Charles Rueben Keyes and the History of Iowa Archaeology

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Charles Reuben Keyes (1871-1951) achieved recognition during his lifetime as the "founder father" of Iowa archaeology, and later assessments confirmed and reemphasized Keyes' stature as Iowa's pioneer archaeologist. The collections and documents Keyes compiled, his interpretive publications, and the records of field work he coordinated have proven more valuable to Midwest and Plains archaeology every year. This article emphasizes Keyes' involvement in the development of professionalism in American archaeology and Iowa's position in the growth of the discipline from 1920 to 1950. Keyes' contacts with the principal archaeologists of his era ensured Iowa's involvement in the development of survey methods and the establishment of regional taxonomic and classification systems. Scant resources for excavation, student training, and technical publications eventually lessened Iowa's contributions to North American archaeology in the mid-1900s.

INDEX DESCRIPTORS: archaeology, Iowa, history of science, C.R. Keyes

Fig. 1. Charles Reuben Keyes.
C.R. KEYES AND IOWA ARCHAEOLOGY

1. The 1935 Indianapolis Archaeological Conference formally classified midwestern and eastern U.S. archaeological complexes within the Midwest Taxonomic System (National Research Council 1937). The conference's landmark publication, which included a revised version of Keyes' presentation (Keyes 1937a), led to use of more consistent terminology, improving the organization of cultural classification and enhancing archaeological communication (Fisher 1986; Griffin 1976; McKern 1939).

2. The 1941 "Conference on the Woodland Pattern" helped clarify the material content and distribution of Woodland manifestations throughout the Eastern United States (American Antiquity 1943). Keyes did not attend, but he submitted extensive materials on Woodland cultures in Iowa which supplied significant summary information and was later published (Keyes 1951).

3. The Fifth Plains Conference, held in 1947 in Lincoln, also focused on definition of cultural complexes. Despite initial withdrawal of his contribution from the resulting publication, Keyes eventually consented to its inclusion (Keyes 1949). That paper — a concise summary of Great Plains affiliated Iowa complexes — helped solidify western Iowa's identification with the Plains, structuring research directions for the following decades.

Keyes' intensive participation in groundbreaking conferences and publications placed him at the forefront of his discipline's definition as a professional discipline in the 1920s and 1930s. Keyes commanded national respect for his rapid acquisition of an encyclopedic knowledge of Iowa archaeology, despite having no formal training in American archaeology — he knew literally everything anyone at the time could know on the subject. His stature arose also from his organizational abilities, reflected by his creation of the Iowa Archaeological Society. The survey was designed on the basis of his own conceptions (Keyes 1920), refined through discussions with the Committee on State Archaeological Surveys and visits to directors of active state programs in Wisconsin and Ohio. Keyes clearly established the mission, goals, and objectives of the survey in terms understandable to a broad spectrum of colleagues, both professional and amateur (Keyes 1925b). The survey program was highly ambitious yet achievable within the expected limits of resources, and Keyes pursued his vision systematically. When opportunities for additional resources became available, such as federal relief funding from 1934 through 1939, he applied the funds to new types of projects which built upon the accomplishments of earlier work rather than simply conducting more of the same work (e.g., Keyes 1934a, 1935, 1937b, 1940a, 1940b, 1941b; Orr 1963).

The plan Keyes developed for the statewide survey program is worth reviewing. Here is an outline of his 1922 plan, presented in a 24-page typescript entitled "Proposed Archaeological Survey Work in Iowa," submitted to Benjamin Shambaugh, the Superintendent of the State Historical Society of Iowa (Keyes ms.a, July, 1922):

I. A Preliminary Survey
   1. A Bibliography of Iowa Archaeology
   2. The Present Status of Iowa Archaeology
   3. Study of Known Archaeological Materials; a Surface Survey
   4. Local Surveys by Experienced Students and Collectors [by "students" he appears to mean 'experienced collectors with scientific abilities']

II. A Specialized Survey
   1. An Intensive Survey of Known Materials [i.e., detailed artifact studies]
   2. Intensive field Work on Focal Points [i.e., regional surface surveys followed up by careful excavation at selected sites; Keyes cites the work of Mills and Shetrone in Ohio and Barrett and Skinner in Wisconsin as examples to emulate — he would like to bring them to Iowa to observe and advise]

III. The Permanent Preservation of Important Sites and of the Collected Materials
   1. Cooperation with other State Organizations [for acquisition
2. The Preservation of Collected Materials
IV. Library Facilities and the Keeping of Records
Keyes supplied details on each point's importance and implementation. This plan constituted a detailed research design and a comprehensive program for systematic archaeological coverage of Iowa. It ranks among the best research and conservation plans ever devised for Iowa archaeology.

With Shambaugh's endorsement and support, Keyes went to work and soon began accomplishing what he had set out to do. The State Historical Society of Iowa supported the survey in many ways, while the University of Iowa provided funds and administration through its Graduate College for much of the work in the 1930s and 1940s. The survey was considered a program of the Historical Society, although in its later years it was as much a University of Iowa program. Keyes' position was that of Research Associate in the University's Graduate College. (Shambaugh's position as University of Iowa political science department chairman and the physical location of the Historical Society in Schaeffer Hall on campus blurred the practical effects of administrative distinctions between the Historical Society and the University). Cornell College, the State Historical Society, and the University of Iowa all provided work space for the survey. Keyes' teaching duties meant he was able to work on the survey only during summers until his retirement from Cornell in 1941. During the 1940s, as Lecturer in Anthropology at Cornell and as Visiting Research Professor of Anthropology at the University of Iowa, he was able to devote himself to archaeology on a full-time basis. Although by that time he was in his 70s, he vigorously pursued survey work and writing and he initiated excavations as well (Keyes 1943).

Keyes submitted informative annual reports to the State Historical Society and the University of Iowa, and 16 annual progress reports were published as well (Keyes 1923, 1925a, 1927a, 1928c, 1929a, 1930, 1931, 1932, 1933, 1934b, 1935, 1937b, 1940a, 1940b, 1941b, 1945). The hundreds of documented sites in Keyes' records, the publication of important summary reports, and the preservation of many important sites around the state are testimony to the survey's success (Tiffany 1981, 1986; Tiffany et al. 1990).

Shortcomings in Keyes' program have been identified as well (McKusick 1975, 1979), most simply the result of low funding levels and the part-time nature of the work. The relatively small role for excavation in the original plan hindered stratigraphic and chronological studies. Keyes was keenly aware of the importance of excavations as an element of comprehensive archaeological investigations; for example, he noted that the lack of attention to habitation site survey and excavations in the ambitious Northwestern Archaeological Survey of the late 19th century hindered that program's effectiveness (Helgevold 1981:36; Keyes 1928a). Keyes supervised some digging in 1934 in Allamakee County, where Federal relief funds obtained through the Society in Schaeffer Hall on campus blurred the practical effects of College. (Shambaugh's position as...)

In 1940, as a condition for continuation of federal excavation funding, Keyes was told to fill out a form in which he wrote the following under "Plans for Publication": "First, a volume in the Iowa Centennial Series to report on the Iowa archaeological survey; later, more detailed professional papers on single phases or aspects of the archaeology of Iowa" (Keyes ms.a, February 6, 1940). There was no mention of publishing detailed site reports or technical artifact descriptions. Keyes intended to write a "book-sized report of the Survey work," telling Ellison Orr, "I am anxious that you read a completed manuscript of the Iowa Survey, criticize it all you please, and finally hold in your hands a bound volume of a book which meets with your approval" (Keyes letter to Orr, December 24, 1948; Orr ms.).

In 1947 Keyes restated his conviction that he should continue to write semi-popular works, to appeal to both laypeople and professionals:

At this time I am trying to write a summary of the preliminary archaeological survey of Iowa which Ellison Orr and I have been working on (part time with both of us) for more than a quarter of a century. Our belief is that our report to the people who have given us rather generous support should be such as those of good average intelligence can understand... It should be possible to present a good deal of scientific material in a form that a considerable number of people can read with some pleasure and profit. If we miss this aim, then of course it will be too bad."

[Keyes ms.a, January 11, 1947 letter to Neil Judd, Smithsonian Institution]

Keyes' publications do indeed provide excellent introductions to Iowa prehistory, and they were all that were educated laypeople needed. But Keyes' colleagues in the profession wanted more. They needed precisely the kinds of technical data Keyes did not publish. McKusick (1979:6) reports without attribution that archaeologists in other states "were disturbed by the absence of detailed Iowa publications during the 1930s." Orr stated in a 1940 letter to amateur archaeologist Paul Rowe that "it is time for Mr. Keyes to be making some complete and comprehensive reports on the large amount of work done, the results, and the material collected. We are far behind Nebraska in this respect" (Orr ms.a, November 3, 1940).

McKern told Keyes very pointedly that there is a need for specialists and for technical reports, even those reports "wholly intelligible to a limited group. This is true in every science." McKern noted technical reports were needed for specialists and for future reference, and that "I am afraid that you will have to put up with technicality in archaeological methods. As a matter of fact, archaeology is making a terrible struggle to become a science. It cannot do this without the developing of methods that will insure extreme care and accuracy. Such methods are bound to be highly technical..." (W. C. McKern, in Keyes ms.a, February 15, 1938)

The only anthropology degree-holding Iowa archaeologist of the 1940s, John Bailey, told Keyes, "We are all looking forward to the day in a February 5, 1938 letter to W.C. McKern: "Does it ever strike you that some of us are getting too blooming technical? [The draft letter on file shows that Keyes originally wrote "positively" and replaced it with "technical."] Some of the recent reports, at first reading, at least, seem to be written for a pretty small group of specialists, Greenman's Younge Site, for example [Greenman 1937]. Will a dozen people read it through? In my present mood I can't imagine myself ever attempting such a report, writing one, I mean. It seems to me I have a duty to perform to the average intelligent man, who is, after all, the fellow who has furnished most of the money to support my efforts. The few people who desire the exact percentages of everything can work it out in my laboratory, if they desire to do so. I wouldn't expect many callers. Maybe I'm in the wrong mood this morning but anyway I sometimes feel like this." [Keyes ms.a]
when you will get into print the treasure trove of archaeological information which you have accumulated in the last twenty years" (Keyes ms.a, February 11, 1942). Bailey also wrote, "I am hunting old-time manuscripts and trying to make head and tail from the field notes made twenty and thirty years ago. Let this be a warning to you to get into print your valuable contributions to the archaeology of Iowa." (Keyes ms.a, January 3, 1943). Let it indeed be a warning to all of us; Bailey's own archaeological work, conducted during his tenure as director of the Davenport Public Museum, was cut short by his suicide in 1948 and has been particularly difficult to organize and utilize. Keyes, to his credit, wrote basically what he had planned to write, and the Iowa Archaeological Survey collections and archives supplied material for numerous theses and research papers in later years (e.g., Fugle 1962; Henning 1961; Ives 1963; Logan 1976; Wêdel 1959). The Keyes Collection recently has been reviewed and re-cataloged so that it is an even more valuable archaeological data bank (Tiffany 1981, 1986; Tiffany et al. 1990).

Keyes' resources and the amount of time he had for technical analyses and writing were extremely limited. No funds and no trained analysts were available to assist with preparation of technical publications. Still, it cannot be denied that Keyes' work lacked this critical element of a fully professional discipline — the publication of technical data and specialized reports — precisely when such material needed wide distribution. Without those reports, Iowa lagged behind as other states and the Society for American Archaeology greatly expanded their technical publication programs. Iowa, which led the way in establishing statewide surveys in the 1920s, received progressively less professional attention through the 1930s and 1940s because of the absence of detailed publications. Authors of major regional syntheses obtained the detailed data they needed on Iowa archaeology either through personal study of Keyes' material (e.g., notes on his recent work and current interpretations in somewhat more detail upon long letters from Keyes to John W Bennett, January 21, 1948) or through extensive letters from Keyes which summarized his recent work and current interpretations in somewhat more detail than his publications (e.g., Bennett 1952; Martin et al. 1947; based upon long letters from Keyes to John W. Bennett, January 21, 1948 ["Iowa Archaeology: A Condensed Statement"], and from Keyes to George I. Quimby, June 24, 1939 [Keyes ms.a]). In the 1930s, compendia of Midwest and Plains prehistory made extensive use of Keyes' summary reports (Shetrone 1936:330-339, 494; Strong 1935:282-288) but, ultimately, the comparative studies and areal syntheses of culture history which were some of the mid-century's crowning archaeological achievements (e.g., Griffin 1946, 1952; Wêdel 1961; Willey and Phillips 1955) took only minimal note of the Iowa data.

Iowa's contribution to American archaeology lacked another element crucial to the discipline's professional development; that is the training of students, preferably but not necessarily at the graduate level. Any discipline's traditions must be passed first-hand to succeeding generations if they are to survive and develop. Keyes' Iowa Archaeological Survey involved no field schools or other formal archaeological training of students, except for a Cornell College summer class in 1930 (Keyes 1931). Because of Keyes' teaching responsibilities in another discipline, he was not able to teach anthropology and archaeology until his retirement at age 70. He was finally able to run field courses and involve Cornell College and University of Iowa students in large excavations in the 1940s. Despite his advanced years and deteriorating health, Keyes conducted tests and excavations in 1942, 1944, and 1945 at the Minors, Spring Hollow, and Ginger Stairs rockshelters in Palisades-Kepler State Park, Linn County (Keyes 1945). The work trained students in field methods and successfully obtained Woodland materials needed for Keyes' summary publications on Iowa prehistory (Keyes 1943, 1951). Keyes directed a graduate research assistant in writing a Master's thesis on surface collected material in these late years (Grissel 1946), but aside from Mildred Mott's landmark thesis from the University of Chicago (Mott 1938), it cannot be said that Keyes directly inspired preparation of important student research projects during his lifetime. The paucity of resources and opportunities to train students left Iowa with no direct successors to Keyes' legacy.

The University of Iowa, while supporting Keyes' work through a research professorship, was late in adding anthropology and archaeology to its instructional and research programs. Griffin has pointed out that "Iowa for a long time had no archaeological program associated with instruction and student training" (Griffin 1976:71). He had written Keyes that "It has always seemed unfortunate to me that Iowa University has not had an archaeologist on its staff...Is there not some way in which a young man could be brought to Iowa City so that he would have the advantage of a number of years' association with you and obtain something of your insight into the archaeological material and problems in Iowa?" (J.B. Griffin letter, July 28, 1948, Keyes ms.b.).

In 1949, the University of Iowa hired cultural anthropologist David Stour and dental pathologist and physical anthropologist Alton Fisher. They had few opportunities to work with Keyes, however. By 1951 archaeologists also were on staff at Effigy Mounds National Monument and at the Sanford Museum in Cherokee. All of them wanted to learn from Keyes, and Keyes provided as much assistance as he could, but the hours he was able to devote to archaeology were spent writing what turned out to be his last summary publication on Iowa archaeology (Keyes 1951).

Duane Anderson (1975:79) recognized that "Iowa archaeologists contributed little to the development of methodology on a professional level during the first decade of the Contemporary Period (1951-1960)." He did not offer an explanation but one reason may have been this break in continuity resulting from the absence of younger archaeologists trained in Iowa or with first-hand experience with Keyes. Entire lines of inquiry passed, at least for a time, with Keyes' passing; progress on important topics slowed as a new generation of Iowa archaeologists was trained during the 1950s. Fortunately, as noted earlier, theses were written on Keyes' and Orr's material, but no anthropologist except Mildred Mott could point to Keyes as a mentor.

With perfect hindsight, of course, it is easy to overlook the obstacles Keyes faced in trying to implement his survey program. The state lacked the resources and infrastructure to build upon the successes of the Iowa Archaeological Survey. Iowa did not keep pace with Illinois, Nebraska, and other states during the 1930s and 1940s, and Keyes did not train students or publish technical reports. Selfishly, we may wish he could have quit teaching German and become a full-time archaeologist. But he was a man of many interests and talents, and he sacrificed enormously to be able to do what he did in archaeology. And what he did was monumental, participating significantly in the development of American archaeology and defining both the broad outlines and many of the fine details of Iowa prehistory.

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The principal sources utilized in preparing this article are the letters and manuscripts housed in the Charles Reuben Keyes Collection of the University of Iowa. Microfilm copies are on file at the Office of the State Archaeologist, The University of Iowa. The Keyes Collection curation projects (Tiffany 1981, 1986; Tiffany et al. 1990) facilitated study of the archival material. Also of value are the Charles R. Keyes Correspondence file in the Archives, University of Iowa Library, Iowa City, and the Ellison J. Orr...
Correspondence file at Effigy Mounds National Monument, McGregor, Iowa. I thank all of the institutions which house these materials for their assistance.

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