An Introduction to Louisiana Archeology

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Contrary to popular belief, the history of the region included within the present bounds of the State of Louisiana begins not with the discovery of the Mississippi River, but long before that time, even before the dawn of the Christian Era. The pre-Columbian inhabitants of Louisiana and neighboring southern states were neither the "wild and woolly" Indians of ten-cent novel fame, nor the romantic people of the Leatherstocking Tales. They were farmers who lived in villages situated on favorable spots on the waterways and tended their laborsiously cleared fields of corn, beans and pumpkins. While some phases of their culture might be compared with that of the ancient Egyptians, some with the aboriginal peoples of France, they have been found to be distinctly American in origin.

Ruins of old Indian villages, fortifications and burial sites are scattered along the borders of the streams and lakes of Louisiana in almost unbelievable numbers. These indicate a fairly dense ancient population and occupation over a long period of time.

The paucity of present information concerning these dwellers in Louisiana is partially due to the meager records left by early white explorers and settlers, but lack of knowledge of their history is due to the ignorance of the Indians themselves. This lack of knowledge resulted, of course, from absence of any form of writing. It is true that traditional tales of tribal origin and movements were passed from generation to generation, but little or no reliance may be placed on them. While some of these legends may have been founded on fact, in their entirety they have taken on such a mythological cast that the truth is very obscure.

Thus the student in beginning to reconstruct the past is at the mercy of the great earthworks and extensive village sites. The first step in recovering this lost history is to locate by means of the early descriptions and maps the sites inhabited at the time of first contact with Europeans. From this point the story may be followed back into the unknown past by the aid of one of the dominant axioms of culture: it is always changing. It should be understood that by "culture" is meant the component of the customs and styles of languages, handicrafts, arts and ceremonials practiced by any particular group of people at any one time. Culture is in reality a set of ideas as to how things should be done and made. It is a continuous state of evolutionary change since it is constantly influenced both by inventions from within and the introduction of new ideas from without the group. Such a method of discovering the origins, migrations, developments and final dispersion of any particular culture is called "progress". It may not be in the strict sense of the word always be progress, nevertheless, the changes in the different elements of our modern civilization are constantly occurring with varying speed. Perhaps the best present illustration of one of the more rapidly changing modern cultural elements is the way in which the "casual" has replaced the "formal" dress and the "modern" shoe.

This principle of the gradual change of culture with the passage of time applies quite directly to the living of the ancient Indians of Louisiana, and clear indications of it may be noted by a study of the articles they have left behind them.

By examining the sites of their prehistoric towns are found mounds, erected as graves, and many of the village garbage heaps. As the days went on, change from season to season.

Small Indian mound along Bayou Graveler, a stream which flows out of Lake La Rose. Photograph taken during the flood period.
the unknown past, the first task becomes that of discovering the types of pottery and pottery decorations used by the tribes that came in contact with the whites.

Several of the historic tribal pottery types have already been discovered. That of the Caddo Indians occupying the northwestern part of the state was definitely determined at the “Fish Hatchery” site near Natchitoches by Mr. Winslow Walker, of the Bureau of American Ethnology, in 1931. (See Journal of the Washington Academy of Sciences, Vol. XXIV, No. 2, Feb. 15, 1934, pps. 99-104.) This ware is characterized by incised lines which form elaborate scroll and meander designs and by a profuse use of spurs and delicate cross-hatching (Figure 1). This pottery is identified as historic by implements found accompanying it which were traded to the Indians by the Europeans.

Pottery characteristic of the Natchez tribe was discovered at a village near Natchez, Mississippi, by Mr. M. B. Chambers, of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, in 1929. This ware was similar to, but not identical with, the Caddo. It is ornamented with graceful scrolls and meanders formed by bands of three lines (Figure 2). A definite date of 1720 is indicated for this pottery not only by the early descriptions of the Natchez villages, but by the quantity of French trade objects accompanying the finds.

Thus by identification of the historic pottery a basis is established for a chronology. Comparative studies show, however, that although the Caddo had occupied the territory where they were first described longer than had the Natchez, both cultures at comparatively recent times had displaced others which had entirely different pottery designs and which very likely represented an entirely different people.

The people of this pre-Natchesan and Caddo pottery that disappeared before the historic period merely for convenience are called “Coles Creek” people. They appear to be descended, culturally at least, from a still older group of people known as “Hopewell”.

Probably it is because of their relative antiquity that these “Hopewell” people are particularly interesting. At one time they occupied the entire valley of the Mississippi from Wisconsin to the mouth of the Mississippi River. All of this peculiar culture had disappeared, however, before the discovery of North America by the Europeans. “Hopewell” was discovered and named in 1908 in southern Ohio. There it appeared to be so different from and superior to the surrounding rather sombre cultures that it was decided connection must lie, as certain indications pointed, down the Mississippi Valley. At Marksville, Louisiana, a village site of this culture was discovered and excavated during the summer of 1933 by Mr. Frank Setzler of the United States National Museum. This excavation showed that the people...
living there during the time of the ancient “Hopewell” culture were agriculturists. They occupied square semi-subterranean houses in a village which was enclosed on three sides by earth embankments, probably surmounted by a wooden stockade, and on the fourth side by the steep bluffs bordering an old stream bed. Large rectangular earthworks strangely reminiscent of the stone pyramids of Central America were erected as sites for their ceremonial buildings. Some of the dead, probably officials of the group, were deposited in a large log-roofed vault buried beneath a conical mound twenty feet high. Copper from the Lake Superior region, galena from the mountains of Arkansas, conch shells from the Gulf of Mexico—all were brought to serve the needs of the people living in the old town near Marksville. Pottery smoking pipes of a typical platform or monitor design were in common use. The pottery was tastefully decorated with conventionalized birds and geometric figures formed by line-enclosed bands of rouletting (Figure 3).

Surface indications have identified a number of other villages of “Hopewell” age in both Mississippi and Louisiana. Although their relative antiquity is indicated by studies of cultural history, the significance of the peculiar fact of their frequent occurrence on oxbow lakes, old abandoned stream channels, is not yet understood.

This brief outline of part of Louisiana’s prehistory has been determined within the past few years. It is still only partially substantiated. There are numerous points which are yet uncertain, and many more gaps remain to be filled in. No answer can yet be made to the primary questions: From where did these people come? Why? What happened to them?

Systematic archaeology in the southeastern states is yet in its infancy. The spectacular remains of southwestern America have occupied the attention of the competent investigators for the most part. Consequently the prehistory of that region is not only known in terms of culture periods, but through recent studies of the annual growth of tree rings, most of the sites can be given definite calendrical dates. However, during recent years, scientific research in archaeology of the southeast has taken great forward strides. Not only are the large national institutions becoming actively interested in the field, but several of the state universities have established museums and departments for systematic investigation and the teaching of prehistory.

Constructive field research is at present underway at a site on the south shore of Lake Pontchartrain. This project was initiated by the Louisiana Department of Conservation in January, 1934, and made possible through the Civil Works Administration of Louisiana. In September of 1934 the Department of Conservation transferred the supervision of the project to the School of Geology of Louisiana State University and such work is being made possible through the Emergency Relief Administration. It is hoped that a state-wide survey to locate and study the state’s aboriginal remains in a systematic and thorough manner may be undertaken soon.

The conservation of Louisiana’s prehistoric monuments is fast becoming a pressing question. Through cultivation, road-building, clearing with subsequent erosion and commercial “pot hunting”, the Indian remains are fast disappearing. Although most of the civilized countries have regulations concerning the preservation of antiquities, there is none in America. However, many old town sites with their accompanying monuments have been set aside in most states by either the Federal or state governments for preservation as parks.

The research of the archaeologist is often compared with the reading of a book written in hieroglyphics. The scientific excavation of an old site is comparable to opening carefully and reading one of the musty pages. Careless or incompetent destruction of a mound or village site tears a page from the story that may never be replaced or read.

(Figures one and three sketched by permission of the United States National Museum.)
Pollution---The Nation's Shame

Seven minute address by Frank T. Bell, United States Commissioner of Fisheries, Washington, D. C., delivered from 12:48 to 12:49 p. m. Eastern Standard Time, on Friday, December 14, 1934, from WMAL, Washington, D. C., on the National Broadcasting Co.'s "Farm and Home Hour."

I AM grateful to the National Broadcasting Co. for this opportunity of talking with my fellow Americans about a subject, which while not so pleasant, is nevertheless most vital to our common welfare, regardless of our walk in life. I want to speak very plainly and very frankly. When a condition prevails which threatens the health of our children and loved ones, we become immediately concerned, and then take steps to eradicate the condition, or shelter them from its contagion. We well remember the terrible epidemic of flu during the World War days, and the vigorous precautions we took in the home to protect our families. We went a step further. Our city, state and even Federal government came into the picture. We shall never forget the flu masks everyone was compelled to wear, schools were closed down, Governmental health agencies were taxed beyond capacity.

Today we are faced with another public menace, which strikes "home" to each of us. I refer to the nationwide problem of POLLUTION of our waters. Today many of our streams and waterways, which only a few years ago were defined as a flow of pure, healthgiving water, may be accurately described by the definition of pollution—physically unclean, contaminated, infected, impure, unsuitable for human consumption and not even fit for fish to live in.

As cloudy and dismal as this picture is, let us look at it sanely and sensibly for if man brought about this condition, surely man can correct it.

When the American population began to increase and our industrial life expand it was only a natural development that factories would be centralized along our water courses. Our growth was so rapid and our resources so plentiful that little thought was given to preserving our water supplies in their natural pure state. When communities were scattered and industries were small, the effects of stream pollution were usually of limited extent. Our streams carried away the household wastes, the sawdust and shavings from

our lumber mills, the waste liquor from our tanneries, the scrubblings from our textile mills, the drainage from our mines, and once they were removed from immediate notice were soon forgotten. But today, the picture has changed entirely. Individuals and communities can no longer live to themselves alone, for domestic and industrial wastes are produced in such great volume that in many coastal and interior waters, their damaging effects are projected down stream through several states, and the problem of control, both from the point of view of public health and from the point of view of conservation of natural resources, becomes of national rather than local interest. This applies equally to sewage and industrial waste.

Just what conditions do we now find? One of our eastern cities alone dumps 95,000,000 gallons of human waste and sewage a day into one of our most beautiful, historical rivers. Another inland city throws 600 to 800 tons of raw garbage a day into one of our great rivers; one of our eastern states releases daily into its streams 3,000,000 pounds of concentrated sulfuric acid, one of the deadliest known poisons, with the result all fish life has been killed and its devastating effect is seen 500 miles down the river where all mussel life has been exterminated; another state, whose tributaries feed into the same river artery, deposits 5,000,000 pounds of this same deadly poison, with a result that the artery itself must carry 8,000,000 pounds daily where it is obvious no fish life can live; in one western state, 50 miles of the most picturesque mountain stream, which otherwise would be as beautiful a trout stream as could be found anywhere in the country, is entirely devoid of all fish or aquatic life because of mine wastes, and 6 lakes touched by this water are likewise barren of all life; two or three of our principal inland rivers on which several large cities depend for their drinking water supply have now been polluted to such an extent that by the existing methods of water purification, namely chlorine, it is barely possible to obtain water suit-