

HENRY COLLINS AND SOUTHEASTERN ARCHAEOLOGY

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Henry Collins' contributions to Southeastern archaeology are reviewed and evaluated.

Henry Bascom Collins, doyen of Arctic Archaeology, died in October 1987 as the result of injuries he suffered in a fall. Until the previous year he had continued to maintain an office at the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, where he was Archaeologist Emeritus. In the years just prior to the Great Depression, Collins was among those individuals who helped transform Southeastern archaeology from a predominantly antiquarian pursuit to a more scientific endeavor. An expert on the prehistory of Arctic Alaska, Canada, and Greenland, he was best known for research that resolved a century-old debate about the origin of the Eskimo. His excavations on St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Strait during the late 1920s and 1930s established the basic culture history sequence for the region. At that time, the Eskimo were considered to be descendants of Canadian Indians who had migrated north. Collins' excavations revealed material culture connections with Siberia and established conclusively that the Eskimo had migrated to Alaska through the Bering Sea region.

For this achievement, Collins was awarded the Gold Medal of the Royal Danish Academy of Science and Letters in 1936. He received an Honorary Doctor of Science from Millsaps College in 1940. Between 1927 and 1955, he directed ten Arctic expeditions. He was a founder and board member of the Arctic Institute of America, President of the Washington Anthropology Society, a vice president of the Society for American Archaeology, and a member of the Cosmos Club. He was the last acting Director of the Bureau of American Ethnology, or as he put it, "the undertaker." Despite his many accomplishments, this remark reveals his unpretentious and pleasant personality.

Collins was born in Geneva, Alabama, in 1899. After serving in the United States Army from 1918-1919, he attended Millsaps College and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1922. His principal interest was geology. "Archaeology meant nothing to me," he remem-

bered. Soon after graduation, Collins went to Washington, D.C. to represent his fraternity brothers at a national meeting. Hoping to join a geological expedition to the Western states, he stopped at the United States National Museum, but the geologist he was to meet was not there. Instead, Collins found himself in an impromptu job interview with Neil Judd, the famous Southwestern archaeologist. Collins recalled Judd's questions:

"Have you ever been to the Southwest"?

"No."

"Do you know anything about Indian pottery?"

"No."

"Well, can you cook?"

"No."

"Young man, I like the way you talk. I'm going to take you!"

From 1922-1924, Collins was a field assistant on the National Geographic expedition to Pueblo Bonito, New Mexico; one of the largest archaeological projects in the United States up to that time. Collins wrote: "Mr. Judd is of the opinion that before the embryo archaeologist begins to delve into scientific facts or theories he should be thoroughly proficient in wielding a pick and shovel."

In 1923, Collins began an intermittent research relationship with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH), where he was engaged "to catalog collections of archaeology, geology, paleontology and junk in the State Museum." He soon returned to Washington to attend George Washington University and graduated in 1925 with a Master's thesis on "Indians of Mississippi." Late in 1924 he joined the staff of the United States National Museum, Smithsonian Institution, a professional association he maintained for the next 62 years. These early years brought him into contact with some of the pioneers of American archaeology such as William Henry Holmes (1846-1933), Jesse W. Fewkes (1850-1930), Matthew W. Stirling (1896-1975), Gerard Fowke (1855-1933), and the noted physical anthropologist, Aleš Hrdlička (1860-1943).

Hrdlička was a brilliant Czechoslovakian emigre with an authoritarian personality and dominating presence. He provided Collins with anthropometric training and set him to measuring ape and human crania in the museum collections. One of Collins' first publications was a study of the temporo-frontal articulation in man (Collins 1926a). He submitted the manuscript to the *American Journal of Physical Anthro-*

pology, created and edited by Hrdlička. In the acknowledgements Collins politely thanked Hrdlička for the opportunity to measure the skulls. Hrdlička replaced the word "opportunity" with "task." Hrdlička was difficult to work with, to say the least. Collins recalled that Hrdlička regarded his assistants as little more than personal slaves. Supposedly, he required all his associates to will their skulls to science, but Hrdlička's own will directed that he be cremated and, together with his wife's ashes, be placed in an urn and stored in the Smithsonian collections.

Collins returned to Mississippi in 1925. He developed a research plan to examine the relationship between the historic Choctaw and the prehistoric cultures of Mississippi. First he planned to visit early historic Choctaw villages and define the associated artifact complex. Once one end of the temporal sequence could be identified, he intended to excavate local mounds, which he expected to yield both Choctaw and prehistoric burials. The final step was to correlate cranial measurements obtained from modern Mississippi Choctaws with measurements of crania recovered in his excavations. Through this combination of archaeological and osteological methods, Collins hoped to construct a chronological sequence of cultural development.

He was assisted by Hermes K. Knoblock of the MDAH and a crew of Millsaps students. Collins wrote, "The boys worked pretty good but I have about come to the conclusion that football is not the best training for archaeological research, ditch digging, and similar occupations." They first proceeded to the site of Nanih Waiya, the earthen mound that is the focus of traditional Choctaw origin myths, but the landowner denied them permission to excavate. With the aid of archival materials, maps, and local histories, several early historic Choctaw villages were located in Neshoba, Kemper, Newton, and Lauderdale counties. Surface collections at these sites produced a distinctive pottery type, later defined as Chickachae Combed, that Collins concluded was made by the historic Choctaw (Collins 1927).

The expedition moved south of Meridian to investigate burial mounds in the old "Six Towns" region along the Chickasawhay River. The area was (and is) very tranquil and bucolic. Collins remembered that the names of three tiny communities they passed through seemed to pose an ironic question: Why not, Increase, Energy?

Collins' excavations at the McRae Mound (22-Ck-533) in Clarke County revealed a puzzling internal construction; copper, ceramic, and lithic artifacts, but no human remains. Also in Clarke County, eight small burial mounds near Crandall contained numerous disarticulated

burials and evidence of cremation. A similar group of seven mounds was excavated at or near *Yowanni*, an important historic Choctaw community in Wayne County. The final site investigated by Collins was the historic community of *Kusha* (22-Ld-512) in Lauderdale County, where several early nineteenth-century graves were discovered. These sites were interpreted as representative of three different time periods in the cultural history of the Choctaw: the McRae Mound as prehistoric proto-Choctaw, the small burial mounds as early eighteenth-century Choctaw, and the *Kusha* cemetery as early nineteenth-century Choctaw (Collins 1926).

In his attempt to establish a cultural sequence in southeastern Mississippi, Collins faced the problem of limited artifact samples and lack of stratified deposits. His association of a distinctive ceramic type with the early historic Choctaw has been confirmed by subsequent investigation. Collins was correct in his interpretation of *Kusha*, but the McRae Mound is now known to be Middle Woodland, much older than Collins suggested. The cultural affiliation and age of the small Crandall and *Yowanni* mound groups is not known.

Comparative craniometric measurements were an important part of Collins' research strategy. Hoping to establish biological links between prehistoric and historic indigenous peoples to complement the archaeological evidence, he took cranial measurements on 130 living Choctaws in Philadelphia, Mississippi (Collins 1925), but they proved to be of little value when poor preservation of the mound burials prevented comparative cranial measurements.

The next summer Collins went south, this time to survey the Louisiana Gulf coast. He visited a number of sites in Plaquemines, Terrebonne, Vermillion, and Cameron parishes. The most important work was on Pecan Island chenier, so isolated at the time of Collins' visit that the inhabitants' only connection with the world beyond the marshes was a mail boat that made the 57-mile trip from Abbeville once a week. Human burials and various artifacts were found in two mounds at Morgan (16-Vm-9), one mound at Veazey (16-Vm-7,8) and a midden at Copell (16-Vm-102). Crania from these burials became part of a large comparative study (Collins 1941).

Recent investigations have demonstrated Morgan to be an important Coles Creek site; Veazey is a Marksville period group; and the Copell burials are Tchefuncte (Brown 1984; Neuman 1984). Collins recognized that Morgan and Veazey were products of two different cultural groups. He concluded that these sites represented western extensions of cultural patterns present in the Lower Mississippi Valley

and the eastern Gulf coastal plain. Similar ceramic styles from Louisiana to Florida, Collins argued, demonstrated widespread prehistoric cultural relationships. Collins' field research that year was funded by a grant from the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Total amount: \$250.

From the archaeological perspectives of the 1920s, Collins' research strategy was entirely appropriate. Archaeologists of that era placed North American prehistory into a drastically collapsed chronological framework. The time span between the historically known groups such as the Choctaw and the builders of the prehistoric mounds was considered to be only a few centuries. The shallow time depth assumption was a lingering influence from an older evolutionary perspective that viewed the Native Americans as culturally static and unchanging (Trigger 1986). The implications of Nelson and Spiers' seriation efforts in the Southwest were generally ignored in the East, where the lack of stratified deposits was widely assumed. All these factors tended to promote the feasibility of the direct historic approach. This approach was advocated by Dixon (1913), utilized by Parker (1916) in New York, and pioneered in the Southeast by Harrington and Collins (Stoltman 1973).

Collins took the archaeologists' responsibility to educate the public seriously. In 1926 he wrote an article, "Anthropology in the Southern States," for a popular magazine and spoke about Southeastern archaeology on an early radio program in Washington. He answered public inquiries, such as a letter from a Mobile gentleman, to whom Collins replied: "I know nothing of the ruins of brick structures [on Mobile Bay] which you designate by the name of Aztalan." Like many archaeologists, Collins was sometimes amazed to read the results of interviews with local newspapers:

You can blame it all on a New Orleans reporter who accompanied me on the first lap of my survey. He had me say that the women of these Louisiana mound-building tribes had *men* to fashion the pottery as that of the Mayas. Perhaps that wasn't any worse though than a later account that appeared in a Texas paper, saying that I had investigated a number of large mounds and kitchen maidens.

Collins had planned to continue working in the Southeast, but in 1926 Hrdlička went to Alaska to pursue the question of Asian-American prehistoric connections and returned excited about archaeological

sites in the Bering Sea region. Hrdlička was not an individual to whom one said no, so Collins went with him to Alaska the next year. "Hrdlička had an evangelistic touch. He could make anybody do anything." Collins fell in love with the Arctic.

But Collins was not yet finished with the Southeast. His correspondence with Dunbar Rowland, director of the MDAH, urged research on historic town locations of the Chickasaw and Natchez as a basis for understanding Mississippi prehistory. Rowland wanted to arrange cooperative work with the Smithsonian for an ambitious program of archaeology in the state. Late in 1927, Knoblock wrote Collins that "a couple of boys from Clinton, of whom you may know, have been digging in the Hinds County mounds this summer under Dr. Rowland's auspices, and appear to have found some really good things."

The boys were Moreau B. Chambers and James A. Ford, hired by Rowland to collect antiquities from local mounds. They wrote to Collins inquiring about excavation techniques, books on archaeology, how to reconstruct pottery, proper tools used by archaeologists, and other advice. Although he was fully involved for the next two summers in Alaska, Collins continued to encourage the rapidly expanding survey work. Rowland and Collins agreed on a cooperative excavation at an intriguing site located by the two young men. Chambers assured Collins that they could hire local labor for \$1.50 a day and stay at Mrs. Brister's Hotel in Vaughan at 35 cents each for room and board. Rowland provided \$75.00 to finance the field work. Collins arrived in Mississippi in December 1929, and assisted by Chambers and Ford, proceeded to the site at Deasonville.

The work at Deasonville was an important new step in several ways. It was a shift away from the mound-oriented artifact hunts that then characterized Southeastern archaeology, which typically consisted of hitching a mule team to a scraper and then peeling a mound like an apple. Except for artifact-laden graves, village areas were generally ignored. The fact that horizontal exposure of village remains was uncommon is reflected in Collins' understated introduction: "But there are other remains--Indian village sites--which promise to yield data that will be of considerable value when Southeastern archaeology comes finally to be synthesized and interpreted" (Collins 1932). Yes, indeed.

A number of both circular and rectangular structure patterns were uncovered. Analogies to early historic Southeastern houses were evoked. Also fairly uncommon at the time was the careful recovery of floral and faunal remains and their identification in the site report. The pot-

tery description reveals a growing awareness of the possible chronological significance of pottery style groups--"overhanging" incised (Coles Creek), stamped and cordmarked decoration, red and white painted wares--but Collins concluded that there was not enough evidence to infer their sequence. Deasonville was determined to be prehistoric due to the absence of styles from historic Choctaw, Natchez, or Tunica sites. Historic styles remained the only chronological anchor in a bewildering sea of sherds.

The establishment of temporal and spatial controls was the thrust of 1930s archaeology, and Collins played an important but indirect role in the achievement of this goal in the Southeast. His major contribution was to nurture and support the talents of James Ford. Ford accompanied Collins to Alaska in 1930 and returned again in 1931. Collins was in the process of constructing a cultural sequence using changes in harpoon head styles, which were ordered by evidence from stratigraphic units in sites located on beach ridges of different ages. This experience exposed Ford to the idea that styles of artifacts might come into existence, increase to a point of maximum popularity, and then gradually decline. Potentially, this provided a method to order the pottery from the surveyed sites in Mississippi.

Over the next several years, Ford expanded the area of surface collections into adjacent Louisiana as he slowly developed his pottery ordering method. Correspondence between Ford and Collins revealed some of the excitement as these ideas matured. In 1934, Ford sent Collins a chart with ceramic decorative techniques arranged in percentages by site. He isolated these decorative groups: Choctaw, Natchez, Tunica, "clapboard" (Coles Creek), red slip, red and white "Deasonville painted," cordmarked, Hopewell, and Broadline.

Collins cautioned Ford not to rush to broad conclusions (such as equating shell tempering with Muskogean) and urged the use of geographic locations for the type names. He wrote to Ford:

I don't think it an exaggeration to compare the work you have in mind with that done by Nelson and Kidder; the only thing is that it is much more difficult, for all they had to do was dig trenches in refuse heaps and note the different types of pottery. The work loomed up as highly significant mainly because a generation or more of rather slow-witted specimen gatherers had up to that time occupied the field alone.

By the mid-1930s, Ford had identified seven ceramic clusters he called "complexes." Caddo, Tunica, Natchez, and Choctaw were established as historic using documentation and associations with trade goods. Coles Creek, Deasonville, and Marksville were considered prehistoric. The chronological order was determined by the presence or absence of shared ceramic styles. A few decorative styles present in Ford's historic complexes were found in Coles Creek. Similarly, Coles Creek and Deasonville shared some decorative methods, but none of the Deasonville types overlapped with the historic complexes. Therefore the continuity or sharing of decorative technique was the basis of inferring a rough order: Historic complexes, Coles Creek, Deasonville, and Marksville (Ford 1936).

The Conference on Southeastern Prehistory was an important attempt to synthesize the current state of archaeology in 1932. The need for chronological control conceived in terms of the direct historic approach was advocated primarily by Collins and Matthew W. Stirling. Collins summarized the data from Mississippi, with Ford and Chambers in attendance. Afterwards, he wrote:

A number of us from Washington were at the Birmingham Conference on Southern Archaeology held last month by the National Research Council and it was rather startling to realize that the work being done by these two boys in Mississippi is the only really scientifically motivated work of the sort anywhere in the South . . . Mississippi is the only state in which the problems of archaeology are being approached systemically.

In 1933, Collins (with support from John R. Swanton) helped Ford secure funds from the National Research Council to continue his research. Later that year he arranged for Ford to obtain a position at Marksville, the first of the large-scale Federal archaeological projects in the Southeast. Ford soon wrote to Collins:

. . . am at Marksville grubbing in the dirt with Setzler. How nice it is to sit under the shade of a little bush (especially transplanted for the purpose) and watch twenty Frenchmen work. You should come down and try it.

To which Collins responded:

Problem: if 20 Frenchmen can dig a 20 foot trench through a mound in 20 hours, how many square miles of Louisiana territory could said 20 excavate with post-hole diggers?

Answer: ask Moorehead.

Collins' correspondence is free of negative comments about his contemporaries, but he clearly felt that the excavation methods of Warren K. Moorehead (also Gerard Fowke) were not up to minimum standards.

Recent historical reviews of the development of Eastern North American archaeology credit Fay-Cooper Cole's University of Chicago Field School with an important role in redirecting and improving field methods in the early 1930s. Graduates of this course went on to apply their training in the huge Depression-era excavations (Haag 1986). Because of the influence of this field school, it is interesting to note Collins' comments when he received a letter from Ford in 1933 saying that Moreau Chambers was planning to attend the Chicago field school that year: "It may be alright, but I can't see his paying his way back and forth to Illinois to see demonstrated something that you and he have already put into practice in Mississippi."

Except in his capacity as mentor to Ford, Collins became increasingly disengaged from the Southeast as he devoted his energies to the Alaskan work. Collins' last active participation in Southeastern field work (as far as I can determine) was at MLe14 in Lee County, Mississippi. This excavation was part of the Natchez Trace Parkway research into historic Chickasaw sites in the Tupelo area. An attempt was made to identify the historic site of *Ackia*, but Collins suggested an alternative location (see Atkinson 1985).

Henry Collins' contributions to Southeastern archaeology in the 1920s and 1930s were substantial. He was a pioneer of the direct historic approach in the region. He was among the first to conduct systematic, problem-oriented surveys with an emphasis on the potential of potsherds to establish chronological order and spatial relationships. He utilized the combined techniques of archaeology, physical anthropology, and ethnohistory in his work. He illustrated the value of village area excavations at a time of mound mania. Finally, he exerted a formative influence on James Ford, who, exposed to the possibilities for chronological order in artifact style change in Alaska, played a pivotal role in the application of seriation techniques to Southeastern archaeology.

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