



**Dr. John "Sam" Houston,
Visiting Brown Scholar
UP CLOSE & PERSONAL**

Born and raised in Dallas, TX, I was reared in a home where, despite its embrace of Southern gentility, religion and politics were robustly discussed and debated. Thus, from an early age, I was exposed to the notion that faith commitments have political consequences and that political positions can assume religious overtones. My fascination with the matrix of issues stemming from this observation set me on a career trajectory to become the teacher and scholar of Islam and comparative religious ethics I am today. My journey began at Baylor University where I studied history (B.A. '00) (and met Shannon, my spouse and life partner!) and continued on to graduate work at Princeton Theological Seminary (M.Div. '05) and Boston College (M.A. Philosophy '08). During this time, I decided to pursue study of the Islamic tradition, but wanting to first live in the Middle East and begin learning Arabic, Shannon and I moved to Abu Dhabi, UAE, where we resided for two years. In 2011, I enrolled in the doctoral program at Florida State University where I focused on modern Islamic thought and comparative religious ethics. I continued my study of Arabic in 2013 in Rabat, Morocco, on a U.S. State Department sponsored Critical Language Scholarship. In March 2017, I completed my doctoral work which included a dissertation analyzing the role played by Islamic mysticism in modern Islamic activist movements. Then in July, Shannon and I moved to DeLand in order for me to take the position of Brown Visiting Teacher-Scholar Fellow in Religious Studies at Stetson University, a position which I am thus far enjoying a great deal!

What drew you to the study of Islam?

I was initially drawn to the study of Islam for pragmatic reasons. Living in a post-9/11 world where to be an informed citizen required at least some knowledge of Islam and the Muslim-majority countries dominating newspaper headlines, I began reading about the religious tradition. As I gained a sense of its rich resources in the areas of ethical and political thought, I discovered that my early interest had transformed into outright fascination. By 2008, this discovery, coupled with the increasingly apparent reality that the academic study of religion required expertise in more than one religious tradition, led me to pursue graduate study in Islam.

Why is the study of Islam important now more than ever?

In our increasingly pluralist society and globalized world, religious and cross-cultural literacy are no longer luxuries but essential resources for maintaining the social contract. In the United States, such education is perhaps most urgently needed in regards to Islam and Muslims who, in this current moment of heightened Islamophobia, often find themselves the victims of intolerance and misunderstanding. A recent report from the Council on American-Islamic Relations found that since 2015 there has been a sharp rise in hate incidents directed at American mosques, such that they are now occurring at a rate of once every three days. While the study of Islam for purposes of fostering inter-faith and cross-cultural understanding is vital, I also believe that as an intellectually rich religious tradition with innumerable insights into the full range of human expression, Islam possesses qualities which intrinsically commend it to study.

How would you increase religious literacy in American public discourse?

To be sure, college and university classrooms serve as crucial spaces to increase religious literacy in American public discourse; however, in my estimation, strategies to carry out this important work should extend further into civil society. While this can take a number of forms, I believe that one impactful way lies in the K-12 public education system. Though this occurs to a certain extent through social studies and world history, the quality and depth of instruction can be lacking, often because teachers do not have the training and resources required to do this work properly. When it comes to teaching about Islam in public schools, scholars of Islamic studies are trying to play supporting roles in a number of ways, either by working with non-profits such as the Islamic Networks Group (ING) or by organizing workshops themselves, as was the case with a recent National Endowment of the Arts funded summer session led by Edward Curtis to educate K-12 teachers about the history of Islam in North America. There is however more work yet to be done.

Is Archaeology for Me? My Experience at Little Carlton.

By: Nathan Bodger



Like many students, I am not sure what I want to do when I have finished my bachelor's degree. I know I would like to pursue further education, but the area in which I will do this is as yet undecided. As many of you have probably noticed, University goes pretty quickly. Over winter break I realized that I was already halfway done, so I made up my mind to talk to my professors about possible graduate school programs and areas of study based on my interests. Unfortunately, this was no easy task, as my interests are about as diverse as the planet we live on, but the professors whom I talked to, including Dr. Bell, Dr. Smith, Dr. Lucas, Dr. Sutherland, Dr. Reddish and Dr. Reiter, patiently listened to me.

One topic that I have been consistently enamored with is history, and after talking to the aforementioned professors, I was encouraged to try my hand in the field of archaeology. Dr. Reddish and Dr. Reiter both put their resources at my disposal and helped me in my search for a suitable dig, which not only fit my interests but was feasible for me to take part in. I eventually settled on applying to the

Little Carlton dig, which involved the excavation of a seventh-century monastic site in North East Lincolnshire, England. This dig not only coalesced well with my major in religious studies, but was also convenient since I have family who live about 30 miles from the site. This dig was run by Sheffield University, and there was limited space for student volunteers. I explained my interest in archeology, and in the site in my application letter, and thankfully I was accepted into the program. I also applied for some funding via the Stetson Internship Travel Fund and was graciously awarded just enough money to make the experience possible, although, as with almost any endeavor of this sort, I did have to pay some out of my own pocket.

The dig itself was an incredible learning experience. Learning through the discovery of actual artifacts and features left behind by ancient people is a completely different experience from learning in a classroom. Instead of feeling removed, one feels an affinity with the ancient past and its people, especially when, as in my case, the items being excavated could well have belonged to one's own

ancestors. The sense of wonder evoked by archaeology aside, the work itself is rather strenuous. Every day we began work at 8:30am and finished at 5:00pm. Digging, lifting buckets, troweling, and brushing for 8 hours a day gets a little bit unpleasant after two weeks, especially when it rains, as it does a lot in England. Nevertheless, the finds from the site were quite incredible, and included thousands of animal bones, over 200 coins, dozens of pins, and a record breaking 26 styli. The finds not only supported the theory that Little Carlton was a Celtic Christian Monastic site, but also hinted at the site being a significant center of ancient scholarship.

Although I enjoyed my time at the Little Carlton dig tremendously, the experience taught me that the field of archeology is not one I want to pursue further. This however, is not at all a negative result. Just because I do not want to become an archaeologist, this does not mean that trying the discipline was a wasted experience. It just means I'm more informed about what I don't want to do, and therefore a little bit closer to deciding what I do want to do.

Alumni News

Nichole Cheslow '17 is working at Flagler County Insurance with offices in Bunnell and Palm Coast, FL. — **Patricia Medina '17** is pursuing a law degree at Howard University School of Law, Washington, DC. — **Chelsea Probus '17** is pursuing a master's in religious studies at Duke University, Durham, NC. — **Douglas Reddick '17** is pursuing a law degree at Florida State University College of Law, Tallahassee, FL. — **Alexandra Sullivan '17** is pursuing a master's degree in cultural anthropology at New York University, New York City, NY. — **Aviar Tatem '17** is Museum Curator Assistant at Museum of Art, DeLand, FL. — **Lynn Walsh '17** is an 8th Grade English teacher at Jefferson Davis Middle School, Jacksonville, FL. — **Christina Canalizo '16** is pursuing a law degree at American University Washington College of Law, Washington, DC. — **Bianca Manning '16** is working at Wells Fargo Bank, Orange City, FL. — **Manny Alamo '15** is a Social Service Professional for Stewart Marchman-Act Behavioral Healthcare. — **David House '15** is pursuing a Masters in Ethics, Peace, and Global Affairs at American University, Washington, DC. — **Elizabeth Fuller '15** is a Collection Management Technician at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Daytona Beach, FL. — **Robert Pruette '15** is teaching STEM at Northridge School Mexico, Mexico City, Mexico. — **Natalie Faria '14** married Ian Campbell '14 on May 27, 2017, at Stetson University, H. Douglas Lee Chapel, DeLand, FL. — **Christopher Dell '13** is pursuing a Master of Divinity degree at University of the South, Seawee, TN. — **Michelle Wildridge '13** is Chaplain at the Ocean County Holy Redeemer Home Care & Hospice, Toms River, NJ. — **Michael Wolodkowicz '13** is a Software Engineer at Digital Forensics, Reston, VA. — **Claire "Stubblefield" Helton '11** was ordained on October 21, 2017 at the Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, TX. Claire and her husband, Zach, welcomed their new son, Peter Wesley Helton in November 2017. — **Stacey Mann '11** is working at Straker Translations, Denver, CO as a project Manager. — **Elizabeth "Lovejoy" Maury '10** is Senior Librarian at SouthShore for the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library. — **Jessie Perry '10** started working at TeleTech, Daytona Beach, FL in September 2017 and married Steve Smith on October 20, 2017. — **Rebekah Jamieson '09** and her husband Jeff welcomed their new son, Joshua in October 2017. Rebekah is a Claims Analyst for a healthcare IT company. — **Thomas Parks '09** is pursuing a degree at Asbury Theological Seminary. — **Tara Holcomb '06** was promoted to Lieutenant at the Mount Dora Fire Department in January 2017, Mount Dora, FL. — **Ansley "Faulkner" Alfano '07** and her husband, Michael, welcomed their new daughter, Caroline Jane Alfano, born, March 2017. — **Mary Beth (Christian) McSwain '07** is a part time Associate Pastor for Family Ministries at First Presbyterian Church, Bradenton, FL. — **Gabriel-Maroun Shibly '08** is a Accounting Manager for the Orlando City Soccer Club, Orlando, FL. — **Daniel Puchalla '05** is an Assistant Editor for Design for the Anglican Theological Review. — **Jonathan Bailey '03** is pursuing a Master of Sacred Theology degree at Boston University School of Theology, Boston, MA. — **Amy Bucciarelli '03** is the Innovation Academy Academic Coordinator & Faculty member at the University of Florida Innovation Academy, Gainesville, FL. — **Tereza Schwarz-Maciano '03** and her husband Akylis welcomed their new twin boys, Leonidas and Vinicius, in December 2016. She also is pursuing a Master in Educational Leadership at University of Florida, Gainesville, FL. — **Christine Hinton '02** is a Religion Teacher at Father Lopez Catholic High School, Daytona Beach, FL. — **Richard Safford '76** is pastor at United Church of Angel Fire, Angel Fire, NM.