We spoke to Davenport about his new role and his plans for Getting Word.

Monticello Magazine: What drew you to this position?

Andrew Davenport: Monticello is among the best places in the world to learn about the past so that we can better critique the present and chart a better future. I am drawn to the power of the place and the opportunity to collaborate with inspiring colleagues, to listen to and learn from descendants of people enslaved at Monticello, and to interact with the hundreds of thousands of members of the public who travel from all over, and the many millions more who are tuning in online, to learn from our nation’s past.

Getting Word is one of the signature projects of Monticello and the Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies. It is a dream come true to be a historian at Monticello and lead this project. It’s not something I could have ever expected.

I began participating in Getting Word events in 2016, when Monticello hosted descendants for a campfire and a sleepover on Mulberry Row. That night is one of the indelible moments of my life. We stayed up all night talking around the fire, reflecting on the past and the odds that families and individuals had overcome from the era of slavery to the present.

I spent the next few years learning as much as I could about the people enslaved at Monticello and their descendants. As a Robert H. Smith Fellow at the International Center for Jefferson Studies in 2017, and as a research assistant for Getting Word in the summers of 2018 and 2019, I began to chart a path toward being a historian. Through Getting Word, I have met countless individuals -- descendants, scholars, friends and mentors -- who have changed my life and significantly expanded my worldview. There is much I hope to accomplish, but my greatest striving is to follow in the footsteps of my predecessors and be a responsible steward of the project for those who will come after me.

Getting Word has been made possible by the participation and candor of descendant families, along with the work of historians. Can you talk more about these relationships and how Getting Word has become a model for other work?

Getting Word is a collaboration between descendants and historians. There would be no Getting Word without the vision and leadership of historians Cinder Stanton and Dianne Swann-Wright, who founded the project with Ohio consultant Beverly Gray in 1993. Their work would have been impossible without descendants' courage to share their family histories. Getting Word historians have traveled more than 40,000 miles to research in archives across the country and have conducted 225 oral histories, the vast majority with descendants of people enslaved at Monticello. The research that has come out of the 28 years of this project's existence has in many ways been the invisible hand behind the visitor experience at Monticello, and its example has reverberated to dozens of peer institutions not only around the country but around the world.
You’ve talked about viewing *Getting Word* as an “archive of freedom” rather than an “archive of slavery.” Can you talk more about that distinction?

Although it was begun to learn more about slavery at Monticello, *Getting Word* is an archive of freedom because it traces the family histories of those who were once enslaved through the joys and challenges of freedom in the century and a half since the end of the Civil War and the abolition of slavery in 1865. Currently, there is no other site-specific oral history project our size that can make a similar claim. We are in new territory.

What makes oral histories so crucially important to the work Monticello does?

*Getting Word* co-founder Dianne Swann-Wright liked to say that “oral histories are a favorite way of passing on information.” I love that. Think about what it means when a grandparent relates stories about their youth, or about their family history, to their grandchildren. Those are sacred, never-to-be-forgotten moments.

I have often spoken to Aurelia Crawford, the *Getting Word* project assistant, and the project’s previous director, Niya Bates, about how families pour their stories into younger generations so that the oral tradition continues. There is no doubt that *Getting Word* families have honored this tradition from — and I am not exaggerating, because the record will bear this out — the 1700s onward.

Oral history is a way for people, oftentimes those who have been excluded from the historical record, to become narrators of their own experiences. Written records are not everything. Jefferson, as brilliant as he was and as important as he remains, curated his own legacy by excluding elements of his life that he wished would remain unknown. The extant oral histories of four people enslaved by Jefferson, and the oral histories recorded by *Getting Word*, have provided a rounder understanding of Jefferson as a human and of Monticello as a home not just to Jefferson, but also to dozens of Black families. We are richer because of this tradition of oral history.

What’s next for *Getting Word* under your leadership?

I will tell anyone who will listen about my five-point plan! As the project approaches its 30th year, our files are outgrowing the *Getting Word* office. A top priority is to professionally archive the project in the Jefferson Library. This will be the first step on our way to being able to share our files with researchers and the wider public. Fortunately, we have two gifted archivists, Suzanne Holt and Calvin Jefferson, a descendant of the Hemings, Evans and Granger families enslaved by Jefferson, to process *Getting Word*.

I am also hoping to increase the endowment of the project to ensure its continued success, continue to conduct oral histories and produce scholarship about the project, maintain and strengthen relationships with descendants, and grow our Promise Grant program, which provides gifts to descendants of *Getting Word* participants who are pursuing any form of continuing education. I can’t describe the thrill I had in August when I signed checks and sent them off to the colleges where descendants are chasing their dreams.

As a member of Monticello’s descendant community, what does it mean to you to work at Monticello today?

It is profoundly meaningful. I am a historian, and so I try to put everything into perspective, but I admit that even I am occasionally blown away by how the past comes to bear in the present. I am one of several Monticello employees who are descendants of people enslaved in Albemarle County, including at Monticello itself, and we often talk about feeling called to do the work we do. I like to think that we are being encouraged onward by the spirits of those whose lives were severely limited by enslavement and whose personal histories too often went unrecorded except on slave rolls, whose loved ones were oftentimes others’ property, and whose children added to the enslavers’ capital.

I consider it a distinct honor to be able to contribute to an institution that has committed itself to telling difficult truths. Monticello is a place where enslaved people resisted and survived and cared for one another, despite the nearly insurmountable hardship. It is also a place where my personal and professional mentors have done incredibly meaningful work. Monticello’s recent history is confirmation that sites of enslavement must change the narrative not only to become more transparent and inclusive, but also to be catalysts in the national conversation about democracy, justice and truth.

Learn more at Monticello.org/getting-word