and tables set up in the receiving area, and tried to sort out the fragile textiles from the less fragile comforters and napkins. Towards the end it was near impossible, but we managed. After the site employees left, we straightened out the piles and made a game plan on how to deal with the number of textiles. I’m still in awe even as I type this. My next day at the lab was spent sorting each textile on a scale of one to four, one being delicate and four being durable. We created an inventory sheet for when we were prepping each item for transport to the Starr
Family Home freezer. We started out placing three long tables together for the larger textiles. Each table was lined with thick plastic. The textiles were spread out on top, photo documentation was taken and then original tag information was notated on the inventory sheet. As we did not need to attach THC numbers to the textiles, new tags were not needed. We lined each textile with wrapping and then cut the plastic to size and wrapped the textile. Each one was taped securely to keep any insects inside the plastic during the freezing process. On the outside of the plastic we noted the scale grade (one to four) and also what the original tag number was so as not to open each package to figure out what it was. The smaller items that could be bagged were and followed the same procedure (i.e. photo documentation, separate inventory, etc). It took upwards of 3 weeks to finish this project due to the massive number of textiles.

The number of projects I had may not be many, but with the amount of work and effort that went into them, I feel proud of what I accomplished. I was lucky enough to land an internship with an incredible agency and my fellow interns and our curators are the greatest. I also found out that I got on as a volunteer, so I have 3 projects in the works already. The Tyler Seven Rifle, once I get enough information to back up the claim that it is a Tyler Seven, will be a THC web blog. Also, I will still be doing research on the United States Colored Troops soldier. And as for the Fort Griffin artifacts, I am in charge of creating an inventory, control all documentation (paper and photography), and research as much as I can about each artifact. These pieces are for a site exhibit about the life of women and children at Fort Griffin. I am quite excited about this and hope I will do a good job representing their history.
As an intern, I think what I learned best was how to learn. That might sound corny and backwards, but depending on your field, there are numerous ways to learn how your particular field works. The amount of research I have had to perform and the different routes I have had to take to do said research has been eye opening. And though I wanted to learn about Texas history, as I gained a deeper need to find out more about the artifacts I was dealing with at the time, it awoke a feeling inside that had been covered by a constant barrage of school work. As time consuming as an internship may be, you only gain as much as you put into it. I gained in twofold an immense amount of knowledge and an incredible amount of work experience that is only the tip of the iceberg. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to intern with the Texas Historical Commission and to Texas State for having an active internship program. I cannot wait to take my next step with the THC as a volunteer. Thank you again!!