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W. H. Holmes and the Folsom Finds

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FOOTNOTES TO THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

W. H. HOLMES AND THE FOLSOM FINDS

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In her recent work, Four Anthropologists: An American Science in Its Early Years (1980), Joan Mark examines W. H. Holmes' forty year battle with proponents of an American "Paleolithic" age. Mark observes that there is apparently no record of Holmes' reaction to the discovery, in the late 1920s, of man and extinct animals at Folsom, New Mexico. The issue is of some interest as the evidence from Folsom, and the many similar sites found in the years that followed, was of a sort not previously dealt with by Holmes. These were kill sites with unequivocal associations of man and extinct vertebrates. Their antiquity was not based on the presence of artifacts that look 'rude' or analogous to European Paleolithic material; nor was there any possibility of the association of man and the fauna being due to random factors (mixing and the like). As a result, Holmes's time-worn arguments against a Paleolithic age in North America--that the 'rudeness' only reflected manufacture and that the geological associations were fortuitous--became irrelevant.

Recently I came across an exchange of letters between Holmes and E. H. Sellards that might shed some light on Holmes's reaction to the Folsom finds. Sellards, it is worth noting, had clashed with Holmes in the late teens of this century over the alleged association of man and extinct vertebrates at Vero, Florida. Holmes' reaction to these finds was to make his by-then standard remarks on the possibility that mixing had occurred to throw the materials together, but then they ended on a rather caustic note. He felt the evidence "recorded by Loomis at Melbourne as well as those obtained by Sellards and others at Vero, are not only inadequate but dangerous to the cause of science" (Holmes 1925:258).

In 1930, when much of the tide of opinion had shifted toward the acceptance, or at least toward a more open-minded position on the issue of man's antiquity in North America, Sellards wrote to Holmes. The relevant portions of their letters are given below. Both letters are in the Holmes Papers, #7084, Box 2, Folder 6, Smithsonian Institution Archives, and are published with their permission.

Dr. W. H. Holmes
Cosmos Club
Washington, D.C.
February 24, 1930

My dear Dr. Holmes:

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At the time I was working on the Vero material in Florida I had one or two letters from you. At that time you felt very strongly that man could not have been in this country as early as the Pleistocene.

It has now been nearly fourteen years since that work was done in Florida and it has been followed up, as you know, by Loomis and Gidley. In the meantime, a number of localities have come to light in this part of the country* which may require careful and detailed consideration. I am wondering, therefore, what may be your feeling towards this problem at the present time? My own work has kept me very busy in other lines but I may find time for some further investigation along this line during the next few years. I have the feeling that such problems are not solved by the argumentative attitude but only by a continuous accumulation of the necessary foundation facts.

Your work in the sciences of geology and anthropology has been extensive and I am sure that you have had occasion to consider these matters very carefully.

Very sincerely yours,

(signed) E. H. Sellards

*Sellards at the time was at the University of Texas, Austin.

March 6, 1930

My dear Dr. Sellards:

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I remember taking part in the early discussion of the Pleistocene formations in Florida and my rash attempts to follow this discussion without actual personal knowledge of the geological formations. My discussions related only to my fear that the explorers were committing themselves to definite conclusions without sufficient knowledge of the dangers of misinterpretations due to disturbances of the consolidated deposits of a region often upset by tremendous hurricanes.

I have now dropped the matter entirely, and am perfectly willing to accept the conclusions of the skilled men who are carrying on researches with the full knowledge of the problems and the dangers. I wish them all every possible success, and have no trace whatever left of the vigorous antagonism that arose from my early battles with the advocates of a paleolithic man and culture of Eastern United States.

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Sincerely yours,

Director

Holmes's rather muted response, certainly not unexpected in a man entering his 84th year, is in sharp contrast to the rather "vigorous antagonism" that marked his previous published and unpublished comments on the antiquity issue. And, perhaps unfortunately for the historian, it does not expressly reveal how the champion of the anti-Paleolithic forces would have mustered his arguments. On the other hand, perhaps his simply dropping the matter is revelation enough.

As a footnote, I have discussed this issue with Drs. Henry B. Collins and T. Dale Stewart, both of whom were beginning their own noteworthy careers as Holmes was ending his. Both remember Holmes as a formidable and rather austere presence, and though neither directly discussed the issue with Holmes, Collins in particular felt that Holmes never doubted the essential correctness of his position. As a consequence, Collins suggests that Holmes did not accept the Folsom evidence.

Holmes, W. H., 1925, "The Antiquity Phantom in American Archaeology," Science 62 (1603):256-258.

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

Jay Bernstein (graduate student in Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley) is doing research on Laura Watson Benedict (1861-1932), one of the earliest woman anthropologists, who did fieldwork among the Bagobo in Mindinao in 1906-07, going on to take a Ph.D. under Boas at Columbia in 1914.

Laird Christie (Wilfrid Laurier University, Ontario) is doing research for a biography of the nineteenth century Canadian ethnologist Horatio Hale.

Ruth Harris (doctoral candidate, History of Science, Oxford University) is doing research on French criminal anthropology in the late nineteenth century.

Dell Hymes (Education, University of Pennsylvania) is planning a collection of essays on the history of linguistic anthropology to be published in the series edited by E. F. Koerner for John Benjamins.

William H. Schneider (History, University of North Carolina at Wilmington) is working on the history of eugenics in France, and on the development of physical anthropology. He has recently been working on a paper entitled "From Cephalic to the Biochemical Index: French Physical Anthropology, 1890-1940."

Robert H. Thornton (Anthropology, University of Cape Town) is doing research on the development of ethnography as a scientific genre, focusing on the early ethnography of east central and southern Africa, 1890-1920. He presented a paper entitled "The Rise of the Ethnographic Monograph in Eastern and Southern Africa, 1850-1920: The Moral Motive and the Market for Ideas" at the Washington meeting of the A.A.A. and is currently involved in organizing a conference on "Ethnography and Literature: Comparative Perspectives on the Narrative Portrayal of Small-Scale Societies."