

***Misadventures in Archaeology: The Life and Career of Charles Conrad Abbott*****Carolyn Dillian and Charles A. Bello.****University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2020****276 pages, 32 illustrations****ISBN: 978194905705****DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v7i1.240>**

Charles Conrad Abbott is remembered today--when he is remembered at all--as a marginal figure in the history of American archaeology. Abbott advocated in the second half of the nineteenth century for the now discredited and outlandish notion that there was an American Paleolithic akin to that only then recently recognized in Europe. Abbott was a dilettante whose privileged status as an educated and elite white male allowed him to espouse and promote the American Paleolithic at the highest levels of academia, despite having no formal training or education in archaeology. On the battlefield of ideas about the past, he was vanquished by the leader of a newly emerging professional class of archaeologists seated not in the halls of academia but rather in government offices: the Smithsonian Institution's William Henry Holmes. Holmes ably demonstrated that Abbott's "paleoliths" from his farm in New Jersey that superficially represented hand axes from Late Paleolithic France and England were, in fact, early stages in the production of stone tools.

The dethronement of Abbott's American Paleolithic--and Abbott's status as a leader in American archaeology--is, of course, central to the fascinating and well-written biography of Abbott, *Misadventures in Archaeology: The Life and Career of Charles Conrad Abbott* (hereafter *Misadventures*), by two archaeologists with an extensive background in the archaeology of New Jersey, Drs. Carolyn D. Dillian and Charles A. Bello. Dillian and Bello in some ways seek to rehabilitate Abbott's image--but not his concept of an American Paleolithic. They present a wider framework for evaluating Abbott and his ideas against a backdrop of shifting perspectives among scholars in the nineteenth century, notably an understanding of Deep Time in terms of the human

past and the existence of pre-modern humans. The authors show how Abbott's avocational nature, despite his elite status, led to his exclusion from an increasingly professionalized archaeological community. I would add the caveat here that Abbott's status diminished not solely because he was an avocational, but rested more on his refusal to adopt systematic practices in the archaeology that he conducted. As Dillian and Bello repeatedly demonstrate, personalities as much as scientific advances can impact the development of a field, and Abbott had an acerbic and contrarian attitude that many found more than off putting. Here, I'll violate the unofficial rules of writing reviews, and quote the authors from the last chapter in this volume at the beginning of this review: "Abbott was polarizing, irascible, petulant and brash, but he was also a prolific writer, colorful character, and innovative thinker" (246). As the eleven chapters in this volume show, Abbott's obstinacy in promoting the American Paleolithic long after every other scholar had moved on does not mean that his contributions to American archaeology should be dismissed, especially in terms of his contributions to the study of New Jersey's past.

*Misadventures* first chapter, "Charles Abbott and the Birth of Professional Archaeology," is somewhat ironically named, as Abbott himself did not professionalize archaeology, unless as a negative example that helped shore up a small but growing community of professional archaeologists. Also, ironically, the chapter opens with an 1893 quote by William Henry Holmes that eviscerates Abbott's vision of an American Paleolithic--albeit the one aspect of Abbott's misguided contribution to the history of American archaeology that I and many others probably already knew. Holmes stated that amateurs were important in the past but that Abbott and others like him should give way to people formally trained in archaeological sciences. Abbot himself was actually educated as a medical doctor and this, along with his privileged status, was considered sufficient for him to participate at the highest levels of American archaeology in the mid-nineteenth

century, but was seen as inadequate credentials as the century ended. Abbott was apparently a reluctant, and not quite good doctor, and he found collecting and writing about artifacts from New Jersey and Pennsylvania for various museums as his true life's work. In 1872, he published his "The Stone Age in New Jersey" in *The American Naturalist*, outlining his thoughts on the American Paleolithic. This article was heavily influenced by recent discoveries and ideas from Europe, where a deeper past for humanity was beginning to be recognized. Another pivotal moment was when Abbott and his family moved to the family farm in New Jersey in 1874, which he called Three Beeches. Abbott initially flourished within American archaeology, but attacks by Holmes and others, Abbott's refusal to accept scientific evidence contradicting his American Paleolithic, and his hostility to his critics reinforced the perception of Abbott as an unserious amateur. His last published work, written in 1912, continued to argue for the reality of his American Paleolithic, and he died just two years later at the age of 76 from a kidney infection--defiant to the end.

In its second chapter, *Misadventures* begins Dillian's and Bello's expansion on historical events introduced in the first chapter with the aptly named "The Move to Three Beeches and the History of Abbott Farm." The chapter not only details how Abbott's move here helped him turn toward archaeology, but also considers the extensive archaeological record revealed on this farm, although primarily as a result of New Deal excavations in the 1930s and more recent cultural resource management (CRM) efforts. Abbott collected thousands of American Indian artifacts from his farms and those around him that are now in Harvard's Peabody Museum, the Penn Museum, the New Jersey State Museum, Smithsonian Institution, and the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford University. Abbott turned in part to collecting American Indian artifacts and writing about them because the farm itself provided insufficient income. Over 10,000 years of American Indian

heritage exist at what is now Abbott farm, but no evidence for Abbott's American Paleolithic culture, or for the pre-American Indian population he proposed should be called *Homo delawarensis*. Since Abbott rarely recorded the locations of his finds, and conducted no controlled excavations, it is the more recent investigations that provide us with an actual understanding of the last 10,000 years of human history here. The Three Beeches are now part of Abbott Farm, a National Historic Landmark that includes multiple archaeological sites and historic properties on the National Register of Historic Places.

Chapter 3, "Frederic Ward Putnam and the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University," shows how Abbott's collections were central to the early history of this museum, but that Putnam viewed Abbott not as a colleague but rather as one of a stable of untrained amateurs the museum relied upon. Putnam apparently considered these amateurs as students and instructed them on proper field methods--instructions that Abbott ignored. Putnam thought enough of Abbott to make him an affiliated but unpaid field assistant to Harvard's Peabody Museum. He later took Abbott with him to the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, where Abbott remained true to his cantankerous and asocial personality. Putnam also published *The American Naturalist*, which introduced Abbott's 1872 American Paleolithic to the world.

With Chapter 4, "Champion of the American Paleolithic," we learn how Abbott's notion of a very early human presence relied directly on discoveries and publications from Europe. This excellent chapter shows how European intellectuals' support for an Earth that was only 6000 years old was ending in the face of evidence for a deep time for humanity. Discoveries of stone tools by Jacques Boucher de Perthes in the 1830s and 1840s, although at first dismissed as not being that old, had a direct impact on Abbott as his "paleoliths" were directly reminiscent of these French

finds. If they looked the same, reasoned Abbott, they must be of the same age. Alfred Russel Wallace himself spoke favorably of Abbott's conclusions, as did, initially, Putnam.

Things came crashing down to an end for Abbott's arguments because of William Henry Holmes, the central figure in Chapter 5, "Debunking the American Paleolithic." Holmes, then working for the Bureau of American Ethnology, excavated over the winter of 1889 to 1890 at the Piney Branch site in Washington, D.C. This site was considered as dating to the American Paleolithic. Holmes concluded that, rather than being paleolithic tools, the artifacts he was finding--in stratified contexts--were actually quarrying debris. Not only was this site NOT an example of the American Paleolithic, Holmes argued that this might be true of other supposed deep time sites. Superficial similarities between Old and New World tools were not sufficient to make a statement about contemporaneity--context was important as well. By the time Holmes published this in 1890, Abbott was a curator at the Penn Museum--as discussed in the next chapter. Holmes actually visits Abbott's sites in 1893, but finds that none of the purported American Paleolithic tools come from intact deposits.

*Misadventures'* sixth chapter, "The Penn Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology," considers Abbott's employment here as a curator, something alluded to in the previous chapter. In 1889, Abbott was offered a position of curator at what was then the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology a scant three weeks before Holmes presented his findings that challenged Abbott's American Paleolithic. Dillian and Bello argue that this timing is particularly fortuitous for Abbott, as his reputation was strong enough in the professional community that his lack of credentials for this new position were overlooked. Within a few short years, Abbott's position became precarious because he was both unproductive and unmotivated, and feuded with others in the museum. He was terminated November 1, 1893. This termination

actually led to critical and financial success, as Abbott turned toward nature writing as detailed in Chapter 7, “Abbott the Naturalist.” Tossed out of the archaeological, for which he was ill suited, he began to write about birds.

Abbott did not fully abandon archaeology despite the criticisms of Holmes and his tempestuous time at the Penn Museum. He continued to explore the Delaware River shoreline still seeking evidence for his American Paleolithic and did some of the first historical archaeology in the region, which is covered in Chapter 8, “Burlington Island and Historical Archaeology.” The artifacts that he recovered from this site were sent to Harvard’s Peabody Museum in 1894, where they apparently sat until they were cataloged and accessioned in 1952. Abbott never published on a site that he stated dated to the 17th century. The artifacts he collected showed multiple components, but, as typical for Abbott, the lack of any contextual information limits their utility.

Being a member of the elite certainly continued to aid his career as Abbott aged. In Chapter 9, “The Princeton Years,” Abbott was invited in 1900 to donate his personal papers and books to the Princeton University Library because he had a connection to Princeton through marriage. He was also asked to develop an archaeological museum at Princeton along the lines of Harvard’s Peabody Museum. Abbott spent the next 12 years unsuccessfully pursuing the creation of this museum, donating numerous specimens collected around his family farm.

Abbott’s time spent trying to create an archaeology museum at Princeton apparently inspired him to write his last book, *Ten Years’ Diggings in Lenape Land, 1901-1911*, published in 1912. He still felt the sting of attacks on his American Paleolithic, likening his critics to yellow journalists. Chapter 10, “The Autumn Years,” discusses this work and Abbott’s declining health, as well as the loss of his home by fire in November 1914.

The appropriately titled final chapter, “Abbott’s Legacy,” discusses not only Abbott’s own work, but also the place where he carried out his archaeological endeavors. Rampant looting at the Three Beeches led to New Deal archaeology under Dr. Dorothy Cross at this farm and surrounding areas in the 1930s in what became known as Abbott Farm. Cross examined gravel deposits to see if there was any support for Abbott’s American Paleolithic--no signs of human occupation were encountered in these deep deposits. Archaeologists in 1963 actually excavated Abbott’s Three Beeches home, finding traces of artifacts that Abbott had collected. Dillian and Bello conclude *Misadventures* by arguing that the American Paleolithic might not be real, but Abbott did make valuable contributions to studies of the past in this region and is rightly considered the father of New Jersey archaeology.

These eleven chapters followed a roughly chronological framework, but seem written so that they can be read somewhat independently. Chapter 1, for example, encapsulates all the major themes in this book. This occasioned some issues of overlap and repetition, as well as changes in Abbott’s status that are not fully explained until much later in a chapter or sometimes in the next chapter. *Misadventures* would strongly benefit from a timeline of major events or changes for Abbott. A major contention of *Misadventures* is the discussion of how the professionalization of archaeology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led to avocational archaeologists being cast aside, but I see this process more as archaeology casting aside someone who remained resolutely amateuristic and refused to adopt and adhere to good practices. The divide between professional and avocational archaeologists today is being increasingly questioned, and perhaps Abbott would consider this a positive development--although I doubt it. This minor quibble aside, I highly recommend *Misadventures* to anyone interested in the history of archaeology, and New Jersey archaeology in general. Dillian and Bello write in an engaging style, and demonstrate a

masterful use of archival data and grey archaeological literature that really breathes life into Charles Conrad Abbott and his contributions.

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