
**“Magnificent Intentions”:
Washington, D.C., and
American Anthropology in 1846**

In the closing years of the nineteenth century, aging, well-traveled American men of letters were fond of looking back, with condescension and nostalgia, to an unformed, innocent antebellum America. Reliving his first visit to Washington in 1849, Henry Adams remembered a sleepy, isolated outpost where “the brooding indolence of a warm climate and a negro population hung in the atmosphere heavier than the catalpas.” The early national capital had lacked physical, social, and moral structure: here “the want of barriers, of pavements, of forms; the looseness, the laziness; the indolent Southern drawl; the pigs in the streets; the negro babies and their mothers with bandanas; the freedom, openness, swagger, of nature and man” had lulled and soothed tight Boston nerves. Even twenty years later, amid the chaos and crush of the first Grant administration, Washington still seemed “a mere political camp” to Adams. His fellow Bostonian, Edward Everett Hale, recalled the capital city of the 1840s as a “mud-hole” where “everything had the simplicity and ease, if you please, of a small Virginia town.” The capital was so isolated from the larger society that the visitor of the forties seemed to come “out of America into Washington.”¹

Visiting Europeans reserved special spleen for the capital city. Here in “the headquarters of tobacco-tinctured saliva” Charles Dickens noted in 1842 the “spacious avenues, that begin in nothing, and lead nowhere; streets, mile-long, that only want houses, roads, and inhabitants; public buildings that need but a public to be complete; and ornaments of great thoroughfares, which only lack great thoroughfares to ornament.” With little trade and a meager permanent population, Washington seemed to Dickens only a “City of Magnificent Intentions.” Anthony Trollope, following in the footsteps of his famous mother, commented no less caustically. He arrived in the first, dismal winter of the Civil War to find a pretentious failure of a city, three-fourths of it “wild, trackless, unbridged, uninhabited, and desolate.” Trollope saw little nobility of taste in the sparse government structures, still less in the “bastard gothic” architecture of the Smithsonian “Castle.” But it was the

sight of the unfinished stump of the Washington Monument on a bleak Sunday afternoon that evoked a summary judgment of the city and the nation:

There, on the brown, ugly, undrained field, within easy sight of the President's house, stood the useless, shapeless, graceless pile of stones. It was as though I were looking on the genius of the city. It was vast, preterentious, bold, boastful with a loud voice, already taller by many heads than other obelisks, but nevertheless still in its infancy,—ugly, unpromising, and false.²

Jibes of European and American cosmopolites notwithstanding, antebellum Washington was not so much a swampy wilderness as a study in American contrasts. Here the unfinished dreams of civic and national splendor and the boisterous, brutal realities of American politics, commerce, and racial conflict coexisted in "a curious combination of sophistication and small-town simplicity."³ Washington shared in the revival of the national economy following the panic of 1837, and local business prospered as more government officials brought their families to live in the capital during the 1840s. But Washington, like other American cities, was also plagued by widespread poverty, restlessness among low-paid workers, grossly inadequate sanitary facilities, and a distressing level of lawlessness. Furthermore, despite the general prosperity of the official city, trade remained largely local. By the end of the thirties it was apparent that the earlier dream of local merchants and investors of a major commercial metropolis on the Potomac was not to be realized. With or without the highly touted Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, Washington would never rival Baltimore or Philadelphia in manufacture or national trade.⁴

In the midst of prosperity, moreover, the capital had a unique racial situation that produced ambivalent feelings among Whites, northern or southern. Until its abolition in 1850, a lively slave trade existed in the District; indeed, as James Renwick's Smithsonian building began to rise on the Mall in the late forties, construction workers could view across the street from its rear entrance the slave pens of two of the major traders of the District. In 1840, the Black population of the District comprised nearly a third of the total; over the next decade the general population increased by twenty percent. The Black population increased somewhat more slowly, dropping to twenty-seven percent of the District by 1850. But within the Black populace, a significant change occurred, as the number of free Blacks increased by seventy percent during the decade; in 1850, the Black free/slave ratio had reached nearly four to one. The established free Black community of Washington continued to draw from outside.⁵

The response of Whites in Washington was revealing. As the issue of slavery extension began to arise in the late forties, the capital was caught between the sensitive national debate and equally delicate local conditions. By 1848 the slavery issue was the "all-absorbing topic of the day."⁶ But

interest focused chiefly on the District slave trade, and after its abolition two years later, the city relapsed into a strange quiet. By a kind of tacit agreement, Constance Green has suggested, Washingtonians decided to "say nothing, do nothing, that might upset the precarious sectional balance." The capital was "like the stillness at the eye of a hurricane" throughout the prosperous, turbulent 1850s.⁷

Growing scientific and artistic reputation perhaps made it easier to ignore political tempests. If the vision of commercial greatness had evaporated by midcentury, there had always been an older dream, shared by presidents Washington, Jefferson, and John Q. Adams, of "a cultural capital" spreading enlightenment to the nation by roads, canals, and rivers.⁸ This vision of Washington as the source and sponsor of internal cultural improvements took several major strides toward realization in the forties, with the firm establishment of the Coast Survey under Alexander Dallas Bache; the Naval Observatory; and the Smithsonian Institution. In 1848 a newspaper correspondent could observe that "if there be one question set at rest in this community, it is that public opinion has decided that the national metropolis shall be distinguished for the cultivation of the mind."⁹ Perhaps science and art would bring glory to Washington.

Early efforts provided little ground for optimism. The federal scientific agencies of the early republic did not owe their existence to any commitment to science as such—President Adams's call in 1825 for vigorous support of science met with no positive response in Congress but resulted from either practical needs or the exigencies of exploring and taming the continent. Local scientific societies also fared poorly. William Stanton has observed that, until the 1840s, Washingtonians "had founded a dreary train of institutions—the United States Military Philosophical Society, the Metropolitan Society, the Columbian Institute, the American Historical Society, to name only those of most imposing mien—only to see them crumble through apathy and neglect."¹⁰ The Columbian Institute, founded in 1816, received a charter and five acres of swamp from Congress, but little else. The Institute membership, mainly of local businessmen, civil servants, and military men, managed to limp along through the next two decades, until its records and property were absorbed by the National Institution for the Promotion of Science in 1840.

In its brief burst of activity in the early 1840s, the National Institute (as it was called after 1842) demonstrated both the possibilities and limits of Washington science. The Institute, founded in 1840, resulted directly from two contemporary events: the prolonged public debate over Englishman James Smithson's bequest of \$500,000 to the United States to found in Washington an institution "for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men"; and the United States Exploring Expedition under Charles Wilkes, the country's first such large-scale effort, which began its four-year voyage in 1838. Joel R. Poinsett, who had been secretary of war under Martin Van Buren and was

an amateur scientist from South Carolina, had successfully launched the Wilkes Expedition in the face of congressional apathy. Two years later, when the first crates of materials began to arrive in Philadelphia and Washington, Poinsett saw that some organization would be necessary to care for the specimens in order to prevent their dispersal and destruction. But Poinsett also had his eye on the Smithsonian funds. He hoped that the Englishman's money would support a national museum, for which the Wilkes materials, along with the National Institute's own circulars, would provide the basic collections. Between 1840 and 1845, Poinsett, Francis Markoe, and J. J. Abert—all government officials—lobbied to establish the Institute as the heir to the Wilkes collections and the Smithsonian monies. Like its ill-starred predecessor, the Columbian Institute, the National Institute received a charter but little money from Congress. Ultimately it lost both the collections and the Smithsonian funds, but its failure exposed central issues in the politics of antebellum American science.¹¹

The debate over the Smithson bequest revolved around several alternative institutions, including a library, university, observatory, and an agricultural experimental station. Poinsett argued for a "National Museum, with Professors who shall perform the double office of Curators and Lecturers," as an important component of a respectable national culture.¹² After the arrival of the first massive shipment of 50,000 specimens, Congress appropriated \$5,000 for their care, and the Institute hired as curator Dr. Henry King, a geologist and mining expert employed in the Ordnance Bureau. The secretary of state made the new Patent Office Building, with its spacious hall, available for display of the treasures. Here King valiantly attempted to organize the swelling Wilkes materials, which soon crowded out the Institute's own growing collections. But when the ships came home in 1842, Wilkes, Charles Pickering, and others of the Expedition's scientific staff, far from showing gratitude for the Institute's labors, complained of the disastrous incompetence of King and the museum-keepers. Wilkes and Pickering argued to a parsimonious Congress that, with the gathering completed, the scientific enterprise was barely under way; preservation, research, and publication now required further public outlay, and these functions must be performed by the scientists familiar with their own collections. They had little patience with the amateurs of the Institute, who saw themselves as a "clearing-house for natural history."¹³

The Wilkes Expedition presented serious issues of private and public interests in science. The Institute men noted, for instance, that the Expedition's zoologist, Titian Peale, had labelled many valuable pieces as his private property, and they suspected that several barrels had been emptied in his Philadelphia museum before coming on to the capital. On the other hand, both Congress and the Expedition scientists expressed concern that the Institute, a private group of "friends of science," should control and possibly damage public collections.¹⁴

The dispute, furthermore, involved divergent conceptions of "museum." The Institute men clearly envisioned a museum chiefly as an institution of preservation and display, not without a certain element of public entertainment, while the Expedition scientists saw the museum essentially as a locus of study and the collections as a permanent research base, an extension of the Expedition itself. When they ruefully recorded that Dr. King had dismembered their specimens and otherwise violated their collections, behind the charge lay a perception of the museum as an ongoing scientific enterprise. Within such a vision, it is worth noting, lay a significant concept of the specimen as scientific property. Legally, of course, the collections belonged to the government; but, in a second and increasingly important sense, they were peculiarly the property of the collector-scientist, for only he knew them in their entirety and could elicit their full meaning for the public. The problem was both philosophical and proprietary, for it involved the very definition of a scientific object.

The appreciation of the scientist's unique, continuing interest in the objects of his study distinguished the Expedition staff from that of the amateur Institute. Similarly, the clue to the ultimate failure of the National Institute lies in the two chief complaints lodged against it: ignorance and unworthy purposes. Despite King's ineptitude, the second complaint was more crucial. The Institute men showed primary concern for national greatness as exhibited in collections of exotic objects—a kind of scientific and cultural boosterism—but little sympathy for patient, loving understanding of the specimens themselves. Externally oriented showcases could only undermine quiet, internal scientific growth—so the American experience seemed to indicate. In 1829, one John Varden had opened to the public a commercial enterprise, the "Washington Museum of Curiosities," complete with stuffed birds and Egyptian mummies. When the free National Institute drove him out of business, he sold out to it—and promptly became its assistant curator.¹⁵ The Varden case was symbolic and instructive. The Institute men lacked an essential respect for the natural world, a nineteenth-century form of piety that set the true scientist apart from the amateur or the pandering commercial popularizer.

The attitudinal gulf was real and determinative. Through much of the nineteenth century, the number of men who shared serious scientific aspirations exceeded the capacity of the society to provide opportunities for full-time pursuit of those interests.¹⁶ As Alexis deTocqueville perceived at the time, organization for power and promotion of individual and group interest was a central dynamic in American life; but historically this has occurred unevenly. Scientific (like artistic) interests came relatively late to organizational maturity. Consequently, members of the scientific community of mid-century were often forced to rely as much on personal judgments of character as on formal organizational affiliation for identity and mutual recognition.

This was especially true in the disparate collection of studies that comprised anthropology.

In August 1846, the New Confederacy of the Iroquois assembled around the light of their "emblematic council fire" in Rochester, New York, to hear the respected ethnologist Henry Rowe Schoolcraft. In a stirring paean to American distinctiveness, Schoolcraft urged Lewis Henry Morgan and the other young men of Rochester to devote themselves to the study of America's "free, bold, wild, independent, native race." America was unique. Without European patronage, Americans depended exclusively on "personal exertions, springing from the bosom of society" for the pursuit of history, literature, and science. Morgan's New Confederacy was such a voluntary effort, a "brotherhood of letters" to advance historical research, promote antiquarian knowledge, and cultivate polite literature.

The time had come, said Schoolcraft, to develop an American scientific and literary tradition: "No people can bear a true nationality, which does not exfoliate, as it were, from its bosom, something that expresses the peculiarities of its own soil and climate." In constructing its "intellectual edifice" America must draw "from the broad and deep quarries of its own mountains, foundation stones, and columns and capitals, which bear the impress of an indigenous mental geognosy."

The native American Indians had borne this distinctive "mental geognosy," and the present tribes, "walking statues" of their progenitors, were monuments far more worthy of study than the antiquarian remains of the Old World. The White man had superseded the Red in America, which obliged him to preserve the memory of the aborigine. After all, Schoolcraft reminded his audience, "their history is, to some extent, our history," a past full of deep tragic and poetic events. "The tomb that holds a man," he concluded, "derives all its moral interest *from* the man, and would be destitute of it, without him. America is the tomb of the Red man."¹⁷

Eight days after his address in Rochester, Schoolcraft sent to the Board of Regents of the new Smithsonian Institution a "Plan for the Investigation of American Ethnology," presented at its first meeting in September. In a far less effusive style than the Rochester speech, the veteran ethnologist proposed several major areas of activity for the Institution: support for a "Library of Philology"; archaeological investigation, particularly of the ancient earthworks of the Mississippi Valley; and material collections from living tribes to create a "Museum of Mankind."

Schoolcraft soberly outlined a field of inquiry open for exploitation and ripe for the application of scientific techniques. After a brief, tantalizing reference to the mysteries of the continent, he urged "the scrutiny of exact observation and description . . . under the lights of induction and historical analysis . . . to enable us to appreciate and understand our position on the globe." As

investigators applied scientific method to ethnology, the boundaries of mystery and conjecture would certainly recede before established facts. Schoolcraft's optimism embraced various subfields of the science of man: physiology, history, archaeology, geography, and geology. But he stressed language as a "more enduring monument of ancient affinities than the physical type" and called attention to the study of mythology.¹⁸

Taken together, Schoolcraft's prospectus to the Smithsonian and his Rochester address of the preceding week reflect the undefined state of anthropology in 1846. Inspired in part by a romantic attachment to the natural wonders and vast beauty of America, but embracing a wide range of both established and developing branches of inquiry, the study of man in America stood somewhere between the amateur enthusiasm of Rochester and the scientific standards soon established at the Smithsonian, between a past marked by speculation and an anticipated future of scientific precision.

Created by the conflux of several distinct traditions, mid-century anthropology comprised a series of questions, pursued through methods that cut across various fields and traditions. In Joseph Henry's words, anthropology enjoyed a unique status as a "common ground" for students of the physical sciences, natural history, archaeology, language, history, and literature. All could contribute; all could draw intellectual enlightenment and moral inspiration.¹⁹ Furthermore, if anthropology was institutionally and methodologically fractured, the inquiry nonetheless addressed issues that were crucial to American national and cultural identity.

"Great question has arisen from whence came those aboriginals of America?" Thus Jefferson expressed, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* of 1784, the central historical question that impelled American anthropology until the Civil War. To be sure, for most Americans the significance of the question was never apparent. John Adams wrote his blunt opinion to Jefferson in 1812:

Whether Serpents Teeth were sown here and sprung up Men; whether Men and Women dropped from the Clouds upon the Atlantic Island; whether the Almighty created them here, or whether they immigrated from Europe, are questions of no moment to the present or future happiness of Man. Neither Agriculture, Commerce, Manufactures, Fisheries, Science, Literature, Taste, Religion, Morals, nor any other good will be promoted, or any Evil averted, by any discoveries that can be made in answer to those questions.²⁰

In part Adams predicted accurately, for anthropologists struggled for decades to find an acceptable utilitarian rationale. But in a more important sense, his skepticism was misplaced. Between the Revolution and the Civil War, Americans groped for an understanding of their republican experiment, their civilization, and their destiny. The creed that gradually emerged from this

introspection placed the new nation outside the ravages of human history, freed from the burdens of corrupt European institutions, as a new, perhaps final hope and home for man. Schoolcraft succinctly expressed this providential vision in 1846, when he described America as "a region destined for the human race to develop itself and expand in . . . a seat prepared for the reunion of the different stocks of mankind."²¹

Integral to the national teleology was a picture of the American continent waiting through the ages, pristine and nonhistorical, for the White man's arrival in order to play out a providentially assigned role. The freshness of America lay in the continent's great natural age without historical and moral blemish. It possessed, in other words, no human burdens, since before Columbus the continent had never known civilized institutions.²² Accordingly, Americans lent no moral significance to Indian "history," which was, as they saw it, not history at all, but the meaningless meanderings of a benighted people. In retrospect it is apparent that the American Indians presented nineteenth-century White Americans with the challenge and opportunity of expanding accepted notions of history so as to embrace radically different human experiences. This proved impossible. Instead, the anthropologist commonly functioned as a variant of the historian, studying and justifying his own history and civilization through the Indian. In the end, few escaped the degradation of denying peoples the integrity of their own histories.

Jefferson's query suggested a second purpose, however, more religious than political in import. George Stocking has identified in British ethnology of the early nineteenth century a central goal: "to show how all the modern tribes and nations of men might have been derived from one family, and so far as possible to trace them back historically to a single source."²³ Like their contemporaries in various fields of natural history, students of anthropology in England and the United States were engaged in a strenuous effort to contain the exploding diversity of the human world within the explanatory framework of the Mosaic account. Defense of monogenism—original human unity in divine creation and descent from a single pair—lay at the religious core of American anthropology into the twentieth century, especially in Washington circles. In service of this goal, Joseph Henry generally excluded from the Smithsonian discussion of physical anthropology as politically explosive and morally repugnant.

For American no less than for British ethnologists, the study of man was a historical and geographical search of deep religious import. Furthermore, as discussed below, while the historical orientation lost ground in succeeding decades to systems of evolutionary classification, beneath these developments the central concern with human unity persisted. In the American context, the significance of Native Americans to White historical identity and national destiny, and the progressive annihilation of these peoples, compounded and complicated the religious impulse in anthropology, lending an urgency to

Indian studies that emerged in Americans' frequent expressions of "salvage ethnology": a unique blend of scientific interest, wistfulness, and guilt.

In their national and religious quest, American investigators at mid-century followed three distinct routes: archaeology, philology, and physical anthropology. The lack of consensus on method, untapped sources of data, and the relative lack of institutional structures and professional criteria created a sense of openness and lively competition that would characterize the subfields of anthropology in this country to the end of the century.

Americans had first encountered the earthworks of the Ohio and Mississippi River valleys in the 1780s, but it was not until after the War of 1812 that Caleb Atwater, of Circleville, Ohio, undertook a systematic investigation.²⁴ The American Antiquarian Society published his results in 1820. Atwater saw in the earthworks evidence of early occupation by a sedentary, law-abiding people. He hypothesized a migration from northern Asia at a remote period; a long, fixed abode in North America; and movement southward to found the ancient civilizations of Peru and Mexico. A subsequent migration from southern Asia by ancestors of the modern Indians supposedly superseded these original occupants of the American continent.²⁵

Less systematic, more speculative observers followed Atwater. Most attempted to account for the differences between the supposed high civilization of the ancient Americans and the more primitive condition of the historical Indians by positing waves of migration and displacement. James H. McCulloh was among the more cautious in arguing against affinities based on the superficial artifacts of the mounds, which might be simply the products of a common human nature. McCulloh's *Researches*, a compilation of the work of others, concluded that ancestors of the present Indians came from the south and built the mounds. Despite disagreements over the identity of the mound-builders, most archaeological investigators agreed that the ancient inhabitants of America had originated elsewhere; and that "physical, moral, and traditional evidence" pointed to Asia.²⁶

Thomas Jefferson provided one of the first accounts of opening a mound, but he predicted that language would ultimately offer "the best proof of the affinity of nations which ever can be referred to." Schoolcraft, too, writing in his diary in 1823, observed that "Philology is one of the keys of knowledge which, I think, admits of its being said that, although it is rather rusty, the rust is, however, a proof of its antiquity. I am inclined to think that more true light is destined to be thrown on the history of the Indians by a study of their languages than of their traditions, or any other feature."²⁷ As the mounds explorers displayed more imagination than rigor, the predictions of Jefferson and Schoolcraft took on credibility. In the late 1840s, John R. Bartlett expressed a common judgment of archaeological labors when he wrote that "the practical investigations made from time to time by various indi-

viduals, have not been sufficiently thorough and extensive, nor have they developed sufficient data to warrant or sustain any definite or satisfactory conclusions."²⁸ Nor until the 1860s would archaeology begin to attain the theoretical respect and academic establishment that philology had enjoyed since the eighteenth century. Faced with the "bewildering visions" of migrations,²⁹ a number of individuals turned hopefully to philology for the solution to the puzzle of American man.

In 1819 Peter Stephen Duponceau first announced his discovery that all American Indian languages appeared to demonstrate a uniform grammatical structure and underlying plan of thought, which he labeled "polysynthesis."³⁰ In Duponceau's view, the polysynthetic form permitted expression of many ideas in few words by consolidating the most significant sounds of simple words into compounds rich in meaning, and by combining various parts of speech into verbal forms to express "not only the principal action, but the greatest possible number of the moral ideas and physical objects connected with it."³¹ Duponceau seemed to have penetrated to the "vital principle" controlling American Indian languages, a fact which, he hoped, would raise American philology out of the miasma of vocabulary comparisons to a respectable place beside European comparative philology. In America, grammatical structure would become the "true key to the origin and connection of the varieties of human speech."³²

Duponceau's polysynthesis was more than a description of linguistic connection. He implied as well a single stage of mental development, thus subtly moving the question of Indian identity from the realm of historical affinity to one of developmental stages. The change was further encouraged by the tendency of philologists to borrow the prestige of natural-science method and terminology. Thus, when John Pickering adopted Duponceau's theory a few years later, he stressed the unity of form, noting that the languages exhibited a "uniform system, with such differences only as constitute varieties in natural objects."³³

Albert Gallatin, Swiss-born statesman and student of Indian languages, similarly accepted polysynthesis as a demonstrated characteristic of American languages, but made allowance for exceptions, such as Basque in Europe, and held out the possibility of undiscovered connections across the oceans. To Gallatin, common structure indicated common origin, while diversity in vocabulary suggested a long time-span since dispersion across the continent—a principle that Jefferson had espoused. Gallatin speculated that the first inhabitants of America arrived at a remote time, "probably not much posterior to that of the dispersion of mankind." As he saw it, American languages showed clear signs of primitive origins; their form derived from "natural causes," indicating that the Native Americans had not degenerated from a higher state, as Schoolcraft and the mounds explorers maintained. Gallatin

thus contributed another support to a paradigm of progressive development, though not yet of evolution.³⁴

By mid-century the discovery of a single "antique plan of thought" in the structure of aboriginal tongues seemed destined to exert a significant influence on ethnology. With obvious satisfaction, the popular historian George Bancroft announced that a "savage physiognomy" characterized all Indian dialects; each was "almost absolutely free from irregularities, and is pervaded and governed by undeviating laws." The unreflecting American savage, like the bee building geometrically perfect cells, demonstrated "rule, method, and completeness" in his language. Far from indicating degeneration, the aboriginal tongues of America showed unmistakable signs of being "held in bonds of external nature." The Indian thought and spoke in terms of concrete experience, apparently lacking powers of abstract expression. Linguistic evidence showed, said Bancroft, that the American aborigines were still in "that earliest stage of intellectual culture where reflection has not begun."³⁵

Bancroft conveyed to a wide audience the optimism (and ethnocentrism) of students of American languages at mid-century. They saw a certainty and regularity lacking in other approaches to anthropology. The precision, it should be noted, did not derive from the fact that language was a human phenomenon. Quite the opposite: linguistic regularities occurred in spite of man's efforts, indicating the operation of general principles of divine origin. Just as men could cultivate and adorn but not fundamentally alter the geology of the earth, so "language, in its earliest period, has a fixed character, which culture, by weeding out superfluities, inventing happy connections . . . and through analysis, perfecting the mastery of the mind over its instruments, may polish, enliven, and improve, but cannot essentially change."³⁶

The work of the philologists pointed strongly toward aboriginal American unity and threw into question the ancient civilizations imagined by archaeologists. Both groups agreed, though, that the first inhabitants of America, whoever they were and whenever they had arrived, had migrated from somewhere else; thus they supported the orthodox view of the unity of mankind. As Bancroft summarized their findings, the "indigenous population of America offers no new obstacle to faith in the unity of the human race."³⁷

Others were less sure. In the two decades prior to the Civil War, researchers in physical anthropology—notably Samuel George Morton, George Robins Gliddon, and Josiah Clark Nott—aided by the impressive scientific support of Louis Agassiz and the explorations of Ephraim George Squier, demonstrated that Native Americans, with the exception of the Eskimo, possessed a uniform and apparently unique physical type. This "American School" of anthropology directly challenged the Mosaic account by hypothesizing an indigenous, isolated American race, created in and fitted to the climate of America.³⁸

Physical anthropology as systematic scientific inquiry in America began

with Morton, a Philadelphia physician and anatomist. In the 1830s he began assembling a collection of crania, mainly of North American natives, that was unsurpassed and totaled nearly 1,000 by his death in 1851. In 1839 he published *Crania Americana*, based on his skull collection. This landmark in physical anthropology, the result of a decade of work, exhibited a consistency, precision, and thoroughness that established Morton as the leading American authority in the field.³⁹

Morton hoped to determine "whether the American aborigines of all epochs have belonged to one race or to a plurality of races."⁴⁰ His conclusion was straightforward: the American Indian peoples, excluding the Eskimo tribes, belonged to a single race. This race Morton divided into two families, the Toltec and Barbarous (American). The culturally superior Toltec had built the North American mounds and also established the semi-civilizations of Central America; the historical Indians had descended from the inferior Barbarous (American) branch. In other words, Morton denied racial separation of the mound-builders from the modern American Indians but distinguished between two "families" in terms of cultural development. He emphasized that physically, morally, and intellectually this "separate and peculiar" race of America exhibited no connections with the Old World; even if apparent connections were discovered in the arts and religions, he maintained, the "organic characters" of the Indians would prove them a single, distinct race.⁴¹

Morton's strength lay in an unprecedented number of cranial measurements; but in fact he relied on only one or two indices, notably the formation of the occipital portion of the skull, in determining an ideal dominant type of American cranium. Repeatedly he noted exceptions and wide variation, but in his conclusions he either ignored them or attributed them to cultural factors.⁴² Morton's opinions underwent little modification; he repeated them in his *Inquiry* of 1842, his "Account of a Craniological Collection" in 1848, and his "Physical Type of the American Indians," contributed posthumously to Schoolcraft's *Indian Tribes* in 1852.⁴³

Morton's work provided the empirical base for polygenist arguments in the searing slavery-related controversies of the antebellum decade. The polygenist implications of Morton's theories required only time and encouragement to emerge fully. They received both. Louis Agassiz found in Morton important confirmation of his own theories of uniform distribution and local diversity that he found characteristic of the natural history of the New World. Nott and Gliddon drew heavily on Morton in introducing the basics of polygenist doctrine to a popular audience. Their ambitious *Types of Mankind* marshaled the evidence of Morton, the archaeologists, and the philologists to drive their points home. The languages of America, uniform in structure but diverse in vocabulary (as Gallatin had argued), indicated great age and common origin. The mounds similarly suggested long occupation of the continent. But physical anthropology was conclusive: "American crania, antique as well as mod-

ern, are unlike those of any other race of ancient or recent times." Other ethnological data—an increasing number of fossil human bones; the apparent lack of alphabet; domestication practices, indigenous agriculture, astronomy, or calendar systems—all seemed to confirm the antiquity, unity, and isolation of the Native Americans.⁴⁴

The work of Nott and Gliddon circulated widely, but it stimulated more vituperation than research and consequently discredited physical anthropology for decades. As Samuel F. Haven, librarian of the American Antiquarian Society, noted in 1856, Morton's theories had become hopelessly enmeshed in "polemical associations."⁴⁵ Because of the theological and political complications, physiologists busied themselves in other pursuits, and Morton at his death in 1851 left no disciple to carry on his researches. The Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia inherited his collection of crania.⁴⁶

The National Institute had a "special duty," Joel Poinsett wrote in 1841, to "inquire into the history of the people we have dispossessed." But the structure of the Institute hampered the inquiry: philology was subsumed under the department of geography; physical anthropology fell under natural history; and the department of American history and antiquities embraced all studies of "the Indian races, now fading from the earth; their mounds and pyramids, and temples and ruined cities," as well as questions of their origins and subsequent "degeneration."⁴⁷ The fractured anthropology of the Institute epitomized the methodological and disciplinary confusion that both plagued and enriched the inquiry. But within the flux of theory and observation, certain long-term, significant trends emerged. Intertwined in the anthropology of the first half of the century were two distinct traditions of reaction to the phenomena of human variety, each a function of individual temperament and intellectual and religious commitment. For pious Christians fully committed to human unity through the biblical account, historical inquiry backward through time promised to reconcile present diversity with single creation. One suspects that classical philology derived much respect as a humanistic discipline from recognition of this potential service. Others, less satisfied with historical connections than with the categories of the powerful natural sciences, sought to order man rather than track men. Indeed, the development of Duponceau's idea of polysynthesis illustrates the ease with which questions of historical affinity transformed themselves into categories of mental and moral development. Whether one followed Morton or the philologists, the North American aborigines emerged as distinct and uniform, due either to "savage physiognomy" of thought and language or to autochthonous creation.

Morton's school, and physical anthropology generally, fell into disrepute in the second half of the century. The reasons were as much political as scientific. As noted earlier, during the 1850s Joseph Henry consistently steered the Smithsonian away from racial debates, even refusing to permit

abolitionist lectures at the Institution. Personally he maintained a discreet silence on such matters, and the Smithsonian largely ignored physical anthropology through the rest of the century.⁴⁹ The policy was more than a function of local racial conditions, though these may have heightened sensitivity. The polygenist controversy nearly tore apart the American Ethnological Society of New York during the fifties. Ephraim Squier reported that "the question of human unity could not be discussed without offense to some of the members and its casual introduction was made a ground of impassioned protest."⁴⁹ Henry could not afford such bickering. His attempt to establish a nationwide scientific network and to bring together in common effort both missionaries and atheistic polygenists like Squier, required absolute neutrality.

With racial categories discounted and even institutionally suppressed, historical speculations of archaeologists suspect for lack of theoretical grounding (and control in the field), and masses of observations and data annually accruing, developmental schemes emerged in the middle decades of the century—independently of Darwinian biology—as a means of meeting both the commitment to unity and the observed diversity. The work of Lewis Henry Morgan, the dean of nineteenth-century American evolutionism, is particularly instructive in this regard. Morgan's career (1851-1881) spanned the decades during which American anthropology moved from primarily historical inquiry into the origins and early relationships of the different peoples of the globe, to "scientific" classifications, or rankings, of humanity in evolutionary stages of social, mental, and moral development. Morgan's own career, from *Ancient Society* (1851) to *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* (1871) to *Ancient Society* (1877), marked milestones in this transition from history to stage classification.⁵⁰

While *Ancient Society* has been justly remembered as the full statement of Morgan's three-stage model of social and mental development (savagery, barbarism, civilization), it was *Systems of Consanguinity*, his massive empirical work on kinship published by the Smithsonian, which established Morgan's inquiry as a science and himself as an institution. Morgan conceived *Systems of Consanguinity* as a survey in the tradition of comparative philology but rooted in what he hoped would prove less mutable human phenomena than language: ideas of kinship. Philologists had reduced mankind to a number of linguistic families, but they had been unable to take the final step, to the "vital question" of origins. Ultimately, Morgan hoped, his "new instrument in ethnology" would prove to be "the most simple as well as the compendious method for the classification of nations upon the basis of affinity of blood."⁵¹

The vitally important truth about *Systems of Consanguinity* is that Morgan did not find the unity he had presumed and sought. Faced with two apparently distinct concepts and systems of kinship, he adopted a developmental explanatory framework in order to preserve a presumed original human unity. In effect, Morgan moved from a vision of man in historical and geographical

migration and contact to a comparatively rigid, static construction devoid of historical fluidity.

Morgan's schema of human development, further elaborated in *Ancient Society*, did embrace notions of change and progress, but these were, like Schoolcraft's visions, strongly teleological and bound to a system of unfolding ideas rather than to the immediate historical experiences of peoples. Morgan's legacy to the next generation—Powell and the Bureau of American Ethnology—was the subordination of historical probings to the greater explanatory power and aesthetic satisfaction of ordering man in value-laden stages. Following Morgan's lead, Powell grounded BAE anthropology in the principle that the American Indians must be understood not as a racial type but as representatives of a single stage of human development. In escaping the tyranny and politics of racial typing, and in the name of science, Powell also denied history to the American aborigines. The resulting flatness of historical perspective was costly for all fields of anthropology, but especially so for archaeologists, who did not discard such assumptions and begin to develop concepts of cultural micro-change and methods of tracing cultural forms through space and time until the twentieth century.⁵²

The divergent roots of anthropology in the traditions of the humanities and natural sciences, which by 1850 already reached down deeply, produced an inquiry whose unity lay not in method but in subject matter and in purposes that transcended the inquiry itself. With few exceptions, Native Americans constituted the subjects of American anthropology through the nineteenth century. This occasions no surprise, since the natives of the Western Hemisphere, and of the North American continent particularly, posed critical historical and providential questions for White Americans. The central, nagging, political and religious dilemmas were these: Are these people in any sense our brothers? By what right can we claim this land as our own?

Over the middle decades of the century, the various approaches to these problems lost or gained prestige and followers as a result of various factors: new theoretical breakthroughs (especially if originated in Europe); domestic political and racial currents; the growing status of the natural and physical sciences in general in this country; and individual and institutional decisions. Broadly sketched, physical anthropology declined for nearly a half-century as a method; while in archaeology (and to some extent linguistics), the purpose of inquiry shifted away from historical questions to "scientific," formally nonracial classifications of mankind that nonetheless in essence preserved the moral placement system of discredited racial categories. The Smithsonian was a critical institutional focus of these developments, and decisions of Joseph Henry were often determinative. His decision to support ethnology (the general term for anthropological work at the time) as part of his program of providing the experience of science to a wide section of the American citizenry provided tremendous stimulus in numerous directions.

Notes

1. Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography* (Cambridge, 1961), pp. 44-45, 256; E. E. Hale, *Tarry at Home Travels* (New York, 1906), pp. 377, 381, 387.
2. Charles Dickens, *American Notes* (Philadelphia, n.d.), pp. 111-12, 116; Anthony Trollope, *North America* (New York, 1862), pp. 301-2, 306, 314-15.
3. Constance McLaughlin Green, *Washington: Village and Capital, 1800-1878* (Princeton, 1962), p. 148.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 152-66.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 21, 175-80.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 180.
8. A. Hunter Dupree, *Science in the Federal Government: A History of Policies and Activities to 1940* (Cambridge, 1957), p. 40.
9. Quoted in Green, *Washington*, p. 170.
10. William Stanton, *The Great United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842* (Berkeley, 1975), p. 290.
11. For treatment of the National Institute see Stanton, *Exploring Expedition*, pp. 281-304; Sally G. Kohlstedt, "A Step Toward Scientific Self-Identity in the United States: The Failure of the National Institute, 1844," *Isis* 62 (1971); and George Brown Goode, "The Genesis of the U.S. National Museum," *USNM, AR for 1891* (Washington, D.C., 1891), pp. 273-380.
12. Stanton, *Exploring Expedition*, p. 292.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 297.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 295-96.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Nathan Reingold, "Definitions and Speculations: The Professionalization of Science in America in the Nineteenth Century," in A. Oleson and S. C. Brown, eds., *The Pursuit of Knowledge in the Early American Republic* (Baltimore, 1976), pp. 33-69.
17. Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, *An Address, Delivered before the Was-Ah Ho-De-No-Son-Ne, or New Confederacy of the Iroquois, at its Third Annual Council, August 14, 1846* (Rochester, 1846), pp. 3-7, 29. For similar but less poetic sentiments, see Schoolcraft's "Incentives to the Study of the Ancient Period of American History," an address to the New-York Historical Society, 17 November 1846 (New York, 1847).
18. Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, *Plan for the Investigation of American Ethnology: to include the facts derived from other parts of the globe, and the eventual formation of a Museum of Antiquities and the peculiar Fabrics of Nations: and also the collection of a library of the Philology of the World, manuscript and printed* (New York, 1846), pp. 5, 12-13. Schoolcraft's *Plan* was reprinted in the *SI, AR for 1885* (pp. 907-14), with the note that although it was never officially adopted by the Institution, "even after the lapse of forty years it possesses sufficient interest and suggestiveness to justify its publication."
19. *SI, AR for 1860*, p. 38.
20. Adams to Jefferson, 28 June 1812, in *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, ed. Lester J. Cappon (New York, 1959), pp. 308-09.
21. Schoolcraft, *Address*, p. 34.
22. Fred Somkin, *Unquiet Eagle: Memory and Desire in the Idea of American Freedom, 1815-1860* (Ithaca, 1967).
23. George Stocking, "From Chronology to Ethnology: James Cowles Prichard and British Anthropology, 1800-1850," in J. C. Prichard, *Researches in the Physical History of Man*, ed. Stocking (Chicago, 1973), p. XCIV.
24. The history of interest in the earthworks of North America, and of the theories adduced to account for them, has been treated extensively in several works, notably Robert Silverberg, *Mound Builders of Ancient America: The Archaeology of a Myth* (Greenwich, Conn., 1968); and Leo Deuel, *Conquistadores Without Swords: Archaeologists in the Americas* (New York, 1967). A recent regionally oriented survey is James E. Fitting, ed., *The Development of North American Archaeology* (Garden City, 1973). For further background, see Lee Eldridge Huddleston, *Origins of the American Indians: European Concepts, 1492-1729* (Austin, 1967). Gordon Willey and Jeremy Sabloff's *A History of American Archaeology* (San Francisco, 1974) places the archaeology of this period in historical and professional context. The most thorough account of the subject, however, remains unpublished: Thomas C. Tax's "The Development of American Archaeology, 1800-1879," Ph.D. diss. (University of Chicago, 1973). I have relied especially on Samuel F. Haven's valuable historical review, *Archaeology in the United States*, published as part of vol. 8 of *Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge* (Washington, D.C., 1856).
25. Caleb Atwater, "Description of the Antiquities of Ohio and Other Historical States," *Transactions and Collections of the American Antiquarian Society* 1 (Worcester, Mass., 1820).
26. James H. McCulloh, *Researches Philosophical and Antiquarian Concerning the Aboriginal History of America* (Baltimore, 1829); see also John Haywood, *The Natural and Aboriginal History of Tennessee, up to the first Settlements by the White People* (1823); Constantine S. Rafinesque, *Ancient History, or Annals of Kentucky: with a Survey of the Ancient Monuments of North America, and a Tabular View of the Principal Languages and Primitive Nations of the Whole Earth* (Frankfort, 1824); John Delafield, Jr., *An Inquiry into the Origin of the Antiquities of America* (New York, 1839); William Henry Harrison, *A Discourse on the Aborigines of the Valley of the Ohio* (1838); and Alexander W. Bradford, *American Antiquities and Researches into the Origin and History of the Red Race* (New York, 1843). Some of these popular expositions enjoyed wide circulation; according to Haven (*Archaeology*, p. 41), one book on the "Moundbuilder Race" (by Joseph Priest) sold 22,000 copies by subscription in thirty months.
27. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on Virginia*, in *Basic Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Philip Foner (Garden City, 1944), pp. 116-19; H. R. Schoolcraft, *Personal Memoirs of a Residence of Thirty Years with the Indian Tribes on the American Frontiers* (1851; reprint ed., New York, 1975), p. 176.
28. John R. Bartlett, "The Progress of Ethnology, an Account of Recent Archaeological, Philological, and Geographical Researches in Various Parts of the

- Globe, tending to elucidate the Physical History of Man," *Transactions of the American Ethnological Society* 2 (New York, 1848): 4.
29. Haven, *Archaeology*, p. 97.
 30. Peter Stephen Duponceau, "Report of the Historical and Literary Committee to the American Philosophical Society, January 9, 1818," *Transactions of the Historical and Literary Committee of the American Philosophical Society* 1 (Philadelphia, 1819): xi-xvi. Quoted in Mary Haas, "Grammar or Lexicon? The American Indian Side of the Question from Duponceau to Powell," *International Journal of Anthropological Linguistics* 35: 239-55. The discussion here is based on Haas's article.
 31. Duponceau, "Report," p. xiv; quoted in Haas, "Grammar or Lexicon?" p. 240.
 32. Haven, *Archaeology*, pp. 56, 54.
 33. John Pickering, "Indian Languages of America," *Encyclopedia Americana* 4 (appendix): 581; quoted in Haas, "Grammar or Lexicon?", p. 241. See also Haas, p. 242; and Regna D. Darnell, "The Powell Classification of American Indian Languages," *Papers in Linguistics* (July 1971), pp. 73-76.
 34. Albert Gallatin, "A Synopsis of the Indian Tribes within the United States East of the Rocky Mountains and in the British and Russian Possessions in North America," *Transactions and Collections of the American Antiquarian Society* (Cambridge, 1836), p. 6. Quoted in Haas, "Grammar or Lexicon?", p. 243.
 35. George Bancroft, *History of the United States*, 14th ed., vol. 3 (1854), pp. 254-66.
 36. *Ibid.*, pp. 256, 264-65, 318. Schoolcraft also found ground for optimism in the slow mutability of language; see his "Incentives," p. 23.
 37. *Ibid.*, p. 318
 38. The following discussion is based on William Stanton, *The Leopard's Spots* (Chicago, 1960); George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York, 1971), pp. 71-96; Paul A. Erickson, *The Origins of Physical Anthropology*, Ph.D. diss. (University of Connecticut, 1974), p. 66-80; Haven, *Archaeology*; Daniel Wilson, "Lectures on Physical Ethnology," *SI, AR for 1862-63*, pp. 240-302; and Aleš Hrdlička, "Physical Anthropology in America," *American Anthropologist*, n.s. 16 (1914): 508-54.
 39. Samuel George Morton, *Crania Americana, or a Comparative View of the Skulls of the Various Aboriginal Nations of North and South America. To Which is Prefixed an Essay on the Varieties of the Human Species* (Philadelphia, 1839).
 40. Hrdlička, "Physical Anthropology," p. 515.
 41. S. G. Morton, "Account of a Craniological Collection," *Transactions of the American Ethnological Society* 2 (1848): 219.
 42. For a critical account of Morton's work and conclusions by a near-contemporary, see Daniel Wilson, "Lectures," pp. 240-65. On reexamination of Morton's collection, Wilson denied the existence of Morton's ideal type—the rounded, brachycephalic "Peruvian" head—among the North American skulls.
 43. S. G. Morton, *An Inquiry into the Distinctive Characteristics of the Aboriginal Race of America* (Boston, 1842; Philadelphia, 1844); H. R. Schoolcraft, *Indian Tribes* 2 (Philadelphia, 1852): 316-30. See also, in Schoolcraft, Morton's "Unity of the Human Race," vol. 3, pp. 374-75.
 44. J. C. Nott and G. R. Gliddon, *Types of Mankind, or Ethnological Researches, based upon the ancient monuments, paintings, sculptures, and crania of races, and upon their natural geographical, philological, and Biblical history* (Philadelphia, 1854); quoted in Haven, *Archaeology*, p. 85.
 45. Haven, *Archaeology*, p. 81.
 46. Hrdlička noted ("Physical Anthropology," pp. 524-26) that Joseph Leidy and J. Aitken Meigs, both of Philadelphia, considered picking up the mantle of the great Morton, but while each contributed in his own way to the advancement of physical anthropology and anatomy, Meigs and Leidy went in other directions. Of Leidy's more than 500 publications in natural science, Hrdlička found only thirteen related directly to anthropology.
 47. Joel R. Poinsett, *Discourse on the Objects and Importance of the National Institution for the Promotion of Science, Established at Washington, 1840. Delivered at the First Anniversary* (Washington, D.C., 1841), pp. 19-20, 42-43. On the formation and early activities of the various departments, see the *Bulletins* of the Institute, 1840-42.
 48. Green, *Washington*, p. 287.
 49. Robert E. Bieder and Thomas G. Tax, "From Ethnologists to Anthropologists: A Brief History of the American Ethnological Society," in John V. Murra, ed., *American Anthropology: The Early Years* (St. Paul, 1976), p. 17.
 50. George W. Stocking's essay, "Some Problems in the Understanding of Nineteenth Century Cultural Evolutionism," in Regna Darnell, ed., *Readings in the History of Anthropology*, (New York, 1974), pp. 407-25, has been suggestive for the following discussion.
 51. L. H. Morgan, *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity in the Human Family*, Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge 17 (Washington, D.C., 1871), pp. 9, 506.
 52. Willey and Sabloff, *History of American Archaeology*, p. 88.

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