

OBITUARY: WILLIAM C. STURTEVANT AND THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

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The discipline of anthropology lost a leading figure with the March 2, 2007, passing of William C. Sturtevant, Curator of North American Ethnology at the National Museum of Natural History of the Smithsonian Institution. This essay updates the biographical sketch I published previously (Jackson 2002), and also provides specific observations on Sturtevant's work as a historian of anthropology. Further information on Sturtevant's life and career can be found in Merrill and Goddard (2002).

William Curtis Sturtevant was born July 26, 1926, in Morristown, New Jersey, the first of three children of Alfred Henry Sturtevant and Phoebe Curtis Reed. His father was a pioneer in genetics, and in 1928 moved his family to Pasadena, California, where he was appointed a professor in biology at the California Institute of Technology. His father's older brother, Edgar Howard Sturtevant, was a leading professor of linguistics at Yale University, where he specialized in Hittite and Indo-European languages.

Sturtevant earned his bachelor's degree from the University of California, Berkeley, where he studied between 1944 and 1949. His progress was interrupted by a year's service in the U.S. Naval Reserve, during 1945-1946, when he was stationed on Guam. This represented only a delay in studies that were focused and progressing well. He was awarded his degree in anthropology with Highest Honors. Reflecting on his Berkeley training, he judged particularly important the courses he took with John Rowe, Mary Haas, Robert F. Heizer, David Mandelbaum, and Robert Lowie (1955:3). Sturtevant's commitment to Native American studies was steadfast, dating to lessons on Indian life and history he had as a third grader. While he was an undergraduate, he participated in an archaeological field school at Chaco Canyon and a UNAM summer school in Mexico City. These experiences contributed to his later interest in Spanish ethnohistorical sources.

Immediately after earning his B.A., Sturtevant began graduate studies in anthropology at Yale University, receiving his Ph.D. in 1955. At Yale, anthropological linguist Floyd Lounsbury especially influenced him. Lounsbury's example, together with his training under Haas at Berkeley and Bernard Bloch at Yale, solidified Sturtevant's commitment to linguistic approaches within anthropology. Such methods and theories were already at the core of Americanist anthropological scholarship as consolidated by Franz Boas, but Sturtevant became an exemplar of this tradition during a period when it was transforming on some fronts and being de-emphasized on others. Sharing Sturtevant's commitment to linguistically sophisticated ethnography was his friend and fellow student Harold Conklin; together, they wrote the first article he published, a thorough study of Seneca musical instruments (Conklin and Sturtevant 1953). Beyond its ethnographic significance, this paper was an early example of rigorous ethnosemantic method, an approach to which both scholars later contributed theoretical works

(1964c). Sturtevant's interest in the West Indies derived from work at Yale with Irving Rouse (Sturtevant 1960b).

In 1950, Sturtevant began a life long research relationship with the Seminole people of Florida. During his doctoral research, he worked most closely with Josie Billie, an important Seminole "medicine maker" (1960a). This early research generated a steady stream of essays in ethnography, oral history and ethnohistory that established him as a leading figure in the anthropology of the Eastern United States. Most important among these contributions is his dissertation, an ethnoscientific ethnography of Seminole medicine, ritual and botany (1955). It stands among the most comprehensive and sophisticated studies of ethnobotany produced in the 20th century, and it remains crucial to the study of Woodland Indian cultures.

Sturtevant's Seminole work was complemented by research among the Iroquois, which he began while he was a Yale student (e.g., 1984). He also spent relatively brief periods doing fieldwork throughout the Eastern Woodlands and undertook broad study of the ethnohistorical sources about it, which provided background for his comparative studies. His research also informed his advocacy, in congressional testimony and other forums, for federally unrecognized Indian groups in the region (1983). Furthermore, he was actively engaged in library and archival work throughout the Americas, from Amazonia (1998) to the Arctic (Sturtevant and Quinn 1987). Outside the Americas, he did ethnographic fieldwork in Burma, making extensive ethnographic collections for Yale's Peabody Museum of Natural History (Harold Conklin, personal communication, 2007) and the Smithsonian (Merrill 2002a:21).

Soon after receiving his Ph.D., Sturtevant left an instructorship at Yale and a curatorship at its Peabody Museum, to take up positions at the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of American Ethnology, first as Ethnologist and later General Anthropologist, from 1956 until 1965. Then, the Bureau was merged with the Department of Anthropology in the U.S. National Museum (later the National Museum of Natural History), and Sturtevant became Curator of North American Ethnology. He remained an active participant in Smithsonian anthropology up until the time of his death. Most prominent among his Smithsonian projects was the *Handbook of North American Indians*, of which he served as general editor (1978–2007). The handbook is an exhaustive, multi-volume reference work on anthropological, linguistic and historical knowledge about native peoples north of Mexico, an essential resource for those interested in Native American societies.

Working throughout his career in museum contexts, Sturtevant was active in the fields of museum anthropology and the study of material culture. He insisted that museums were important to general anthropology (1973), developed methods for anthropological museology (1977), and conducted research on museum collections (1967). In 1979–1981, he served as president of the Council for Museum Anthropology.

Sturtevant was also a central participant in the development of ethnohistory as an interdisciplinary field of study. He served as President of the American Society for

Ethnohistory in 1965–1966, and his essays helped to frame and solidify this developing field (1968, 1971). His work in the development of ethnohistorical methods, along with the breadth of his anthropological interests, provided the foundation for his work as a historian of anthropology.

His service as a member of the Editorial Committee for the *History of Anthropology Newsletter* was just one of the many ways in which Sturtevant contributed actively to the advancement of this research field. The frontier separating Sturtevant's work as an ethnohistorian and historical ethnologist from his work in the history of anthropology is difficult to isolate in any non-arbitrary way. He saw understanding the history of anthropology as prerequisite for sound anthropological practice, but his work on the history of the discipline was linked to his other research in complex ways. Sturtevant's interests in historical ethnography and ethnology led him to consider particular moments in the long history of contacts linking the peoples of the Americas with the rest of the world after the Columbian encounter. This work led, in turn, to both his development of refined methods for assessing diverse forms of ethnohistorical data and to his efforts to understand proto-ethnography, both contextually, as an unfolding process of cross-cultural encounter, and as a means to ethnological ends.

This thread in his work as a historian of anthropology is represented by his significant contributions to the study of early documents recording encounters between Europeans and the peoples of the New World. His work in this type of research is truly remarkable in its breadth and depth. Examples of his writing include "John White's Contribution to Ethnology" (1964b), "Louis-Philippe on Cherokee Architecture and Clothing" (1978), "Patagonian Giants and Baroness Hyde Neuville's Iroquois Drawings" (1980), and (with David Beers Quinn) "This New Prey: Eskimos in Europe in 1567, 1576, and 1577" (1987). The full corpus of such studies, when combined with his general historical analyses of intercultural topics running from the most hostile ("Scalping" [with James Axtell], 1980, and "Cannibalism," 1991) to the most pacific ("Black Drink and Other Caffeine-Containing Beverages among Non-Indians," 1979), provides a comprehensive picture of European–Native relations over a vast expanse of time and space. Contemporary anthropology, for Sturtevant, was part of a broader, continuous and much longer history of cross-cultural documentation and engagement.

The largest and perhaps most influential body of work in this vein, within Sturtevant's oeuvre, specifically concerns the complex historical problems associated with European pictorial images of New World peoples, societies and customs. Sturtevant produced a remarkable corpus of studies examining particular bodies of visual imagery, and he identified many themes grounded in general historical processes. He tracked genealogical influences over time, as illustrators drew upon earlier images in addition to first-hand observations. Such findings led to deeper understanding of the nature and origins of visual stereotypes. This work provided techniques for using historical images in research, and demonstrated that historical images must be carefully contextualized in order to insure that generalizations based on them are sound. He himself provided an array of insights and information from his own study of thousands of images. This

aspect of his work was carefully examined by Merrill (2002a: 28–30), who also compiled a useful bibliography of Sturtevant's writings through 2001 (2002b) that includes a vast range of works on such matters.

Another kind of contribution to the history of anthropology are the numerous biographical sketches and obituaries that Sturtevant authored over a career in which he was centrally placed in the field's professional networks. Examples of such work include his obituaries for "John Mann Goggin" (1964a) and (with Harold C. Conklin) "Floyd Glenn Lounsbury (1998), as well as his assessment of "Mary R. Haas and Ethnology" (1997) and his festschrift contribution "R. F. Heizer and the *Handbook of North American Indians*" (1981).

Sturtevant was a meticulous and widely read scholar, one who always seemed open to engaging in active scholarly debate. He also favored the essay and the note as genres. These characteristics converged in a predilection for contributing scholarly corrections and commentaries to the literature. One can see these impulses at work, and their relevance for the history of anthropology, in writings such as "Royal Incest: A Bibliographic Note" (1981), "Asians Before Columbus?" (1994), and (with James B. Griffin, David J. Meltzer, and Bruce Smith) "A Mammoth Fraud in Science" (1988), which chronicled the forgery of an archaeological artifact, supposedly a Paleoindian artifact of Pleistocene age picturing a woolly mammoth or mastodon. Such writings play a particularly useful role in the historiography of anthropology. Similarly, Sturtevant was a prolific reviewer of books and exhibitions, including many works on the history of anthropology. Doubtless, future workers in this field will draw upon his erudite assessments of books published during the half-century in which he was an active reviewer of publications. His exhibition reviews will offer a glimpse of this much more ephemeral medium of scholarly production during an era of remarkable change in professional museum practice.

An additional field of historical research is represented by Sturtevant's contributions to the history of research in linguistics and linguistic anthropology. Here he notably contributed to describing the history of work in Southeastern North America. Examples of such studies include his "Siouan Languages in the East" (1958) and his synthetic "History of Research on the Native Languages of the Southeast (2005).

The question of William Sturtevant's place among historians of anthropology can be viewed from a very different perspective if one considers him as himself a subject for historical study. Here one can return to a few biographical facts for orientation. In addition to his presidency of the American Anthropological Association (1980–1981) and of those organizations already discussed, Sturtevant served as President of the Anthropological Society of Washington (1992–1993) and the American Ethnological Society (1977). He also received numerous grants and fellowships. Brown University awarded him the degree of L.H.D. in 1996. The Smithsonian's National Anthropological Archives will house his voluminous collection of professional papers. These will constitute a major resource for several fields of inquiry, from the social history of anthropology to the historical anthropology of Native North America.

The rich collection of essays edited in his honor by William L. Merrill and Ives Goddard in 2002 included a personal biographical essay by his sister Harriet Sturtevant Shapiro, a detailed professional biography compiled by Merrill (2002a), the list of his published work through 2001 (Merrill, 2002b), as well as essays by leading anthropologists who drew inspiration and insight from Sturtevant's work and personal influence. This edited volume will long remain a key document for situating his professional activities within the wider history of 20th century anthropology. Thankfully, while this work can be found in research libraries worldwide, it is also currently available for free online, and can be downloaded from the webpage for "Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology," a program of Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press (see www.sil.si.edu/smithsoniancontributions/Anthropology, accessed June 4, 2007).

In 1952, Sturtevant married Theda Maw with whom he raised three children, Kinthi D.M., Reed P.M. and Alfred B.M. (deceased). They divorced in 1986. In 1990, he married Sally McLendon, also a leading anthropological linguist and Americanist. On June 5, 2007 a ceremony celebrating William C. Sturtevant's life and work was held in the Baird Auditorium of the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution.

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