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CLIO'S FANCY--DOCUMENTS TO PIQUE THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

I. LIFE ON THE FRINGES OF SCIENCE: THE CASE OF CHARLES C. ABBOTT

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One hundred years ago the number of institutions in this country supporting investigation in any branch of anthropology could have been counted on the fingers of one hand. Consequently the individual with neither independent income nor institutional affiliation faced constant struggle for recognition; a livelihood from the science was hardly to be expected. Even those fortunate enough to establish an institutional contact frequently suffered from feelings of isolation, inferiority, and dependent status. Whatever the sufferings for science of the great institution-builders--Putnam, Powell, Boas--from the outside their positions appeared comfortable and secure.

Charles C. Abbott of Trenton, New Jersey, was one such fringe contributor. Abbott began picking, digging, and buying up Delaware Valley Indian artifacts in the early 1870s, establishing a relationship with Frederic W. Putnam of the Peabody Museum that lasted more than 40 years. Abbott's Primitive Industry (1881), which claimed to establish the case for "paleolithic man" in the Trenton gravels, opened one of the great debates of American archeology. The book did little, however, to change Abbott's professional status, and for years he continued to waver between his love of relic-hunting and his need to provide for his family. Chafing at his existence on the fringes of archeology, Abbott saw Putnam as his only hope and yet the symbol of his own professional limitations:

But what of the future? Mere arrow-head gathering is impotent to suggest a single new thought, and I seem like Othello, to be without an occupation. Surely to go on digging in the gravel will not tell us anything new; altho' of course additional specimens are desirable, and will be procured, whenever I get a chance to dig. . . .

If in the course of your thoughts from day to day, in archaeological matters, any question arises, which you think it possible, I may be able to throw some light upon, by some new style of field work or otherwise, please let me know. I honestly feel, as though my work now was without any definite object. . . . Have pity on me, and send me an idea!

(Abbott to Putnam, Fall, 1878)

Yesterday, it was finally decided that I was to accept a clerkship in the [Trenton] "Saving Fund" here, and I go on duty on Dec. 1st. Thus, therefore, is closed my career in science of all kinds, and it is fit that I should say a few words with the last box [of specimens], as it is possible that there will be no further correspondence between us.

Of course I cannot but feel bitterly the disappointment that such a step was necessary, but so it has proved, and I mean to succumb to fate with as good grace as possible. You cannot realize how great a treat it was to me, living in this brainless town, to visit Cambridge occasionally. To be shut off from doing this, for all time, is of itself hard for me to think of. I have had no hopes however, of late, that I could get on this winter, so it is easier for me. There was yet much in local archaeology that I should like to have done; one point of "mud deposits and argillite arrowheads" I especially desired to work up; but I cannot do this in the miserable hours left after "office hours" . . .

Forced out of the ranks of scientific workers, of course you will all very soon forget me, but I have one request to make. Please do not erase my name from the lists of recipients of your Annual Reports. It will be a pleasure to me to yearly note your progress. Of course, all idea of arranging my own collection is abandoned; and I can only hope that whoever does it, will have some respect to my views as to what that arrangement should be; especially in the three main heads of Palaeolithic, Intermediate, Indian.

Let me heartily thank you, for the many kindnesses of the past years, so full of happiness to me, and to express the hope that your future will prove as brilliant and joyous to you, as mine now bids fair to be monotonous and aimless.

(Abbott to Putnam, Nov. 20, 1881)

Abbott did not, however, leave archeology. In 1889 he became the first curator of archeology of the new University Museum in Philadelphia, but resigned after three stormy years in Philadelphia and moved back to his Trenton farm. As the issue of paleolithic man heated up in the 1890s Abbott, no longer working for the Peabody, became incensed at Putnam's caution in publishing the Trenton discoveries of Abbott and his successor in the field, Ernest Volk. In a series of scathing letters Abbott heaped on Putnam all the professional frustrations of 30 years:

You call my recent letter "interesting." I am glad you found it so. It was more than that, for it stirred you to a sense of duty in the matter of Volk's work here. You otherwise would not have arranged for sending a geologist; but your brief letter, at hand, tells more than you intended. It is often easy to read between the lines. You are afraid to come although one half day at Volk's trenches would teach you more than a year in any museum. Possibly additional knowledge of American Archaeology would be burdensome and necessitate additional lecturing. If so, I can understand your aversion there-to.

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Probably you advocate patience; but I am annoyed, at times, by the tiresome squibs about the "silliness of the suggestion" of paleolithic man. Such rubbish, as you know, finds facile birth in Philadelphian and Washingtonian atmospheres. You know all of this, as well as I do, yet you have the coolness to say nothing will hurry you in making any report. But does it not occasionally enter your mind that something may hurry me? I can just as easily as Volk or yourself--more so, as I command a far more ready pen than either--publish a report of the explorations here in last eight years, and render your report totally unnecessary. I do not throw this suggestion as a threat, but please bear in mind that self-preservation is the first law in nature, and if you continue to refuse to put Volk's work before the public, I will be forced to. . . . Years ago, when I was toiling in the field and building up the collection I gathered, you did not keep so close-mouthed, and I fail to see that there is more reason for it now. . . . Leave to the Angel Gabriel the trumpeting of the truth as to paleolithic man; the facts and the end of the world coming together. Such is your admirable plan . . .

(Abbott to Putnam, May 22, 1899)

(The 1878 and 1881 letters are in the Peabody Museum Papers; the 1899 letter is in the F. W. Putnam Papers. They are printed with the kind permission of the Putnam family and the Harvard University Archives.)

II. SCHOOLCRAFT AND MORGAN ON THE HYPERBOLE OF AZTEC HISTORIANS

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When Lewis Henry Morgan wrote "Montezuma's Dinner" in 1876, ostensibly as a review of Hubert Howe Bancroft's Native Races of the Pacific States (1876:263-308), his thesis countered a tradition which saw the Aztecs as an advanced civilization. Morgan, of course, was quite critical of such claims and of the Spaniards who advanced them. Recently writers have taken Morgan to task for his interpretation. Although Morgan's antipathy for the Aztecs is generally seen in the context of his theory of social evolution, one factor which has been overlooked is the possible influence of his ethnologist friend, Henry Rowe Schoolcraft. During the 1840s Morgan was often in close contact with Schoolcraft and may have imbibed some of the latter's views on the subject of Aztec civilization. While this is of course difficult to prove, there is nevertheless a rather close parallel between Morgan's denigration of the Aztec civilization as expressed in "Montezuma's Dinner" and Schoolcraft's views as presented in his Personal Memoirs of a Residence of Thirty Years with the Indian Tribes on the American Frontiers (1851:160-161).

Nothing is more manifest, on reading the "Conquest of Mexico" by De Solis, than that the character and attainments of the ancient Mexicans are exalted far above the reality, to enhance the fame of Cortez, and give an air of splendor to the conquest. Superior as the Aztecs and some other tribes certainly were,