

6-1-1927

Prehistoric Cultures

Charles Reuben Keyes

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Keyes, Charles R. "Prehistoric Cultures." *The Palimpsest* 8 (1927), 215-229.
Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol8/iss6/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Prehistoric Cultures

It would be pleasant to report that particular tribes of certain linguistic stocks inhabited Iowa in prehistoric times and that the characteristics of their various cultures were thus and so. But this is quite impossible at the present time. We do know that the Algonkian family was represented on Iowa soil before the coming of the white man, for Marquette found the Peoria on the west bank of the Mississippi in 1673. Furthermore, Indian tradition, supported by a few vague references in the relations of the early missionaries and the accounts of early explorers, makes it probable almost to the point of certainty that the Ioway and Omaha of the Siouan stock, quite likely the Mascouten, or prairie Pottawattamie, of the Algonkian stock, and possibly the Mandan of the Siouan stock, also had villages in the Iowa country in prehistoric times. It is possible also that certain other tribes, close relatives of those mentioned, and in the historical period often associated with them, may have likewise reached Iowa before the white man did. Any more definite statements than these appear quite in the nature of guesswork, so far as the contributions of history and tradition are concerned.

But where history and tradition are silent, archeology begins the search and often has much to say.

Through detailed studies of the earliest known historical sites and through archeological explorations carried out on territory known to have been occupied in the prehistoric period, the characteristic cultures of some of the Indian stocks are beginning to be understood. Much remains to be done in this field, but some good starting points seem to have been established. While the prehistoric Siouan cultures, for example, are but little known outside of the Mandan of North Dakota, Algonkian criteria are coming to be depended upon more and more.

The Algonkian culture may be identified by the predominance of stone implements and ornaments over those of any other material. Grooved stone axes are perhaps the most characteristic tool and are found over all the Algonkian territory in great numbers and in great variety of forms and sizes. Arrowheads, spearheads, knives, drills, and scrapers of chipped flint are found also in a variety of forms unequalled elsewhere and the first two are likely to be notched, stemmed, or barbed. Not content with utilitarian products in stone, the culture also produced vast numbers of ceremonial and ornamental objects such as bannerstones, bird-shaped stones, tubes, and gorgets in polished slate, porphyry, and hematite. The pottery vessels have bases in the shape of a rounded-off cone, the clay is tempered with rather coarsely-crushed granite, and the rims and sides of the vessels are ornamented with fabric impressions while punched, stamped, and incised de-

signs are put on in a characteristic way. Work in bone and antler was but little developed. First identified in New York, the prehistoric Algonkian culture is found to have extended over all of New England, southern Ontario, through Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and parts of Iowa and Minnesota. Its southern range remains undetermined.

It must not be thought, of course, that the finding of a few grooved axes or notched arrowheads in a locality is sufficient in itself to establish the presence of the Algonkian culture. For this several of the characteristics should be indicated in a positive way. Taken separately the single feature should be regarded as an indicator only. By far the best single criterion of a culture is the pottery. The women of the different stocks had quite divergent ideas as to the form, decoration, and texture of their ceramic products, and on this fact now rests much of the science of American archeology. For the general reliability of the pottery index to a culture has been proven for all parts of the Americas that developed a ceramic art.

On the basis of established facts, five very distinct prehistoric cultures may now be assigned to Iowa and given a partial description. Information concerning them is gained in part from past studies recorded in the literature; in part it has been collected from those who have made unrecorded studies; and in part it is the result of new observations made by

many persons since the inception of the present survey in 1922, whose contributions must later be recorded in the history of Iowa archeology.

The most widely-spread culture was the Algonkian, the general features of which have just been noted. It is found over every part of Iowa except certain limited areas to be designated under the succeeding descriptions. To judge by the archeological remains, the prehistoric Algonkians might have laid claim to nearly nine-tenths of the Iowa country. How different this from the later conditions as known in history! A word of caution should be dropped here, however, to the effect that certain Siouan tribes, like the Ioway, were so long in intimate touch with the Algonkian peoples that their culture may not be definitely distinguishable, in all cases, from that of their old neighbors. But whatever exceptions there may or may not have been, Algonkian culture would mean, as a rule, also Algonkian tribes.

The stone products of Algonkian type found over most of Iowa are of amazing variety and often of the most exquisite workmanship. Over one hundred and twenty types of chipped implements have been distinguished and this, as the saying goes, "without half trying". The work in ground stone is equally fine and diversified, the grooved axes, especially, not being surpassed by any found elsewhere on the continent. West of the divide between the two river systems the materials collected in the valleys

of the Nodaway, Nishnabotna, Boyer, Soldier, and the lower course of the Little Sioux show changes in form and material. There the axes average smaller and thinner, a larger number are polished, and the lustrous black, mottled gray and brown, or mottled black and yellow diorite specimens are quite readily distinguished from the green, or mottled white and green diorite, diabase, and porphyry axes of the territory lying on the Mississippi slope. The pottery of the Missouri slope is also thinner and harder than that of the middle and eastern parts of the State and is, perhaps, a little more elaborately decorated. It is as if the Algonkian tribes on the two slopes were out of touch with each other, possibly through having reached the Iowa country along different river routes. For the Algonkians were canoe and woodland Indians who did much of their travel by water and for purposes of residence regularly kept to the timber belts.

Very interesting are the Algonkian village sites hidden away in what was once forest skirting the Iowa rivers and smaller streams. From their seclusion in a side ravine or on the bank of some small tributary, the smoke of their camp fires would seldom have been visible from the main waterways. This is true too of the caves and rock shelters of east central Iowa. The fact of their location in places that even yet have largely escaped the plow makes the finding of an Algonkian village site something of an event.

In 1924 such a site lay buried and unknown beneath the rather sandy soil of the east bank of Main Creek in Washington County until the floods of late July arose to an unwonted height and excavated their way recklessly through the place. Probably most of the village remains went on down the creek. However, when persons living in the vicinity first discovered the wreckage, there lay scattered over the creek terrace some twenty grooved stone axes, about three hundred flint implements of various kinds, numerous hammerstones, a large granite mortar, quantities of debris from the arrowmakers' workshops, and fragments of pottery unnumbered.

Such sites are found generally over the State, even among the bur oaks standing on the margins of most of the northern Iowa lakes. Thence they trail off to similar sites in Minnesota, but not, it is interesting to note, into Nebraska or the Dakotas. Aside from the locations themselves, it is the pottery and the work in stone that must be depended upon for the final analysis; for the light Algonkian houses, frail structures of sapling framework covered with bark or with mats of woven rushes, have long since mingled completely with the forest soil.

Beginning at the mouth of the Iowa River in Louisa County and following in a narrow band the bluffs and terraces of the Mississippi to or beyond Dubuque, occurs the Hopewell or "mound builder" culture, the same that made famous the archeology of Ohio. Above Dubuque there is a gap, probably

more apparent than real, and then the Hopewell again comes to light in the valley of the Turkey River near Clermont, the farthest north and west of any known sites of this famous culture.

The Hopewell culture, which receives its name from the Hopewell family who owned the farm some seven miles northwest of Chillicothe on which the best-known works of the culture stand, is entirely prehistoric. It is distinguished by its lavish use of copper for both weapons and ornaments, of freshwater pearls for necklaces and as units of decorative designs, and of various showy minerals and sea-shells brought from afar for the purpose of making both ornaments and utensils. Finely-sculptured stone tobacco pipes are characteristic also, having curved platform bases surmounted by either plain or animal-effigy bowls. Many of the large knives and spearheads recovered are among the finest known, being beautifully chipped from obsidian, chalcedony, white quartz, and other fine materials.

In Iowa most of the work on this culture was done by the Davenport Academy of Sciences during the seventies and eighties, and the fine series of copper axes and awls, curved-base pipes, pearl and shell ornaments recovered through its efforts are now to be seen in the Academy's museum.

No Hopewell village sites are known with certainty in Iowa and very few, strange to say, even in Ohio and the intervening states. A few Hopewell objects have been found in the fields, but for the most part

they are products of the mounds. The pottery that has been found tends to support a theory that this culture may be a very highly specialized Algonkian.

A culture very different from the Hopewell adjoins the mounds of the latter at Toolesboro, and so closely that a stone might easily be thrown from one site to the other. This is in the form of a large village site on the plateau just west of the Toolesboro mounds. The land there has been cultivated for about seventy-five years, but still produces many fragments of shell-tempered pottery and numbers of small flint scrapers and triangular arrowheads. Other sites of this kind have a peculiar distribution in Iowa: a village site on a broad ridge overlooking the Des Moines River in the northeast corner of Warren County; several village sites in similar situations overlooking the Little Sioux in Clay and Dickinson counties; the largest known village site in Iowa, covering upward of a hundred acres of beautiful high terrace overlooking the Big Sioux in the northwest corner of Lyon County; and village sites on nearly all of the high terraces of the Upper Iowa River in Allamakee County.

The potsherds, or bits of broken pottery, on all the sites appear to be identical, being shell tempered, having notched or crimped rims, and bearing simple decorations of small, shallow punch marks and incised lines. Wherever collections of sufficient extent make comparison possible, the accompanying artifacts are of quite the same types: numerous

small flake scrapers and triangular arrowheads, rather thick stone celts, heavy grooved hammers and mauls, well-worn hand mullers, and shallow mortars — all usually made of granite; small calumet pipes of red pipestone; a few disk-stem pipes of the same material; a few inscribed catlinite tablets; and in contrast with the Algonkian culture, numerous implements of bone and antler. On and near some of the sites stood earthen enclosures. The near-by cliffs and cave walls furnished backgrounds for pictographs of birds, fish, and various unknown objects.

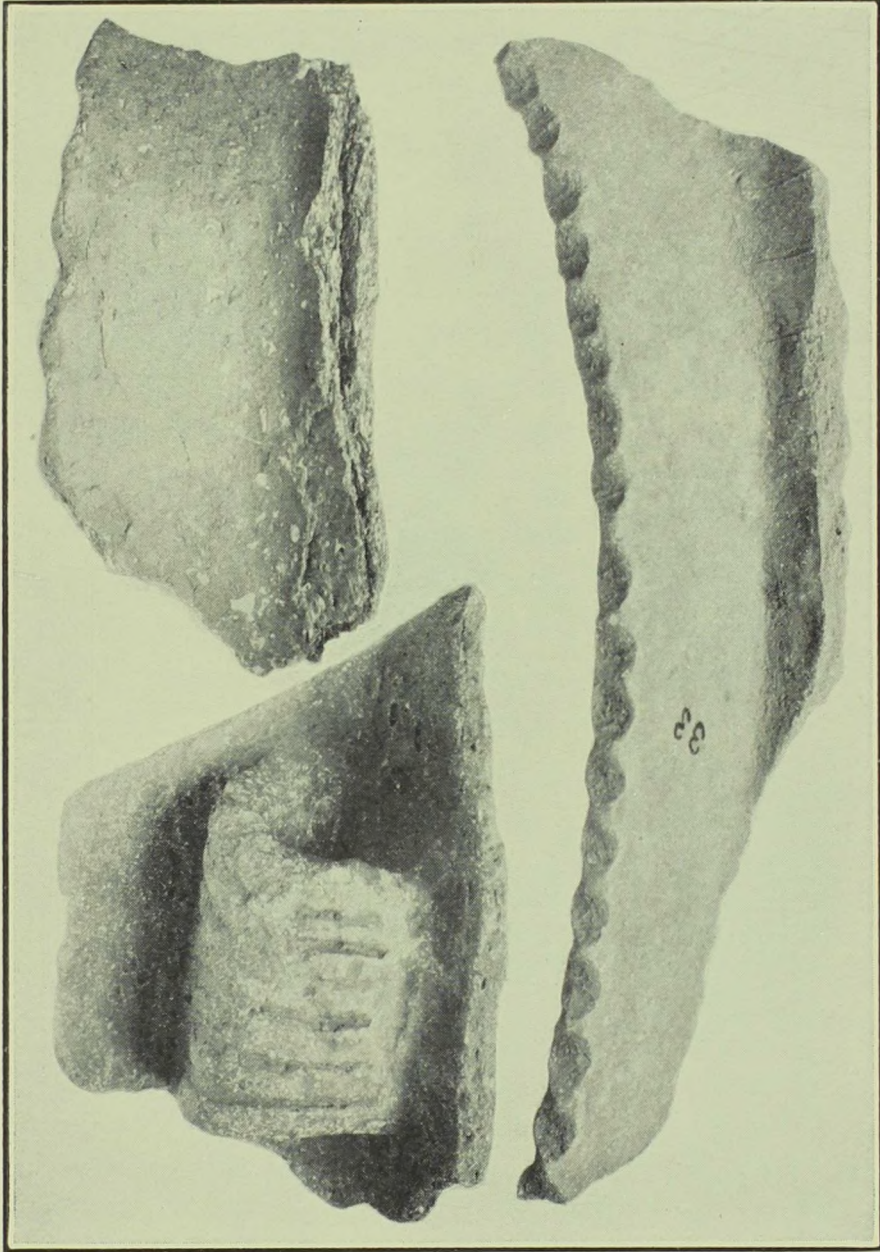
Several village sites on the broad terraces of the Little Sioux, beginning at the south edge of Correctionville in Woodbury County and extending southward for about five miles, are evidently of this same culture though apparently showing tribal variation. The criteria are the same as on the other sites except that the rims of the pottery vessels are strongly recurved and the rims and necks of the vessels show a little more elaborate use of dots and incised lines.

The type of shelter used by these people is not as yet very clear. Boulder circles formerly to be seen on the Lyon County site possibly indicate weights used to hold down the edges of large skin tipis. The large amounts of village refuse point to occupation through considerable periods of time. In all cases the villages appear to have stood quite in the open for all to see who would. It was as if their inhabi-

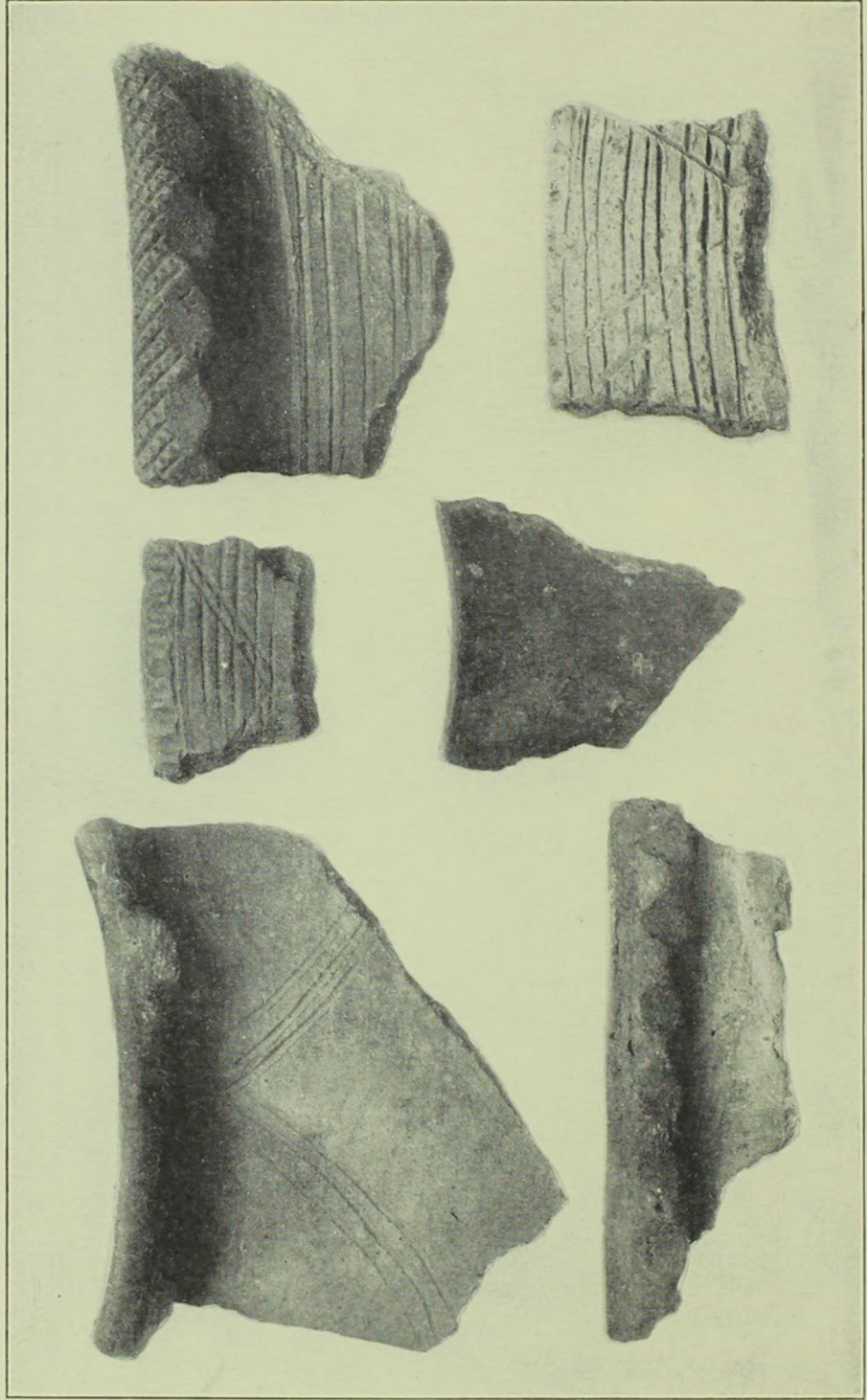
tants were issuing the perpetual challenge: "We are not hiding, you see; come take us if you care and dare".

This culture possesses many of the characteristics of the culture of the Plains Indians. At any rate it is almost certainly Siouan. There is a temptation to see in these bold village sites the former home places of Ioway and Omaha, especially as tradition, early historical references, and archeology all seem to agree. There are some counter indications, however, and it is better, when assigning names intended to show identity, not to jump at conclusions. Nevertheless, a designation for the culture does appear necessary and for this is suggested "the Oneota". Oneota is the Indian name for the Upper Iowa River, where the culture is most fully represented and has longest been known. This good, original name having been rejected for the river, it may serve here to designate the people that once lived there.

Beginning at a point on the Little Sioux River in Cherokee County about six miles south of Cherokee, passing through the southeast corner of O'Brien County, and ending about three miles west of Linn Grove in Buena Vista County, are found the sites of twelve ancient villages overlooking the Little Sioux or its tributaries and representing a culture that differentiates itself sharply from the three that have been considered. Five of the villages stand on terraces of the main stream; one on a broad hilltop adjoining the same; four on the terraces of Mill



POTSHERDS FROM THE ONEOTA CULTURE OF THE UPPER IOWA RIVER



POTSHERDS FROM THE MILL CREEK CULTURE OF CHEROKEE COUNTY

Creek; and two on the terraces of Waterman's Creek. They are all situated in such a small area that it is possible to see from one site to the next. The villages were very compact also, each occupying from one to two acres only and containing from twelve to twenty-two large earth lodges, which were probably surrounded, like similar villages on the upper Missouri, by a stockade. On account of cultivation the original shape of the sites can not always be determined, but the two that still remain in undisturbed prairie are rectangular in form and surrounded by a broad, shallow ditch. It is on these two sites that the circular depressions where the earth lodges stood can still be counted.

Deep camp refuse covers all of the sites and is also scattered more or less over what appear to be small camp sites in the spaces between the villages. In a general way the articles of stone and bone are similar to those of the Oneota, but with the addition of the discoidal stone and of spoons and pipes made of pottery. Catlinite pipes are rare or lacking, though polished tablets of pipestone with various incised pictographs and symbolic designs are commoner here than in the Oneota. The pottery is very distinctive, generally dark gray or black in color, with tempering of finely-crushed granite. The vessels are generally globular in shape, the restricted openings having short, vertical rims which usually show decorations of cross hatching, rounded indentations, diagonal incised lines, and sometimes the molded

heads of birds or animals. Horizontal trailed lines often encircle the entire vessel.

Similar remains are found on a single site on Broken Kettle Creek, a tributary of the Big Sioux in Plymouth County, except that bone implements appear to be even more numerous than on the Little Sioux, the pottery seems, on the whole, a little thinner and harder, and a few of the vessels are painted instead of being decorated with incised lines. The Broken Kettle site, however, can hardly represent more than a tribal variation from this distinctive culture on the middle course of the Little Sioux, and more detailed study may show the culture of these rather widely-separated villages to be identical.

All the known sites are strikingly similar to the old Mandan villages of North Dakota and, except for certain differences in decoration and in the rim shapes of the pottery vessels, these Iowa sites might be called Mandan. At any rate, the people who occupied them probably belonged, like the Mandan, to the Siouan stock. But how different they must have been from the people who lived in the great open villages less than ten miles to the north and to the south!

Unless the natural name for this culture eventually becomes clear, it may reasonably be assigned a geographical designation, "the Mill Creek culture". This name indicates both the place of its greatest concentration and the point where it first attracted the attention of students at Cherokee.

As matters now stand, the linear and effigy mound region of northeastern Iowa, extending along the Mississippi bluffs from the Minnesota line to near Dubuque, constitutes Iowa's fifth culture area. Until fuller knowledge makes its connections more apparent, it may be referred to simply as the "effigy-mound culture". It is probably a part of the area, including the southern half of Wisconsin, the southeastern corner of Minnesota, and northern Illinois, which shows a very large number of similar works. Wisconsin archeologists, who have given the subject most attention, are inclined to regard the ancient Winnebago as the makers of the effigy and linear mounds. If this is true, then we have another Siouan culture in Iowa. No village sites are known, however, whose archeology sets them off from other cultures and attaches them definitely to that of the effigies.

A group of two linear mounds, three birds, and an imposing procession of ten bears constitutes the best monument of the effigy-mound culture in Iowa. It is, indeed, one of the finest mound groups in all America. The effigies stand on the broad summit of the four hundred and fifty foot bluff about a mile above Marquette, and to this day they are excellently preserved. Any failure of the present effort to keep this group intact would be a grave misfortune.

The presence in Iowa of so many distinctive prehistoric cultures, not to mention the possibility of others still undiscovered, presents a situation so

complex and so interesting that it should prove a challenge to all those in a position to furnish an additional fact or suggest a reasonable theory. First of all, more facts are needed. Of the thousands of miles of creek and river courses, comparatively few, of course, have been thoroughly explored. No one can now tell what the more exact boundaries of the known cultures are or whether some unknowns may still await a finder. Pottery fragments and other relics are needed, pottery fragments especially, from all the Iowa sites that produce them. This is particularly true of the three southern tiers of counties, where it has been especially difficult to locate the permanently-occupied sites.

A further need, if the archeology of the State is to advance more rapidly toward a fuller interpretation, is evidence that will show whether the peoples of the different culture areas were contemporaneous or whether they succeeded each other. The failure as yet to find a single site which shows the remains of one culture superimposed on that of a predecessor suggests that all occupied the Iowa country at one time. For would not successive tribes naturally select the same favorable and strategic locations for at least a few of their villages, or occupy at least a few of the same protecting cliffs and caverns? Yet it is all but unbelievable that so many peoples of so different ideas and modes of life, so different that mutual understanding, even of the spoken word, would have been impossible, could have lived at one

time with such intimate contacts as the archeological remains would indicate. If the occupations were successive, a few sites might be expected where stratification of two or more cultural deposits exists; if they were contemporaneous, there ought to be ample evidence either of peaceful barter or forced interchange of the spoils of war. The situation as it now appears — sharp separation of each cultural complex from all the others — can hardly be true. Evidence of the one kind or the other doubtless exists, but up to this time it has been forthcoming in so small a measure as to be of very doubtful value. To date a person could hold in his two hands the artifacts clearly emanating from one culture that have been found in seemingly close contact with the village refuse of another. Occasional commingling of Siouan and Algonkian products among the field finds away from the home sites would, of course, be quite fortuitous and therefore worthless as proof either of successive or contemporaneous occupation. But, after all, this is only one of the many problems that Iowa archeology has to face. Its solution, as with all matters of research, involves long accumulation of facts, patient comparison of details, and steady contemplation of phenomena before any possibility of a conclusion can emerge.

CHARLES REUBEN KEYES