

NINETEENTH CENTURY SMITHSONIAN ANTHROPOLOGISTS: CREATING A DISCIPLINE AND A PROFESSION

by Pamela M. Henson



When the twentieth century dawned, anthropology was firmly established at the Smithsonian. The U.S. National Museum had a substantial department devoted to the study of human culture, and extensive collections documented human life from around the globe. At the Smithsonian's Bureau of American Ethnology, led by the formidable John Wesley Powell, ethnologists and archeologists scoured the American West for remnants of Native American culture. Late nineteenth century American anthropology, rife with sometimes public controversy, was not a field of quiet contemplation. The Smithsonian played a central role in the emerging profession of anthropology, including ethnology, archeology, and philology, or what today we would call linguistics.

How and when did anthropology become such an important part of the Smithsonian Institution (SI)? In 1838, almost 50 years after the Revolutionary War ended, the United States sent out The United States Exploring Expedition to assert the nation's status as equal to the imperialist nations of Europe. The six navy ships circumnavigated the globe from 1838 to 1842, mapping the earth, exploring Antarctica, and collecting cultural materials from around the world. Aboard the ship was a crew of "scientifics," men trained in natural history who were charged with collecting and studying the botany, geology, zoology and cultures they encountered along the way. (More about the Expedition is available at www.sil.si.edu/Digital_Collections/usexex/). Secretary of War Joel Poinsett (for whom the Poinsettia was named) eagerly received the many shipments of specimens and artifacts sent back during the expedition. He also began to plan for a place where about forty tons of these precious "curiosities," including 2500 ethnographic and ar-

chaeological specimens, could be stored, preserved and studied. In 1840, Poinsett helped create a "National Institute for the Promotion of the Arts and Sciences." For its growing collection, the Institute was allotted space in the Patent Office Building's exhibit gallery, in a building that now houses the National Portrait Gallery and the Smithsonian American Art Museum. The Institute struggled with inadequate funding and hoped to secure control of an unusual bequest from an English scientist.

The Founding of the Smithsonian Institution

That mysterious bequest came from a wealthy English chemist and mineralogist named James Smithson. The illegitimate son of an English gentlewoman, Elizabeth Keate Hungerford Macie, and the Duke of Northumberland, Hugh Smithson Percy, Smithson struggled all his life to establish his status in British and Continental society. His will of 1826 left his estate to his nephew, Henry James Hungerford, then a young man. But Smithson added a peculiar clause. He stated that if his nephew died without heirs, legitimate or illegitimate, then his estate was to go to the United States to found in the City of Washington, under the name of the Smithsonian Institution, an establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men.



James Smithson

This was so unusual that the will's text was published in the *Times* of London and the *New York American* after Smithson's death in 1829 at the age of 64. But Smithson's nephew was young and healthy, and by all accounts, quite adept at spending money, so the clause was viewed as an interesting but unlikely prospect. However, just six years later, in 1835, Smithson's nephew died and the extraordinary clause went into effect. In 1838, the British Court of

Chancery awarded the estate to the United States. As the USS *Mediator* brought the proceeds of Smithson's estate (bags of gold coins worth \$508,318.46) across the ocean to the United States, the U.S. Exploring Expedition was just setting out across the Atlantic, in search of knowledge about all areas of the globe. The fates of these two ships were inextricably linked, their cargoes forever intertwined (Ewing 2007).

However, it took some time for these forces to play out. Smithson's gift was not welcomed by all. Anti-federalists opposed accepting a gift to the nation. Debates soon emerged over what the unknown English scientist had meant by the phrase "increase and diffusion of knowledge." The debates went on for over a decade until compromise legislation was passed on August 10, 1846, creating the Smithsonian Institution as a trust instrumentality of the United States—a public trust to carry out Smithson's mandate for the increase and diffusion of knowledge. But what exactly would this Institution be with such a vague will and broad legislative mandate? A university, an astronomical observatory, a national library, scientific laboratories, agricultural or mechanics institute, a botanic garden, a museum—there were many possibilities, and they included what was later called anthropology. Section 6 of the legislation established that "objects of foreign and curious research" and all objects of natural history belonging to the U.S. government, including the collections that had been held by the National Institute, were to go to the new Smithsonian to be preserved and studied.

The Board of Regents governing the new Institution first turned to building a suitable structure to house the Smithsonian, choosing a medieval-type design that they believed would inspire academic ideals. The building would house research, a national library and a national museum. This national museum would meet the need of the young nation for a temple of national identity that would place the United States on a par with the great capitals of Europe (Field et al. 1993).

As the first "Secretary" of the Institution, the Regents chose the noted physicist Joseph Henry, a professor at the College of New Jersey (now Princeton). Although reluctant to turn from his pioneering research in electromagnetism to the responsibilities of running a national museum or library, Henry took the legislative mandate seriously and established a "Programme of Organization." He divided the areas of knowledge into "sections," and

Section II, The Moral and Political Class, included Ethnology, incorporating particular history, comparative philology, antiquities, etc., providing a founding rationale for what would become Smithsonian anthropology (Henry 1847).

In the belief that the need to both increase and diffuse knowledge deserved equal weight., Henry established the Smithsonian's publication program and the International Exchange Service. This service distributed American publications throughout the world in exchange for foreign publications, which were then distributed to colleges and academies across the U.S. (Crawford 1897).

The first Smithsonian publication in 1848 was a work of anthropological research, *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley*, by Squier and Davis. With its fine illustrations, the publication established that the new Smithsonian would publish on serious research topics important to the United States—a key statement about the Smithsonian's intended role (Squier and Davis 1848).

The Original Collections

The Smithsonian soon received the scientific collections once held by the National Institute, including the natural history specimens and ethnographic materials collected by the U.S. Exploring Expedition. These and other ethnographic materials included extensive field notes, drawings, and artifacts, ranging from textiles, basketry, jewelry, masks, statues, tools, weapons, and household goods. They included items such as a portion of the lid of a mummy case from "Sacara" (Saqqara), donated in 1842 by the diplomat and Egyptologist George Roberts Gliddon (1809-1857). The items were carefully documented as to their provenance and use, making this a valuable collection for research. Cultures documented ranged from the Northwest Coast Indians to the Maori of New Zealand, from the Egyptians to the Hawaiians (Henson 2004).

Placed on display in the central hall of the new Smithsonian Institution Building, or the Castle, the exhibits immediately proved popular with the public, attracting a growing audience of curious visitors. These original collections were soon supplemented with a steady stream of new donations from around the globe. U.S. ambassadors, missionaries, scholars, and adventurers collected and sent objects back to the new museum. But Henry was very ambivalent about the museum and library. Maintaining collections was very expensive, and Henry feared



Exhibits in the Great Hall of the Smithsonian Castle, 1867.
Photo courtesy Smithsonian Institution Archives.

the collections would use up the Smithsonian endowment and leave little or no money for basic research. He believed the artifacts and specimens were valuable for research, but that a museum would only have local impact and limited educational value. Feeling similarly about the library, Henry had it removed from the Institution in 1865 and sent to the Library of Congress (Rothenberg et al. 2002).

The Emergence of Smithsonian Anthropology

Anthropology and its subdisciplines were just beginning to emerge as fields of research in the mid-nineteenth century. Indeed, many of the Smithsonian's early anthropologists began their careers in other fields: geology, mineralogy, or invertebrate zoology, to name a few. Fascinated by the cultures they encountered throughout North America, these scientists turned their attention to documenting the human, rather than the natural world. Secretary Henry was very supportive of anthropology, especially the field of linguistics. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, the Smithsonian supported the collection of Native American vocabularies. In 1861, George Gibbs published *Instructions for Research relative to the Ethnology and Philology of America*. Initially a mineralogist, Gibbs who worked for the Smithsonian without pay,

stimulated the collection of vocabularies and other ethnological information by missionaries and the Bureau of Indian Affairs staff and worked to publish the data (Hinsley 1981).

Gibbs' interest in the relationships among languages stimulated other work, including that of the early anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan who called for an ethnological map. The Smithsonian issued a circular (or questionnaire) for Morgan's map and served as a central point for data collection. After the founding of the Bureau of American Ethnology in 1879, John Wesley Powell and his staff further systematized the linguistics work and the ethnographic map project. Throughout the 19th century, the Smithsonian published linguistic works in the appendices to its annual reports in the *Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge*, and later, in the bulletins and annual reports of the Bureau of American Ethnology.

The museum side of anthropology continued to grow as well. In 1850, Spencer Fullerton Baird, a broad-based naturalist, was hired as the first curator of the Smithsonian. He later became the first director of the U.S. National Museum and the second Secretary of the Smithsonian. In contrast to Henry, who worried about the expense of keeping collections, Baird dreamed only of directing a great national museum and encouraged the donation of collections. Baird himself studied kitchen middens along the coast of Maine.

The museum's anthropological collections grew rapidly. In the 1870s, many ethnological artifacts were displayed in the Castle. For the purposes of comparison, Native American ethnological specimens were juxtaposed with artifacts from China, Japan, and prehistoric France. Along the arcades were portraits depicting American Indian delegates who visited Washington between 1858 and 1869, painted by the U.S. National Museum artist Antonio Zeno Shindler. Until they were destroyed in a fire in the Castle in 1865, the John Mix Stanley collection of North American Indian portraits had hung in the Castle. The 1850s, 1860s and 1870s were the decades of the exploration of the American West. Museum director Baird ensured that scientists accompanied almost all of the military and geological surveys of the West, and that the artifacts and specimens collected came to the Smithsonian. The Castle was soon packed with birds, dinosaurs, and baskets (Henson 2000).

The Centennial Exhibition of 1876

In the 1860s, Charles Rau, a language teacher in New York, began to write papers for the *Smithsonian Annual Report*. Having established a reputation as an excellent archeologist, in 1871, Rau was hired to prepare the ethnological section of the Smithsonian's exhibits at the Centennial Exhibition of 1876 in Philadelphia. The popular and well-received Centennial exhibits established the Smithsonian's reputation internationally. Objects such as a Tsimshian housefront were added to the growing collections and were soon on display in the Smithsonian building. Shortly after the Centennial, Secretary Henry died and Spencer Baird was appointed the second Secretary in 1878. Baird focused his energies on constructing a separate U.S. National Museum, now known as the the Arts and Industries building, and hiring a staff of professional curators. In 1881, as the museum opened, Rau was appointed Curator of the Department of Archeology. Until his death in 1887, Rau built the collections, organized the museum displays, and continued to publish in the Institution's journals (Hinsley 1981).

Rau was joined in 1884 by the new curator of ethnology, Otis Tufton Mason, a professor at Columbian College (now part of the George Washington University) in Washington, D.C. There, he and Powell had established the academic study of anthropology in the 1870s, and Mason received one of anthropology's first Ph.D's from the Columbian College in 1879. In the same year Mason helped found the Anthropological Society of Washing-

ton, the parent organization what would become the American Anthropological Association. Like Rau, Mason had worked on the exhibits for the Centennial Exhibition as a volunteer, beginning in 1872. Mason was influenced by the evolutionary ideas of Gustav Klemm, a German scholar. Using an evolutionary framework, Mason developed exhibits as synthetic series that demonstrated, he believed, the progress of a specific field of technology through all stages of development, from the most primitive societies to modern civilization. He believed that such exhibits reflected the stages through which human societies had advanced in their cultural development. Mason's "synoptic series" exhibits were attacked by Franz Boas, who argued that they were not based on data and that exhibits should focus on ethnic groups, not technological series. But Mason was first and foremost a collector, who believed that objects, more than anything else, told the story of human history (Hinsley 1981).

The expeditions to the American West were a great source of collections for the Smithsonian, but they also produced another great resource—anthropologists, such as William Henry Holmes and John Wesley Powell. The expeditions also led to the formation of a new organization at the Smithsonian—the Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE). Like many others on their travels west, Holmes and Powell had become fascinated by the artifacts of existing and earlier Native American cultures.

William Henry Holmes

As a child, William Henry Holmes (1846-1933) was equally interested in art, natural history, and geography. Those interests would serve him well in his long career with the Smithsonian. He was first hired as scientific illustrator for the Smithsonian in the early 1870s. In 1872 he was hired as an artist and geologist on the Hayden Yellowstone Survey and made his name as a major figure in the exploration of the West throughout the 1870s. In the 1880s, he continued working on surveys for the newly created U.S. Geological Survey and soon headed its scientific illustration division.

But Holmes had become fascinated by the Native American materials he encountered out West. His artistic eye was soon analyzing ceramics and other artifacts for patterns and relationships. He was named a curator of anthropology in the National Museum. In 1889 he joined the staff of the Bureau of American Ethnology, but soon left for the Field Museum in Chicago. He returned to di-



Anthropology exhibit at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, 1876. Photo courtesy Smithsonian Institution Archives.

rect the BAE from 1902 to 1909, albeit reluctantly. In 1909 he was appointed Head Curator of Anthropology in the National Museum, where he remained the rest of his life. In 1920, he was also appointed Director of the Smithsonian Gallery of Art and oversaw its expansion into a major museum. A man of many talents, Holmes exemplified the self-taught amateurs who became professionals in the second half of the 19th century. He set high standards for accuracy in scientific illustration, in geological mapping, and in analysis of artifacts.

He also was well-known for refusing to believe that the stone points found by collectors were from an ancient society—he argued they were incomplete rejects from modern Native Americans. He was not convinced until 1926, when Jessie Figgins carefully excavated an extinct bison with Folsom points embedded in its ribs. Only then would Holmes accept the antiquity of Native Americans in North America.

John Wesley Powell

The geological surveys of the American West produced another towering figure in Smithsonian anthropology: John Wesley Powell (1834-1902). Like Holmes, Powell was interested in natural history as a youth. With some course work at Wheaton and Oberlin Colleges, he soon became well-known as an amateur natural historian, as well as a collector of Native American materials. He served in the Civil War and lost his right arm below the elbow at the Battle of Shiloh. After the war, Major Powell, as he was known, taught at Illinois Wesleyan College and began systematic surveys of the Colorado Rockies. In 1868-1869, he conducted his first anthropological studies among the Ute tribe. In May 1869, with support from a variety of organizations, including the U.S. Army and Smithsonian Institution, Powell led a daring and epic adventure down the Colorado and Green Rivers. When he and his party emerged from the Grand Canyon on August 29, the first Westerners to ever see and document the Colorado River in Grand Canyon, Powell was an instant hero. He received government appropriations for his subsequent surveys, and his *Explorations of the Colorado River* and later publications were well-received.

In 1872, Powell was appointed a special commissioner of Indian Affairs and served as an informal advisor to Congress on Indian affairs, western land policy, and science policy. His *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region*



John Wesley Powell with a Paiute Indian near Kaibab Plateau. Photo by John K. Hillers, 1873. Courtesy Smithsonian Institution Archives.

of the United States argued for careful control of western water sources; it was ignored at the time but is now regarded as visionary. In 1879, Major Powell was appointed director of a new organization within the Smithsonian, the Bureau of Ethnology, renamed later the Bureau of American Ethnology. Powell remained in that position until 1902, simultaneously running the U.S. Geological Survey, also created in 1879. Powell advocated a strong federal science program and the application of scientific principles to government policies such as land use (Hinsley 2981; Judd 1968; Noelke 1974).

Powell's BAE was the leading center for American ethnology in the late 19th century. It was also the home of a number of fascinating personalities, men and women who bridged the transition from amateur to professional. Interestingly, the BAE employed or supported a number of early women anthropologists, who were seen as uniquely able to work with women informants (Lurie 1966; Noelke 1974).

Matilda Cox Stevenson and the Zuni

In 1879, shortly after the BAE was founded, geologist James Stevenson was sent to Zuni Pueblo to conduct archaeological studies. He was accompanied by his formidable wife, Matilda or Tilly as she was known, who studied the role of women in Zuni society, especially domestic practices and childrearing. She then turned to the complex and fascinating Zuni spiritual world. After her husband's

death in 1888, Tilly Stevenson continued doing field work and producing publications for the Bureau. Her aggressive style of gaining access to rituals was often criticized, and she is remembered for her ability to intimidate the feisty director of the Bureau, John Wesley Powell. As with many women who depart from the norms of female behavior, Tilly Stevenson is often remembered more for her personality than her scientific contributions. But her colleagues acknowledged that she had a fine grasp of the significance of Zuni ritual; indeed, the Zunis permitted her unusual access to rituals because they believed she understood their meanings and purposes. She did not romanticize the Indians' place in American society. She saw acculturation as leading to a breakdown of Zuni values and social structure, a loss, not gain, for the Zuni. Mrs. Stevenson was on the payroll of the BAE for many years as an independent researcher who reported to BAE managers but did not work directly for them. She worked at home, struggling with ill health and alcoholism. When the Bureau furloughed her in 1901, she exerted her considerable political influence and kept her status until she completed her major work on the Zuni in 1904 (Hinsley 1981; Judd 1968).

Alice Cunningham Fletcher and the Omaha

At about the same time that Stevenson arrived at Zuni Pueblo, Alice Cunningham Fletcher took up the study of Indian culture. In 1879 she traveled from Boston to Omaha, Nebraska, to begin studies of Omaha culture. Fletcher loved the rigors of living in Indian villages and was motivated by a desire to improve Indian life. Her ethnological



Mountain Chief, Chief of Montana Blackfeet, listening to song being played on a phonograph and interpreting it in sign language to Frances Densmore, 1916. Photo courtesy the National Anthropological Archives.

reports on the Omaha were usually published by the BAE, sometimes coauthored with Francis LaFlesche, an Omahan who became like a son to her. LaFlesche was on the staff of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and later the BAE. Fletcher was named a collaborator of the BAE and used this connection to secure publication of her research. Unfortunately, she also was a strong advocate for social change. She secured passage of a bill that created homesteads for the Indians but cost them free access to a larger set of lands. Since the Omaha community never took well to settled farming, her program of social amelioration led to further deterioration of their culture and economic status (Hinsley 1981; Judd 1968; Welch 1980).

Frances Densmore and Indian Song and Dance

These women paved the way for Frances Densmore, who also worked as an independent scholar with BAE support after the turn of the century. Educated at Oberlin, she combined interests in music and ethnology to create a career studying Indian song and dance. Armed with wax cylinders, she traveled across the country recording Indian music, analyzing the relationships between tribes and the significance of ritual in Indian life. From 1907 to her 1957 death, the Bureau paid her though she never worked in residence in Washington. The Smithsonian Densmore Collection of Indian song contained over 2400 songs by the time of her death. She described and transcribed each



Alice Cunningham Fletcher. Photo courtesy the National Anthropological Archives.

song and collected Indian instruments for the Museum. She analyzed the songs musically and described their relationship to Indian culture. She completed a volume on the music of four Southwestern tribes in her 90th year. Unlike Stevenson, she had fine relations with the tribes she studied, and unlike Fletcher, she did not romanticize their role in American society (Judd 1968).

The Establishment of a Profession

Anthropology provided fine career opportunities for women of independent spirit committed to research. None was ever in residence at the museum; perhaps as a corollary to their independent status, all three devoted their time to research and publication, rather than menial or clerical duties. None ever entered management, but Alice Cunningham Fletcher founded the Women's Anthropological Society of Washington since the original Anthropological Society of Washington (ASW), founded by Mason, did not initially admit women. In 1903, however, Fletcher became the first woman president of the ASW, when the two organizations merged. These women pioneers, like Stevenson and Fletcher, established a role for women in anthropology and moved beyond studies of domestic life into studying all aspects of culture.

By the mid-1880s, the BAE was an established institution, beginning to exert authority over American anthropology. The Smithsonian, which itself came into being through a curious intersection of American national aspirations and an emergent western interest in natural history as an adjunct to imperialism, played a central role in the emergence of anthropology as a profession. In America, this profession was focused especially on the ethnology, linguistics and archaeology of Native Americans. The BAE also had fostered the careers of several early anthropologists, including several women. Washington, with its professional societies, colleges, National Museum, and the BAE was the American center of the new discipline until the early 1920s when the anthropology departments in several universities, including Harvard and Columbia, were exerting leadership in the profession as well.

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