



**In Situ**

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Issue 1 *In Situ* 2016

Article 8

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5-14-2016

# The Legacy of the Junior Archeological Society on Lower Mississippi Valley Archaeology

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# The Legacy of the Junior Archeological Society on Lower Mississippi Valley Archaeology

## ***The Legacy of the Junior Archeological Society on Lower Mississippi Valley Archaeology***

Ashley L. Terry

The Junior Archeological Society of Baton Rouge, which operated from 1959 through the mid-1970s, afforded middle- and high-school students an opportunity to learn about anthropology, archaeology, history, and a wide range of other topics. The Society was sponsored by J. Ashley Sibley, Jr., an avocational archaeologist and teacher. He encouraged Society members to learn through research and practice – to this end, he led them on excavations of several Native American sites in Louisiana and Mississippi. Excavated materials were, in turn, exhibited in a museum of the Society's own styling (eventually relocated to Sibley's property at Grindstone Bluff). Though my project initially focused on the JAS's main locus of excavation, Smith Creek site in Wilkinson County, Mississippi, I have since chosen to broaden its scope. I now aim to characterize the formation and operation of the Junior Archeological Society, as well as the impact it had on its members. In doing so, I have consulted both former members and archival materials.

Though the Junior Archeological Society (JAS) certainly had a measurable impact on the archaeology of the Lower Mississippi Valley, the title of this paper is not appropriately nuanced. A more fitting one would be, "The Legacy of the Junior Archeological Society on Lower Mississippi Valley Archaeology and the Reciprocal Effect of the Practice of the Latter on the Former". Title issues aside, I hope that this paper will provide the reader with an understanding of the Junior Archeological Society's endeavors, archaeological, organizational, and otherwise. This project arose out of my participation in the Smith Creek Archaeological Project, which Dr. Megan Kassabaum led during the summer of 2015. Smith Creek site (22Wk526) is located in Wilkinson County, Mississippi, in the southwest corner of the state. It consists of three mounds (A, B, and C) flanking a central plaza, and dates to the Coles Creek period (approximately 700CE-1200CE). During the

2015 excavation season, the Smith Creek crew opened a total of four units on the site: one on Mound A, one on Mound C, and two in the site's South Plaza.

Mound B, a burial mound, went unexcavated. Its surface still bore the scars of previous endeavors. These "scars" – a long, sloping trench along the mound's North-South axis and a series of depressed areas on its summit – had been in place since at least the 1970s, when Jeff Brain and his team of archaeologists conducted the Lower Mississippi Survey (MMT Report 2013). The Mississippi Mound Trial Project noted again, in 2013, the presence of a "slumped area on the south side" of the mound as well as "a number of slumped areas on [its] summit" (MMT Report 2013). Their report attributed these trenches and pits to the Junior Archeological Society of Baton Rouge. The organization had attained, at this point, a semimythological status among archaeologists in the Lower Mississippi Valley – there was an "oral tradition" which incorporated stories of "Sibley's Bugs" and their scientific misdeeds (Vin Steponaitis and David Floyd, pers. comm.)

Armed with this information, my task was the following: to understand precisely how (and, perhaps, why) the JAS excavated Smith Creek's Mound B. Interviews with former JAS members seemed the most expedient method of gathering information, and so I set about building a contact list. Fortunately, Dr. Kassabaum was already in contact with one JAS alumna, Mrs. Ginny Benoit of Natchez, Mississippi. Other names – some half-remembered – were offered up by other archaeologists. The bulk of the preliminary list of names, however, came from the object bags filled out with provenience information by Society members. These bags (and the artifacts within) had been gathering dust in a small structure on Sibley's family property on Grindstone Bluff. The structure had, at one point, served as the museum of the Junior Archeological Society – in other words, a repository for the artifacts which the Society amassed and the projects they completed. It was also one of the focal points of the "Grindstone Bluff Museum and Environmental Education Center", Sibley's project following the JAS's eventual dissolution. The hut had not been maintained and was falling down; Jeff Girard obtained

permission to enter it in 2011. Salvageable materials, both archival and artifactual, were passed on to scholars (or, in the case of the skeletons that were recovered, the Louisiana Department of Justice). As previously insinuated, I made use of the object bags that traveled to the University of Pennsylvania.

Having built a list of names, I began to search for contact information (e.g., email addresses, phone numbers, and the like). In some cases, members whom I contacted had current contact information for their fellow alumni. In other cases, I had to rely heavily on Google and my own detective skills.

With contact information obtained, I began contacting former JAS members for interviews. Though I was sometimes able to begin conversations via email, there were several individuals whom I had to contact by telephone from the start (and what calls those must have been to receive). At the outset of the project, I planned to ask interviewees specific questions about the JAS's involvement at Smith Creek; however, after conducting my first interview, I realized that predetermined questions were unnecessarily limiting. I formulated an interview model which I called the "bold narrative technique", meaning that I oriented the interviewee to the goals of my project, asked her/him to tell me about her/his involvement, and then intervened as little as possible. The resulting narratives were organic rather than formulaic, and so I gained a greater appreciation of what JAS membership meant to each respective interviewee. Here, I felt the goals of my investigation shifting: rather than focusing solely on Smith Creek, I broadened its purview to include the Junior Archeological Society more generally.

In another unexpected turn of events, I was able to procure a sizable sum of archival materials relating to the operation of the Junior Archeological Society. Jeff Girard shared with me some of the materials he had been able to salvage from the JAS Museum at Grindstone Bluff. Former members – namely Randy Ellis and Janice Pierce – sent me materials as well. Among these archival materials were the Handbook of the Junior Archaeological Society, which

was coauthored by J. Ashley Sibley, Jr. and his first wife, Zilda P. Sibley; several copies of *The Junior Archaeologist*, a mimeographed journal in which JAS members self-published their respective independent research projects; two editions of the Society's Constitution; a packet of meeting minutes which illuminate the Society's quotidian operations; and a handful of original photographs which show the JAS at work. In reviewing these materials and synthesizing them with interview data, I built a robust picture of the Society and its endeavors.

J. Ashley Sibley, Jr. and his successive wives were the driving force behind the Junior Archeological Society. All three individuals (J. Ashley, Zilda, and later Anna May) were educators at the elementary level in the Baton Rouge school system. The Society began in 1958 when a group of roughly twenty young boys approached Zilda, Sibley's first wife, and asked if she and her husband would be willing to co-sponsor their envisioned organization (Randy Ellis, pers. comm.). Unfortunately, Zilda passed away in January of 1961 (*Handbook of the Junior Archeological Society*). Sibley remarried on February 1st, 1963 – meeting minutes reveal that the members of the Junior Archeological Society were invited to attend. At a JAS meeting shortly following their marriage, "...a celebration over the Sibley's [sic] wedding was held with refreshments. Their wedding gift was given." (Minutes 2/14/1963).

The Sibleys had "no children of their own, but they lavished attention on [members of the Society]" (David Britt, pers. comm.). Interviewees have stressed the amount of time and personal expense which the Sibleys devoted to the Society – in everything from teaching materials, to transportation costs. And, indeed, they were all gifted teachers and leaders. According to Janice Pierce, "The Sibleys were simply awesome people and incredible educators" (Janice Pierce, pers. comm.). Many accolades were directed at Mr. Sibley specifically: "...[Sibley] impacted many through his love of learning...He was an amazing man in many ways," "...you ever see people that exude knowledge? And want to transfer it onto somebody? That's how he was. And he did not care if it was a Saturday or Sunday, 10'o'clock at night" (Bill Mollere, pers. comm.; Randy Ellis,

pers. comm.).

The effort which the Sibleys (as well as each member) put into the Junior Archeological Society was appreciable. The Society kept a tight schedule: “We all join in regular meetings to learn more about our fellowman and plan out activities. Regular meetings are 7:00-to-9:00 p.m. ...every other Thursday. Expeditions are usually once per month on Saturdays” (Handbook of the Junior Archeological Society). Society members, who ranged in grade level from sixth to twelfth, were responsible for the majority of expedition and meeting planning. Elected officers – including the Chief (President), the Shaman (Vice-President), and the Trailblazer (Expedition Chairman), among others – were variously charged with the duties of scheduling guest speakers for meetings, presenting preparatory information for upcoming expeditions, and publicizing the Society’s endeavors (Constitution of the JAS, 1961).

Members also participated in Louisiana’s state science fairs. They wrote reports based on independent research and, in some instances, built displays and dioramas to showcase their findings (David Britt, pers. comm.). The Sibleys, along with other members, offered constructive criticism throughout project-building process. This careful scrutiny probably explains why “... the Junior Archaeological Society...[mopped] it up by comparison [to other competitors]” (Janice Pierce, pers. comm.). After the science fairs, these displays frequently made their way into the Society’s Museum (and, in fact, some were recovered at Grindstone Bluff). An officer termed the “Museum Curator” was in charge of arranging and accounting for these cases and all other Museum objects.

JAS members were held to high standards of scholarship and conduct; it is fitting, then, that each prospective member was required to “... complete a six-week working test period and take the necessary training to prepare [her/him] to be a member in good standing” (Handbook of the Junior Archeological Society). This training period encompassed instruction on Lower Mississippi Valley history and archaeology, as well as on the practice of archaeology itself. Society guidelines also encouraged candidates to practice good

etiquette, self-respect, respect for others, and the like. This instruction emphasized, at every turn, the Society’s motto: “Knowing the past... better the future!”. The highlight of membership in the Junior Archeological Society was, according to many of my interviewees, the expeditions. Members visited sites throughout Mississippi and Louisiana, along with some in neighboring states: Little Stave Creek, a paleontological site in Alabama; Poverty Point, a Louisiana site which has since become a World Heritage Site; and Sibley’s own property at Grindstone Bluff (which he called Sibleyshire). The Society also ventured to Mexico a handful of times throughout its existence – members recall being able to “clamber[...] all over [historic sites] with no restraint whatsoever, from Teotihuacan to many others” (David Britt, pers. comm.).

Though the Mexico trips were exciting, Society members always looked forward to returning to their “home base” – Smith Creek. The first volume of *The Junior Archaeologist* describes the site’s constituent structures as “...a great truncated temple mound, a large burial mound, and another mound which may be a habitation mound of a chief” (*The Junior Archaeologist*). These mounds, particularly the burial mound, were “a treasure-trove for the young archeologists, and [provided] a practical lesson in the science of archaeology” (*The Junior Archaeologist*).

The young excavators had, as it turned out, observed proper archaeological procedure to the best of their ability. Additionally, Sibley made a point of emphasizing the importance of backfilling trenches and pits. So how might we explain the aforementioned “scars” on the surface of Mound B? As it turns out, pothunters had also been visiting the mound. Janice Pierce’s field notebook placed the first instance of this destruction in 1970; Randy Soileau, who succeeded Janice, noted that “...in the final years at Smith Creek [they] seemed to be competing with [...] pot hunters who would obliterate the burial mound between [their] trips” (Janice Pierce, pers. comm.; Randy Soileau, pers. comm.).

On a lighter note, the Junior Archeological Society also made use of Mound C – the “temple mound. It was their locus of new member induc-

tion and officer installation rituals. As part and parcel of these rituals, members wore their own hand-made “Indian attire”, including headdresses and breechcloths. It is clear that Smith Creek was important to the Junior Archeological Society – we should, perhaps, refrain from writing off their excavations at the site so quickly.

The scope of this project was, as I have previously stated, much broader than I originally intended. It was very valuable, I believe, to contextualize the Society’s work at Smith Creek within the larger sphere of its operations. The Society was one of very few avenues through which middle- and high-school-aged children could learn about (and practice) social sciences. The Sibleys instructed JAS members in a way which was both informative and memorable – that interviewees were able to recount in detail their experiences in the Society is a testament to this fact. It is simple, perhaps, to brush off the Junior Archeological Society as a coalition of haphazardly-digging “bugs” – especially if one looks only to the damage on Smith Creek’s Mound B. However, to do so would be to sell the Society short.

*May the Great Spirit grant that we, as brother Junior Archeologists, go forth and spread what we have learned, and encourage others to join with us in sharing the great adventure of “knowing the past – to better the future”.*