Circular 316: archaeology, networks, and the Smithsonian Institution, 1876–79

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Introduction

On November 26, 1874, Chicago's *Daily Inter-Ocean* ran a story featuring William Berridge, resident of the town of Pecatonica, Illinois, who had discovered an ancient burial while digging a well on his property. 'After he had got down about ten or fifteen feet,' the article noted, 'his spade struck into something hard, which turned out to be a human skull.' Berridge, it seems, took little interest in his finds, but word spread quickly 'and the people flocked from all parts of the country to see these WONDERFUL REMAINS.' (*Daily Inter-Ocean*, November 26, 1874).

Late-nineteenth-century American newspapers like the *Daily Inter-Ocean* were abuzz with stories of antiquarian discovery. The *Memphis Avalanche* chronicled remains 'found on Mrs. Imogene Beaumont's place, situated on Lake Cormorant, De Soto County, Mississippi' (*New Orleans Times*, July 12, 1874), and dozens of similar accounts were published. Collectively, such reports demonstrate that antiquities were a common element of American rural life, engaged with interest and curiosity.

Such evidence for the popular appeal of archaeology in the United States during the decades following the American Civil War also exposes the chaotic state of 'professional' practice in that era. Diverse communities of interest flourished in the American hinterland. Antiquarian entrepreneurs amassed collections and dealt artifacts through extensive networks; local and regional societies pursued fieldwork, published reports, and promoted cultural achievement. Competition between these communities and networks was commonplace. In particular, structures

of inquiry – access, interpretation, authority – were the subject of vigorous debate.

Leaders of nascent national institutions understood the popular appeal of American antiquities, and made use of it to establish control over archaeological practice. The Smithsonian Institution – in particular, its founding Secretary, Joseph Henry – played a central role in this process of professionalization. Although his own research concerned electromagnetism, Henry promoted archaeology, publishing five archaeological reports in his first decade as Secretary via the new *Contributions to Knowledge* series (Whittlesey, 1850; Squier and Davis, 1848; Squier, 1850; Lapham, 1855; Haven, 1856). Such effective use of the publishing resources of the federal government put Henry in position to shape the structures of knowledge and practice in the nascent discipline (see Hinsley, 1981; Henry, 1996).

The Smithsonian's program of professionalization, however, was entirely reliant on a network of antiquarian collaborators. The Institution had no professional staff, and a limited budget to support research. Most of the *Contributions to Knowledge* studies arrived as substantive manuscripts, sent by antiquarian entrepreneurs from states where archaeological sites were being exposed by settlement, land clearance, and cadastral surveys. Shorter communications from interested parties also traveled along the network. There was little pattern to these reports, or consistency in their content. Artifacts were sent as well: managing this flow of information became a major problem. When naturalist Spencer Baird became Assistant Secretary he took personal interest in the collections (see Henson, 2000), but keeping track remained difficult.

The antiquarian communities of the United States had a generally positive response to the Smithsonian's collection of information about the indigenous past. The Institution's imprimatur was a mark of status and a source of potential support for local initiatives. Henry occasionally funded modest fieldwork and collecting projects, and such investments were eagerly sought. For instance, in February 1854 the vice-president of the New Orleans Academy of Sciences paid a call on Henry and Baird while visiting Washington: his report described the meeting as focused on shared collecting opportunities, as well as potential 'exchanges' that would 'make a very handsome nucleus for a museum for the Academy' (New Orleans Academy of Sciences, 1854: 62).

There was, however, inherent tension in the relationship between the Smithsonian and others in the antiquarian networks. As local institutions and scholarly 'circles' matured throughout the American south and midwest, tension between national sanction and local achievement became more common. Collectors or agents working in support of Smithsonian projects were seen as rivals to locally based entrepreneurs.

As the museum functions of the Smithsonian expanded after the Civil War, tension over the antiquarian capital represented by artifacts became particularly evident.

It was also anticipated that Smithsonian would ‘synthesize’ dispersed knowledge about American archaeology, both through the centralization of information and through quick publication. The need for such a catalog, map, or synthesis was widely discussed. ‘It is to be hoped that the honored Secretary...’ wrote John Wells Foster, ‘will bring out an illustrated catalogue of American Antiquities, not restricted to Smithsonian collections, but embracing those of individuals throughout the United States’ (1873: vi).

Henry, however, encouraged primary research rather than synthesis, and used the Smithsonian’s scarce resources accordingly. ‘[I]t strikes me,’ he wrote to one of his correspondents, Charles Rau, ‘that all that is required at present, in the way of publication, is sketches of progress, suggestions of hypotheses to direct lines of research, and instructions as to the method of making explorations, and the preservation of relics, etc.’ (Henry to Rau, June 6, 1868.)¹ Such ‘sketches of progress,’ however, failed to satisfy Henry’s antiquarian constituents, who continued to send reports piecemeal to Washington. In the absence of a common strategy or a consensus about archaeological methods, correspondents continued to act according to their individualized preferences. Thus over time dissonance increased within the network, challenging the nascent structures of the profession.

American archaeology at the Centennial Exposition

The engagements and tensions of American antiquarian networks came into full view in the context of the 1876 Centennial Exposition, held in Philadelphia. Leaders of the Smithsonian clearly saw the event as an opportunity to showcase their vision for American scholarship, endeavors that included archaeology. Baird noted that ‘in view of the very great interest in subjects of this character, it was determined [to exert] special effort to render the display exhaustive and complete’ (1876: 67). Some formal collecting was sponsored, and items borrowed from other institutions (*cf.* Putnam, 1876: 7; Powers, 1877) (see Figure 2.1). But the Smithsonian’s network – along with those of other federal agencies, such as the Department of the Interior – was essential to this effort. Collections were received, including

many thousands of stone implements of every kind and character. In some instances gentlemen who were not willing to present their collections permanently, have consented to lend them for the Exhibition, and

(A.)

No. 7.

International Exhibition, 1876.

BOARD ON BEHALF OF UNITED STATES EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENTS.

NATIONAL MUSEUM, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION.

COLLECTION TO ILLUSTRATE

THE

MINERAL RESOURCES OF THE UNITED STATES.

Invoice of Specimens Collected at Cairo Ill.

By J. C. Zimmer Esq.

NO.	DESCRIPTION.	LOCALITY.
1-7	Bottles two with images	Mississippi Co Missouri
7-14	Cups three ornamented	" "
14-21	Pectles, Missouri granite & blue stone	" "
21-25	Deep dishes, Wms. ^{gray} plates	Tennessee River
25-33	Hatchets, granite, blue ^{gray} green stone	" "
33-40	Skechers, chert, granite, green ^{gray} blue stone	" "
41	Sinker green stone,	" "
42	Georget " "	" "
43	Rimmer " "	" "
44	Acorn marble	" "
45	Shovel chert	" "
46	Hoe " "	" "
46-49	Images	Mic. Co Mo.
49-53	Balls blue stone	Tenn. River
53-113	Spear Points colored chert various	Ohio.

2.1 Invoice of specimens obtained at Cairo, Illinois, from J.C. Zimmer, Esq., on behalf of the Smithsonian Institution, for the Centennial Exposition of 1876. CLE. Smithsonian Institution Archives, Image # SIA 2011-0783. Copyright © Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, DC. All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder.

these will be carefully kept separate and returned at its close (Baird, 1876: 69).

The Smithsonian's representative in Philadelphia was Henry's long-time correspondent Charles Rau, whose career reflects both the vicissitudes of local antiquarians in the United States and the new opportunities of the 1870s. Rau left Germany in 1848, pursuing a teaching career first in rural Illinois then in New York while keeping up correspondence on antiquities, amassing a considerable collection in the process (Kelly, 2002). His employment by the Smithsonian in May 1875 came after eighteen years of labor, and Rau was motivated to make the exposition a success (Henry to Rau, May 10, 1875).² The annual report for the 1876 year lists materials received from sixty-six different donors, only a few of whom were formally employed by the Institution (Smithsonian, 1877: 84–104). Most of this material would be added to the national collections after the Exposition ended, creating new opportunities for display and – potentially – scholarship.

The Smithsonian's determination to make the Centennial Exposition a showplace for archaeology was shared by local antiquarian societies across the country. An International Archaeological Congress held in September demonstrated their numbers and engagement (*cf.* Stocking, 1976). Exhibits featuring antiquities of all kinds were presented to the public. The display mounted by the Ohio State Archaeological Society, for example, occupied sixteen cases and included artifacts from forty-five different private collections. Described as a 'positively splendid collection' in Frank Leslie's guidebook (1876: 216), the Ohio exhibit demonstrated the potential for regional networks conducting their own archaeological projects. At the center of the display was a map of the state illustrating the distribution of different types of site and of the indigenous population. 'Much is to be added to this map to perfect it,' the organisers remarked. '...This is a work which must of necessity be done by the State, or it will never be thoroughly accomplished' (Read and Whittlesey, 1877: 82).

The upsurge in local archaeology on display at the Centennial Exposition also reflected changing attitudes toward the Smithsonian's antiquarian network. Protest over the flow of collections to Washington was widespread. In particular, the Institution's failure to coordinate and synthesize the influx of information was seen as hindering the collective effort. Roeliff Brinkerhoff, the president of the Ohio Archaeological Society, expressed this concern publicly during the Archaeological Congress. 'We want,' he announced in his opening speech, 'some means of communication so that each may be kept advised of progress made, and whenever any point is gained all may know of it, and no further

efforts shall be wasted in determining what has already been determined' (*The Ohio Liberal* 4(22), Mansfield, Ohio, September 13, 1876).

As an alternative to Smithsonian centralization, Brinkerhoff and his colleagues at the Ohio Society launched a new, decentralized network, designated the 'American Anthropological Association' (Stocking, 1976).³ Focused on local societies and a more open information exchange, the organization would effectively bypass the Smithsonian and similar 'professionalizing' efforts under way by other, nascent national institutions.

From the perspective of Henry and Baird, the Smithsonian's 'success' at Philadelphia was immediately threatened by the divergent aims of their colleagues in the Archaeological Congress. Faced with the potential unraveling of their network, the two abruptly changed policy and launched an effort to synthesize the results of American archaeology. The Smithsonian staff remained modest, but Henry was committed to reinforcing the Institution's central role in antiquarian networks. Compiling archaeological information would take advantage of the public's interest and allow alternative models to be bypassed. There was still no clear sense of how such antiquarian knowledge might be processed into a coherent whole, but that problem seemed less significant than threats to the Smithsonian's central role in American antiquarian networks.

Circular 316

Rather than develop a new approach to collecting information about American antiquities, Henry opted for a more traditional strategy: the circular. Antiquarian societies in the United States had used circulars since at least 1797, when the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia had requested that its correspondents send 'accurate plans, drawings and descriptions... of the ancient Fortifications, Tumuli, and other Indian works of art: ascertaining the materials composing them, their contents, the purposes for which they were probably designed, &c.' (American Philosophical Society, 1799: xxxvii; Smith, 1996: 7). Another circular was sent out by the War Department in the 1820s to elicit first-hand accounts about Native American languages. Its designer, Albert Gallatin, argued that the resulting information would be an important scholarly resource (Bieder, 1986: 29).

The antiquities query sent by the Smithsonian in the spring of 1878 was designated Circular 316, 'In Reference to American Archaeology.' Otis Mason, a professor at Columbian College who had been assisting Henry and Baird with collections projects, prepared the fifteen-page document, which solicited information on twenty-one different categories of antiquities, including sites, locations, and collections. The section

on 'Mounds and Earthworks' requested that a map be included, 'however rude it may be... A topographical survey is most desirable, when it is convenient'.⁴

Mason tallied approximately 216 responses to Circular 316 received through 1880 (Mason, 1880): associated files in the Smithsonian archives include material from approximately 499 different correspondents dating between May 1876 and December 1879. The flow of correspondence was greatest in the period immediately after the circular was sent, with at least eighty-five letters arriving in May 1878 alone. Some respondents to the circular were local experts who had been part of the Smithsonian's network for years. These include the Rev. William M. Beauchamp, of Baldwinsville, New York, who would go on to publish widely on Iroquois topics, and Matthew Canfield Read, one of the organizers of the Ohio exhibit at the Centennial Exposition (Read to Baird, September 5, 1878).⁵ Another, Charles Metz, would shortly become a collaborator of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard (Burns, 2008).

The vast majority of responses, however, were sent by people who encountered archaeological remains in the course of their daily lives. Most preferred to make general comments about their experiences rather than comply with the requested format. Many correspondents provided information about individuals in their counties or towns who either took a general interest in antiquities or had collections of their own. In many cases the letters were accompanied by sketch maps of sites and, in particular, drawings of artifacts. Many of these were essentially marginalia, intended to convey a general sense for the material. In a few instances these were well executed and conveyed a clearer understanding of the artifacts concerned (see, e.g. Figure 2.2). But a more typical example is a letter from Dr Moses Quinn MD, of Dalton, Georgia, indicating that he had seen 'aboriginal remains scattered all over the country,' but including no details (Quinn to Henry, 1 June 1878).⁶

Longer-term engagement with correspondents was rare. Only twenty-nine individuals wrote three or more times, but some of these correspondents were deeply interested in the project. One of these was Samuel B. Evans, of Ottumwa, Iowa. Evans was a journalist, writing for the *Ottumwa Democrat*, a platform that he had used for articles on the 'mound builders.' 'I have given the mounds considerable attention,' he wrote, 'and have explored many of them in this county and have my mind on a few more which I wish to go through before giving an elaborate report.' A month later he wrote again, having

just returned from Van Buren County in this state where in company with Judge Sloan and D.C. Beamon, Esq., of that Co. I explored four

2.2 Sketch of an artifact in the cabinet of Frank Cowan, Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania. CLE. Smithsonian Institution Archives, Image # SIA 2011-0784. Copyright © Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, DC—CLE. All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder.

mounds, and succeeded in securing a skull of a mound-builder in a pretty good state of preservation.

Some material from this effort was subsequently shared, and an undated response from Rau expressed thanks 'for plaster casts. Report will be utilised in the work on mounds to be written by Professor Mason' (Rau n.d. [response to Evans]).⁷

Many of the respondents, like Evans, were of the 'educated' classes in their local community. Doctors, teachers, and attorneys are on the list, as are pharmacists, postmasters, bankers, pastors, judges, civil

engineers, and one jeweler – Charles Artes, of Evansville, Indiana, whose extensive collection of antiquities was widely commented upon in the era (e.g. W.M. Locke to Baird, January 8, 1879.⁸ See Wilcox and Hinsley, 2003.) One of Artes' neighbors, F. Stinson, was general Secretary of the Evanston Young Men's Christian Association, but spent his spare time 'digging into mounds & graves, taking drawings & items of the same, & of earthworks' (Stinson to 'Sirs,' May 10, 1878).⁹ Fully ten of the correspondents were the editors of small-town newspapers, serving as nodes of contact for their community. Farmers were also well represented, often reporting about artifacts plowed up in their own fields.

Very few of the correspondents were women. Three – Sarah Jane Foster of Beardstown, Illinois; Annie L. Peyton of The Plains, Virginia; and Cara Chase of Wells, Nevada – made substantive contributions to the effort. Foster, in particular, took a deep interest in the archaeology of Cass County, preparing a report and maintaining correspondence over the duration of the project. There is also ample evidence of women participating at least indirectly in antiquarian activities. F.M. Witter, for example, of Muscatine, Iowa, put in a request for a report to be sent to 'Miss Edith Winslow,' and there are similar references in other letters (Witter to Baird, November 16, 1878).¹⁰

Letters were received from forty-three states and territories. Ohio – at the center of popular American antiquarianism since early in the century – produced thirty responses. Similarly high numbers came from Illinois, Indiana, and New York. Representatives of local institutions contributed as well, including Thomas Rhodes of the Akron City Museum, who sent a sample from a cache of 190 'leaf-shaped implements' found 'under an old tamarack stump' (Rhodes to Baird, January 10, 1879) (see Figure 2.3).¹¹

Responses from the western states and territories were few, most contributed by military officers, members of exploring parties, and government officials. Some came indirectly – written to officials within their own hierarchies, who then passed them along. A captain of the 8th Infantry stationed at Camp Verde, Arizona, sent a box of artifacts dug up in nearby ruins, while an agent of the General Land Office agitated for preservation of the ruins at Casa Grande (G.M. Brayton to Officer in Charge, Army Medical Museum, February 23, 1878; Charles D. Poston to Baird, November 30, 1878).¹²

Evidence for local antiquarian networks is evident in many of the Circular 316 letters. The Iowa networks were particularly robust. The Davenport Academy was a major contributor to archaeological knowledge during this period, and several of its members corresponded with the Smithsonian (e.g. W.H. Pratt to Baird, February 17, 1877;

2.3 Akron City Museum letterhead. CLE. Smithsonian Institution Archives, Image # SIA 2011-0790. Copyright © Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, DC. All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder.

R.J. Farmingham to Baird, February 24, 1877; J. Duncan Putnam to Baird, November 8, 1878.¹³ Cf. Goldstein, 2008.) It was not the only organization in the state devoting attention to antiquarian matters: F.M. Witter, of Muscatine, described the local ‘academy of sciences’ as well as efforts by the city to hire an archaeologist (Witter to Baird, November 16, 30, 1878).¹⁴ Seth Dean, a county surveyor based in Glenwood, recommended the Council Bluffs missionary Samuel Allis, who returned the favor: the two also exchanged artifacts and consulted on questions from the circular (Dean to Henry, April 10, 1878; Allis to Henry, May 22, 1878).¹⁵

The underlying tensions within the antiquarian community of the late-nineteenth-century USA is evident throughout the Circular 316 collection. The desirability for coordination is frequently expressed, particularly through the circulation of information about the substance and practice of archaeology. Joel Barber, county surveyor in Lancaster, Wisconsin, wrote ‘I rejoice at the effort you are making. We needed such a pamphlet to teach us what and how to report’ (Barber to ‘Sir,’ April 13, 1878).¹⁶ Dozens requested copies of the Institution’s reports. Smithsonian employment or funding was widely desired, since otherwise few had the resources to pursue such interests. ‘We are all more or less poor, and can depend only on individual interest in the work,’ noted one correspondent (James Pomeroy to Secretary, July 30, 1878).¹⁷

The task of synthesizing this amalgam of information fell to Mason and Rau, who had become a permanent member of the Smithsonian staff after Philadelphia. Neither was adept at the particular demands of the project, and it is clear that they despaired of the task. Mason's experience with American archaeology 'on the ground' was limited, and he demonstrated little understanding of the challenges faced by those collecting the sort of information desired. Rau's expertise pertained to artifacts, particularly stone tools, and he took less interest in other categories of information. From his perspective most of the material received was useless for the planned synthesis. Rau's curt assessment of an artifact sent by William Taylor, a farmer from Scarborough, Tennessee, preserved in the margin of the letter, was typical. 'No answer required. This spec. amounts to nothing' (Taylor to Baird, November 10, 1878).¹⁸

Networks and synthesis

The deepest irony of the Circular 316 project was that it failed almost before it began. On May 13, 1878 – shortly after the circular was released – Joseph Henry died in the Smithsonian Castle. He was succeeded by Spencer Baird, who had a different agenda. Although Baird supported archaeology, particularly the acquiring of materials for the museum, he seems to have been less concerned about establishing institutional priority. Unlike his predecessor Baird was in close personal contact with many in the national network of natural history collectors, and seems to have had a better grasp of the strengths and weaknesses of antiquarian 'crowdsourcing.'

A more fundamental shift that rendered the Circular 316 information less useful for its original purpose was the creation, in 1879, of the first 'professional' anthropological organization in the United States, the Bureau of Ethnology (later, the Bureau of American Ethnology). Directed by John Wesley Powell, the dean of the federal survey teams that had documented the west, the bureau was placed under Baird's nominal authority but was run as an essentially independent body. Powell had corresponded with Henry as part of the Circular 316 project, but once in a position of authority rejected the populist, networking strategy it represented. Instead, he assembled a research team made up of war veterans and former survey party members, who ran their own field operations and ethnographic studies under his overall direction. In such a scheme, local knowledge and networks had limited value.

For a period of time Mason and Rau continued their efforts, and are mentioned approvingly in various annual reports over the next few years.

2.4 S.T. Walker, 'Mound at Bullfrog [Florida]'. CLE. Smithsonian Institution Archives, Image # SIA 2011-0794. Copyright © Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, DC. All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder.

Both men had other projects to attend to, however, and eventually the Circular 316 letters were filed away. A selection of the more thorough accounts provided was published in the print outlets of the Smithsonian, including the Annual Reports. The work of Evans and his colleagues on Iowa mounds, for example, appeared in 1880. The unsystematic nature of this material, however, meant that it was difficult to review in any syncretic way, and it remains almost impossible to cite.

As historian Curtis Hinsley has noted, '... the circulars provided... insufficient control over personal idiosyncrasy,' and it is true that their value for generating archaeological information is slight (Hinsley 1981: 152). The great value of the Circular 316 project for historical scholarship, however, is the collective image the correspondence depicts of archaeological activity by the American public, particularly in rural areas. Through text, sketches, maps, and photographs, an image created of a population deeply involved with the material past.

Notes

- 1 Charles Rau Papers (CRP), Record Unit 7070. Folder 2. Joseph Henry, 1866–70. Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, DC.
- 2 CRP, Folder 2. Joseph Henry, 1871–6.

- 3 As Stocking (1976) notes, there is no apparent connection between this organization and the modern American Anthropological Association, founded in 1902.
- 4 Circular 316. Collected Letters on Ethnology (CLE), Record Unit 58. Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, DC.
- 5 CLE.
- 6 CLE.
- 7 CLE.
- 8 CLE.
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