

Book Note - John W. Bennett, *Classic Anthropology: Critical Essays, 1944-1996*, Transactions Publishers, New Brunswick (1998)

by

**David L. Browman
Department of Anthropology
Washington University- Saint Louis**

The above volume includes a series of 15 papers: 7 previously published, and 8 written explicitly for this book. "Classic Anthropology" for Bennett is the period between 1915 and 1955 (p. xi). The book jacket indicates "special attention to Ruth Benedict, Leslie Spier, Laura Thompson, Bronislaw Malinowski, Clyde Kluckhohn, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and others." The discussion of Spier relates mainly to his work on the Plains Indians sun dance, and that of Teilhard de Chardin narrates his concept of culture, rather than any discussion of Spier's and Teilhard de Chardin's specific contributions to archaeology.

Chapter 11, however, is a 27 page discussion of "Walter W. Taylor and Americanist Archaeology's Search for a Concept of Culture." After a brief review of some of the 19th century figures in American archaeology, Bennett then argues that one of the major significant transformations in American archaeology was the shift of the discipline out of the government venue (such as the Bureau of American Ethnology) into the university setting. It was the academic setting, he argues, which led in part to the change from collection of museum objects to the search for an archaeological concept of culture. Bennett argues (p. 292) that "Academization, then meant scientization, and for anthropology, this meant a search for a scientific concept of culture and its handmaiden, ethnology. For archaeology, it meant three things: (1) improved methods of excavation and better stratigraphy; (2) superior techniques of artifact description, and above all, and (3) precise chronology. All of these in the pre-Classic era [e.g. pre-A.D. 1915, dlb] were approximate or slipshod. "

Although Bennett is best known for his work in applied and ecological anthropology, in fact he started out in archaeology, and his first publications were on archaeological topics in Illinois (see references for several of his archaeological contributions). Before dealing with Taylor, Bennett takes an interesting aside in identifying an individual whom he feels is un- or under-appreciated: William Baker Nickerson. Bennett argues that what later was known as the "Chicago Method" and attributed to Cole and Deuel (1937) had actually been employed by Nickerson in his work at the Jo Daviess county sites between 1896 and 1901. According to Bennett, Nickerson was a trained surveyor who also worked as a telegrapher for the Illinois Central Railroad. Nickerson started out conducting archaeological excavations as a gentleman's hobby, but as with many avocational archaeologists of his era, was in direct contact with F. W. Putnam at the Harvard Peabody Museum, who provided funding for part of his work. Nickerson's first excavation work, starting in 1884, was in Illinois and somewhat later in Michigan. At the time he did the Jo Daviess mounds work, he had returned to Illinois and was stationed in Galena, subsequently he was stationed in Chicago and Hainesville, Illinois, and finally seems to have ended up in Epworth, a short distance west of Dubuque, Iowa. It was while he was in Epworth that he attempted to become fully supported through conducting archaeological excavations, and between 1911 and 1916, he was employed by the Minnesota Historical Society, and the National Museum of Canada, to conduct excavation projects in Minnesota and Manitoba. World War I brought an end to his archaeological career, by drying up funding, and I have no record of any later work by Nickerson until his death in 1926. But for the thirty-plus year period between 1884 and 1916, he conducted many excavation projects in the upper Midwest/Great Lakes area (see references at end of this note for his published papers). According to Bennett (1998:293), Nickerson "developed all the same techniques Cole and Deuel called the 'Chicago Method': located the loci for all finds with a transit, measured profiles and ground plans, and so on". Earlier Bennett provided even more detail on Nickerson's work, noting that (Bennett 1942a: 123):

- (1) He used a datum plane for recording all artifacts and locating features on his profile drawings. He called it a 'zero base line';
- (2) He used a five-foot grid system, staking out his mounds and excavating his 'blocks' by levels measured from the datum plane. Two main axes divided the dig into 'sections', each of which had its own numbered 'blocks';
- (3) He recorded all his finds on coordinated ground plans and five-foot profile drawings, with detailed symbol keys. His profiles and ground plans appear in alignment on single large sheets, so that they can be read with a minimum of reference to the text;
- (4) He used a mattock exclusively for vertical excavation, carefully smoothing his profiles, and planing his floors with a sharpened shovel; and
- (5) He relocated all his excavations with stakes marking the trench limits, and burying these stakes when he restored the mound.

The work referred to here in Jo Daviess County was conducted by Nickerson under the indirect sponsorship of Putnam, and a final report was submitted as a manuscript for publication to the Peabody Museum in 1913, where, with Putnam no longer being in charge, the manuscript languished for another 30 years. Thus we can see yet another earlier archaeologist who was utilizing techniques generally not employed by university-trained archaeologists for at least another quarter century, but because of the relative 'invisibility' of his work, until it was salvaged by Bennett, unknown and thus regrettably with minimal influence on the development of the discipline. Bennett sees Taylor's 1948 book (*A Study of Archeology*) as an American version of Grahame Clark's 1939 *Archaeology and Society*. He notes that in the archaeology classes at the University of Chicago in the late 1930 and early 1940s,

the general consensus was simply that Clark's recommendations were mainly appropriate for a European context, where you generally had better links between the past and present.

Now Taylor was recommending full contextual cultural analysis for Americanist archaeology, especially the North American situation (p. 300).

As many before him, Bennett has trouble evaluating the specific importance of Taylor in the development of Americanist archaeology. On one hand Bennett observes that Taylor only conducted a single major excavation project, whose field reports still are not available, and that his important writings are confined to the 1948 volume, which facts might argue for a relatively minor impact. But on the other hand, Bennett indicates that the "book went through seven printings, presumably all sold out, which speaks for itself", and notes that such luminaries as Binford credit Taylor's book as being important in their intellectual development. Bennett argues that American archaeologists were

guilty about the fact they were not producing high-level theory, or reconstructing whole cultures and not just pottery types, they really were not prepared for intellectually sophisticated endeavors. And I think one reason Taylor's 1948 book was resented was because of the guilt and frustration. Taylor, not a real digger himself, and a student of that fancy Harvard anthropologist, Clyde Kluckhohn, had some nerve! My own recollections of the period also tell me that Taylor's book was probably read more carefully by socio-cultural anthropologists than by archaeologists.

In the light of the 1990s, criticism of the specifics of Taylor's proposal for an enlarged archaeology is not very meaningful. Archaeology was heading in those directions before he wrote and published, and it has continued to do so. "(p. 307).

In this sense, Bennett, being actively engaged as a student when Taylor's book was written, can bring a personal perspective to the conundrum which has puzzled many archaeologists, that is, the rather negative reception of Taylor's seeming sensible ideas. Equally important, however, from the point of view of the history of the discipline, is Bennett's appreciation of Nickerson's work, and his explicit linking of Nickerson's methodology to the later development of the 'Chicago Method' of Cole and Deuel.

References

Bennett, John W.

1940 "Preliminary notes on the Baumer Site," *Southeastern Archaeological Conference Newsletter*, 2(3):7-8.

1941a "Excavations at Kincaid," *Southeastern Archaeological Conference Newsletter*, 2(4): 13-17.

1941b "'Salt Pans' at the Kincaid Site," *American Antiquity*, 7(2):165- 166.

1942a "W. B. Nickerson—Pioneer in Scientific Archaeology," *American Antiquity*, 8(1):122-124.

1942b "Recent Developments in the Functional Interpretation of Archaeological Data," *American Antiquity*, 9(2):208-219.

1943a "Hopewellian in Minnesota," *American Antiquity*, 9(3):336.

1943b "A history of the Mississippi Cultures," *Wisconsin Archaeologist*, 24:33-42.

1944a "A Note on Middle Mississippi Architecture," *American Antiquity*, 9(3):333- 334.

1944b "Archaeological horizons in the Southern Illinois Region," *American Antiquity*, 10(1): 12-22.

1944c "Middle American Influences on the Cultures of the Southeastern United States," *Acta Americana*, 2(1/2):25-50.

1946 "Empiricist and Experimental Trends in Eastern Archaeology," *American Antiquity*, 11(3): 198-200.

1947 *Archaeological Explorations in Jo Daviess County, Illinois: The Work of William Baker Nickerson (1895-1901) and the University of Chicago (1926-1932)*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

1952 "The prehistory of the Northern Mississippi Valley, in *Archaeology of the Eastern United States*, edited by James B. Griffin, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, pp. 108-123.

(with Nelson A. Reed and James Warren Porter)

1966 "Solid Core Drilling of Monks Mound: Technique and Findings," *American Antiquity*, 33(2):137-148.

Capes, Katherine H.

1963 "The W. B. Nickerson Survey and Excavations, 1912-15, of the Southern Manitoba Mounds Region," *Anthropological Papers*, National Museum of Canada, No. 4. Ottawa.

Cole, Fay-Cooper and Thorne Deuel

1937 *Rediscovering Illinois*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Nickerson, William Baker

1908a "Stone Graves of Northwestern Illinois," *Records of the Past*, 7(1):52-58.

1908b "Mounds of Northwestern Illinois," *Records of the Past*, 7(2):85-95.

1911 "The Mound-Builders: a Plea for the Conservation of the Antiquities of the Central and Southern States," *Records of the Past*, 10(6):334-338.

1912 "The Burial Mounds at Albany, Illinois," *Records of the Past*, 11(2):69-81.

1913 "On an Archaeological Reconnaissance of Manitoba," *Summary Report of the Geological Survey of Canada, Department of Mines, for the Calendar Year 1912*, Ottawa. p. 504.

1914 "On Archaeological Research in the Valley of the Souris River, Southwestern Manitoba," *Summary Report of the Geological Survey of Canada, Department of Mines, for the Calendar Year 1913*, Ottawa, pp. 387-388.

1988 "Archaeological Evidences in Minnesota: Explorations of the Minnesota Historical Society in the years 1913 and 1916 in the Valley of the Minnesota River by William B. Nickerson under the direction of Newton H. Winchell and Warren Upham," *Minnesota Archaeologist*, 47(2):4-40.