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### Putnam, Boas, Holmes

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William Henry Holmes

## SUBSCRIPTION COSTS GO UP

After holding the line on subscription rates for many years, we are forced to raise them. Starting with the next number (Volume XVIII, No. 1, June 1991), the cost of subscriptions to HAN will be increased by \$.50 a year for students, and \$1.00 a year for all other categories--as indicated on the preceding page.

## FOOTNOTES FOR THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

### Putnam, Boas, and Holmes--

#### Establishing Anthropology at the Field Columbian Museum

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The Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 brought Franz Boas to Chicago as chief assistant to Frederick Ward Putnam, head of the Fair's Department of Ethnology. When the Field Columbian Museum was founded at the end of the Fair, Boas remained in Chicago to work for the new Museum. However, in February of 1894 Boas "declined to work for the Museum any longer under the present terms" (FMA:Boas to Skiff 2/19/94), and left the Museum in May of that year.

Why Boas left the Museum, and the impact of his departure on the development of anthropology in Chicago has been a matter of speculation for decades. Nearly twenty years ago Donald Collier (1972:8) wrote

It is intriguing to speculate on the course of American anthropology if Boas, who is generally considered the greatest of its founders, had remained at Field Museum and had taught at the young University of Chicago.

Unfortunately, speculations concerning what might have been are impossible to document. However, documents revealing why Boas left, and whether he was ousted or quit, are available.

Boas' own version of the events at Field Museum was recorded by Kroeber (1943:13). According to this "confidential account" Boas was the leader of a revolt by the scientific staff against the tyrannical rule of Museum director F. J. V. Skiff. "But when it came to the firing line, Boas alone went forward, and fell."

Collier (1972:8) goes beyond Boas' account of the precipitating event. He suggests that Boas resigned under pressure because of a "long-standing and bitter conflict dating back to 1891 between Putnam and Harlow Higginbotham, President of the Exposition and an influential Trustee of the

new museum." Since Boas was clearly Putnam's man and remained loyal to his former chief, and since Skiff was Higginbotham's "protege," it would not be surprising if Boas' career in Chicago were to have ended abruptly.

Anti-Semitism has also been offered as one of the reasons for Boas' departure from Chicago. Don Fowler (1989:5) believes that a combination of Marshall Field's anti-Semitism and pressure from the Bureau of Ethnology in Washington to find a job for W. H. Holmes led to Boas' downfall.

Correspondence files in the archives of Field Museum, in which the sequence of events leading up to Boas' departure is traced, offer a somewhat different perspective on the circumstances surrounding it.

On February 16, 1894 Boas wrote to Skiff (FMA) requesting that his relationship to the Museum be finally determined. On the next day, he wrote to Holmes stating that although he was in charge of the anthropological department, this position apparently had been offered to a "Washington Ethnologist," although he did not know to whom. Boas then snapped, "If this were true, I would consider it, of course, an unsurpassed insult..." (FMA: Boas to Holmes 2/17/94, enclosed with Holmes to Skiff 2/21/94).

In a reply sent four days later, Holmes responded somewhat coolly that "The proposition made to me by the Directors of the Field Columbian Museum was confidential," and that it contemplated no interference with anyone, but concerned the establishment of a new position. Holmes went on to deny knowing anything of Boas' official relations with the Field Columbian Museum except that he is "installing the anthropologic collections brought together by your department at the Fair..." (FMA: Holmes to Boas 2/21/94, enclosed with Holmes to Skiff 2/21/94).

In the meantime, however, events had moved forward back in Chicago. On February 18, Boas reported to Putnam that

Mr. Holmes has been practically appointed director of the anthropological department and the Museum authorities are willing to let me step down and take the ethnology under him which he does not want. This information comes from [President] Harper [of the University of Chicago] (FBP: Boas to Putnam 2/18/94).

The next day Boas addressed an angry letter to Skiff:

As you can not give me the assurance that since I have had temporary charge of the Anthropological Department nobody besides myself has been or is being considered in connection with the position of Director of the Depart-

ment of Anthropology, I decline to work for the Museum any longer under the present terms (FMA: Boas to Skiff 2/19/94).

Boas' behavior must have seemed somewhat gauche to the gentlemanly Holmes, and it succeeded in upsetting him. A month later Holmes complained to Skiff that Boas' "antagonistic position with respect to my coming has given me a good deal of discomfort" (FMA: Holmes to Skiff 3/30/94). But from Putnam's perspective, there was no question that Boas was justified, as he suggested six weeks later to Edward Thompson:

You know how they treated poor Boas there [Chicago]... After getting all this hard labor out of him they have simply kicked him out and put in Holmes of Washington in his place to take charge of the department [of anthropology] (FWP: Putnam to Thompson 5/19/94).

Given this known correspondence, and Boas' subsequent bitterness toward Chicago and its Museum, it was not unreasonable to assume that Holmes was part of a conspiracy to rid the Museum of Boas. This assumption is strengthened by Boas' continued animosity toward Holmes. For example, in 1902 following Major Powell's death Holmes was proposed as the head of the Bureau of American Ethnography. His appointment was to be at the expense of W. J. McGee, Powell's chosen successor and favorite of the anthropological establishment. Boas took the position that he was "fully prepared to befriend McGee against the man who had taken his place in Chicago" (Hinsley 1981:251). McGee in turn would write Boas reminding him that "you saw Holmes' cloven foot in Chicago, but I see both of them and the forked tail as well" (McGee to Boas, quoted in Hinsley 1981:253).

Speculation on Holmes' role in the termination of Boas' brief career in Chicago might have ended here. However, in summer 1990 Mary Ann Johnson, the Field Museum's Archivist, discovered a letter in a mislabeled envelope containing early correspondence pertaining to the curatorship of anthropology. This letter from Holmes to Skiff throws new light on Holmes' opinion of Boas and Holmes' plans for the development of anthropology at Field Museum. It was written the day after Holmes had expressed his concern to Skiff over Boas' "antagonistic position" with respect to his coming to Chicago, and is reprinted here with the permission of the Field Museum.

Washington D.C.  
March 31st, 1894

Director F.J.V. Skiff,  
Columbian Museum,  
Chicago, Illinois

Dear Sir:

Some time ago I wrote you indicating my intention to make some proposition respecting the retention of Dr. Boas in the Museum. I do not know what your wishes are save as indicated during our short interview here and I have little idea of what Dr. Boas desires or expects. I wish to say in beginning that I consider it of the utmost importance that he be kept on the Museum force. Assuming that you wish me to take personal direction of the Anthropologic work and especially that part of it relating to the arts of man, I would propose that, if agreeable to you, he be given charge, under the assistant Director, of the section of physical anthropology or somatology. He is especially qualified to take up all that relates to man as man, and in the museum of the future the natural history of man--his anatomy, physiology and embryology; his evolution from lower orders, his racial characters, his relations with all other creatures, and all that pertains to medicine, surgery, health, physical training, race improvement, etc.--must, if properly managed, take a place hardly inferior to that of any other department scientific or practical.

But mere museum work, the installment and discussion of the chaotic gatherings of other men, will never make a great museum and will contribute little to science and progress. If we are to do more and better than others it is the field arm of our work that must be made strong. It is only by sending out to the corners of the world such trained men as Boas that anything but patchwork can be accomplished. I propose then that beside giving him practical direction of physical anthropology he be made the agent of the Museum for all the great northern regions of the globe--Alaska, British America, Greenland, Scandinavia, North Russia and Siberia-- a field pregnant with many of the most important questions of the race and rich in the materials that go to make up a museum. His time could be divided somewhat equally between the field and the museum. If you can give him reasonable compensation this would seem a mission worthy of the ambition of any man howsoever aspiring.

It is hardly fair to such a proposition that it should be laid before you in this brief and imperfect manner, but I must not encroach unduly upon your time howsoever important the subject may seem to me.

If you desire additional details for your own edification or for presentation before the Board of Directors

I will gladly furnish them.

Very respectfully yours,

W. H. Holmes

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Assuming that the "assistant Director" Holmes referred to was the assistant director of the Columbian Museum, then this letter represents a significant counterproposal on Holmes' part: i.e., that anthropology at the Columbian Museum in effect be divided between himself and Boas, each with equivalent positions in the museum hierarchy (the "assistant Director" perhaps mediating the difficult relation between Skiff and Boas), and Boas given charge of the areas in which he had an acknowledged specialist competence--physical anthropology and the northern most regions of North America. Whether Skiff in fact approached Boas with this proposal is unclear; if he did, then it must have been that relations between Boas and the Museum had already crossed a Rubicon. At the very least, however, the letter does suggest that Holmes was not involved in any plot that may have existed to get rid of Boas, and that however much he may have been irritated by the tone of Boas' letters, he had a high enough regard for Boas' abilities as an anthropologist to want to keep him at the museum in an important position. Ironically, however, Holmes himself lasted only three years in Chicago before resigning his position as head curator of anthropology. He left sharing with his predecessors Putnam and Boas the same negative feelings toward the Museum and its businessman-dominated board and director (McVicker 1989). In his unpublished memoirs, "Random Records of a Lifetime" (VIII:4[A]), Holmes in fact placed the blame directly on Skiff and his unappreciative and tyrannical attitude. Thus, paradoxically, Holmes was later to echo Boas' own confidential complaints to Kroeber--giving credence, to that extent, to the previously accepted account.

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Aside from these published sources, archival sources directly cited in the text are identified by the following acronyms:

FBP American Philosophical Society, Franz Boas Papers, World's Columbian Exposition.

FMA: Field Museum of Natural History Archives, Museum Archives, Boas Papers.

FWP: Peabody Museum, Frederick Ward Putnam Papers, World's Columbian Exposition.

## RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

Robert Bieder (Senior postdoctoral fellow, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution) is working on a study called "The Ethnographic Zoo," which is part of a larger study on the history of the zoo.

Guy P. Buchholtzer (Simon Fraser University) is working on Kwakiutl oral literature with the goal of rendering George Hunt/Franz Boas texts available in a computerized form for multidisciplinary purposes.

Carol Frances Jacobs (SUNY Buffalo) was given a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1989 to study the concept of time in Ford Madox Ford, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Walter Benjamin.

Andrew and Harriet Lyons (Anthropologica, Wilfred Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario) are involved in a project on "Sexuality and the Discourses of Hierarchy," which will examine the construction of sexuality in anthropology from 1850 to 1935, and would welcome correspondence from others investigating related topics.