

OBITUARIES

PHILIP PHILLIPS

1900–1994



Philip Phillips, an American archaeologist of great distinction and achievement, died at his home, in Bolton, Massachusetts, on December 11, 1994. Phillips was born in Buffalo, New York, on August 11, 1900, the son of Bradley H. and Ruth Harnden Phillips, and his early education was in the public schools of Buffalo. In 1918 he entered Williams College in western Massachusetts. A good student there, he also enjoyed other aspects of college life. Among his fondly remembered activities was running the high hurdles and, in his senior year, serving as captain of the track team. He graduated from Williams in 1922, and that same June he married his childhood sweetheart, Ruth Schoellkopf, also of Buffalo.

It was Phil's early ambition to be an architect; so shortly after marriage, he and Ruth moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he enrolled in the graduate School of Design at Harvard University, receiving a master's degree in architecture in 1927. Afterward Phil set up a practice in architecture in Buffalo. For two short years he happily pursued this career until the Depression of 1929. I can remem-

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ber Phil relating the tale that he was out on a residential property location, awaiting a prospective client who was planning a new house, when he received word from this man—it was that fateful day in October 1929—that “the bottom had just dropped out of everything” and that he’d better forget the house. Architecture, at least for Phil, was at a standstill. He had to find something else to do.

Fortunately, Phil and Ruth had no personal financial problems, and he was able to turn to something in which he had had earlier, casual interests. This was American colonial history, which was to lead him eventually into archaeology. There were also other circumstances in this career change. During those Harvard graduate years in architecture, he had become a good friend of an architectural student colleague, Singleton Moorehead. Moorehead, who was to continue with his architectural career, was, as it happened, the son of Warren K. Moorehead, the well-known American archaeologist at the R. S. Peabody Foundation at Andover, Massachusetts. Another friend of “Sing” Moorehead’s was George C. Vaillant, destined to become the premier Mesoamerican archaeologist of the 1930s. As a result of these associations, George and Phil also became friends. At Vaillant’s urging, in 1930 Phil and Ruth returned to Cambridge and Harvard so Phil could study under Vaillant’s old professor, Alfred M. Tozzer, in the Department of Anthropology.

Phil’s first actual archaeological field research was on Iroquois sites in New York. Tozzer wanted him to go into Mesoamerican and especially Maya studies, but Phil hesitated because he didn’t want to spend extended field periods in Mexico and Central America away from Ruth and his young children. Instead, he turned to the southeastern United States, an area that was to hold his interest to the end of his life. His particular specialization was to be in Mississippian and related archaeology, with a focus on the Lower Mississippi Valley. Using the large collections from this region in Harvard’s Peabody Museum, as well as museum and private collections in other parts of the country, he assembled a huge master file on Mississippian ceramics.

Eventually, he was to do a doctoral dissertation, *Introduction to the Archaeology of the Mississippi Valley*, receiving the degree in 1940. Although never published, this thesis, according to Stephen Williams, a younger colleague who followed in Phil’s footsteps, “had a strong influence on many scholars working in the field who were fortunate enough to get a chance to read it.”

Phil’s first formal appointment with the Peabody Museum and Harvard came during this time, in 1937, when he was made assistant curator of southeastern archaeology, a title which he held until 1949. After that he was, successively, curator of southeastern archaeology, 1949–1967, and honorary curator from 1967 until his death. During his active years he also served as a faculty member of the Peabody Museum, the governing board of that institution. He was ever generous with his time, as well as with his personal fortune, in aiding the institution.

Phil was especially active in working with younger colleagues and students within the museum and the Department of Anthropology. He offered several formal seminars in southeastern archaeology for graduate students. I sat in on some of these and can attest that they were always interesting and lively affairs. Phil induced a very relaxed intellectual atmosphere in these seminar sessions, and he presided over them with good sense and wit. Argument was encouraged; there was never any “putting down”; one came away with the feeling that it had been enjoyable learning.

These shared learning and research experiences were continued with vigor into the laboratory. In the latter part of the 1950s, Phil was obliged to stay home more often because of Ruth’s health. Home was in Bolton, Massachusetts, some 30 miles or so west of Cambridge, where the Phillips’s had an extensive country estate surrounding a wonderful red-painted, two-story, wooden farmhouse and a nearby barn of the same color. The property had been a coach-stop, or inn, in colonial times, and Phil, with his architectural skills, had restored it beautifully. With the help of Stephen Williams, his younger Mississippian-devoted colleague at Harvard, the upstairs of the red barn was transformed into a pottery laboratory of some size. Here, Phil, Steve, and others could sort away, classify, and study southeastern potsherds and other artifacts that were to form the descriptive substance of future monographs.

Williams once said he “was struck by the fact that so many of us [and here he was referring to Phil’s

colleagues of long-standing] can remember the time that we first met Phil Phillips.” This observation was noted in a booklet, *Philip Phillips, Lower Mississippi Survey*, privately printed in 1970 in an edition of only 200 in honor of Phil’s 70th birthday. Over a dozen of us—Jimmy Griffin, Al Spaulding, Bill Haag, Clarence Webb, Jeff Brain, Steve, myself, and others—recorded our memories and impressions of Phil. In every case, admiration for him as an archaeologist and a scholar is imbedded in a context of our fondness for him as a person.

One of Phil’s outstanding archaeological achievements, was the work, *Archaeological Survey in the Lower Mississippi Alluvial Valley, 1940–1947* (1951), which he wrote with James A. Ford and James B. Griffin. It is no exaggeration to say that at that time these were certainly the three most knowledgeable and “high-powered” archaeologists working in the southeastern United States. As of 1940, when their survey was planned, Hopewellian (or Middle Woodland–affiliated) cultures were well known only for the Ohio Valley and for Louisiana. One of the main questions confronting archaeologists was the nature of the cultures in the Mississippi Valley territory between these two regions. What was there on this general time horizon, and what was the relationship of these presumably earlier complexes to the later Middle Mississippian cultures of the area? As might be expected, there were strong and differing opinions about such questions. I had been associated with Ford in Louisiana archaeology in the late 1930s and knew some of his views, which, in a Fordian manner, were very definitely held. Griffin, equally strong minded, was by no means convinced of all of Ford’s views. Of the three, Phil was probably less definite in what he thought about it all—at least at the beginning—than either of his two colleagues. Or perhaps this was his way of promoting team harmony. In any event, the survey, both in the field and in the studies and writings that followed, went off very well, and the publication derived from these is clearly a landmark volume in the development of our knowledge of the prehistory of the eastern United States.

Phil was to follow this up with continued fine-grained research in the Lower Mississippi Valley. This involved both field and laboratory study, much of the latter taking place in the Bolton “red barn” laboratory. He brought this work to a successful conclusion with his two-volume monograph, *Archaeological Survey in the Lower Yazoo Basin, Mississippi, 1949–1955* (1970). These volumes lay out the regional descriptions and the chronology of cultures for a large segment of the Lower Mississippi Valley. It is the basic stuff of which archaeology is made and on and in which it is grounded.

Phil’s interests were not purely in formal-spatial-temporal systematics. Early on, he was concerned with questions of diffusion. In fact, his first published paper, a contribution to the Tozzer festschrift, *The Maya and Their Neighbors* (1940), dealt with the possibilities of design style contacts between Precolumbian Mesoamerica and the southeastern United States; and years later (1966) he was to return to diffusionist themes with an article in the *Handbook of Middle American Indians* on transpacific Asia-to-America contacts. By and large his judgments on diffusionist themes tended to be critical, but, I think, fair.

I had the pleasure of working with Phil, at some length and over an extended period of time, on further considerations of archaeological method and theory. We had known each other for a good many years before I came to Harvard in 1950. We had first met in the context of Georgia archaeology in 1937, and I had seen him off and on ever since that time. Indeed, when we were both in Washington for a brief period in the 1940s, we collaborated on a little paper on negative-painted pottery from Florida (1944), and we frequently corresponded after that. After I had settled in at Harvard, we had lots of time to talk. Phil had just finished writing up the Phillips-Ford-Griffin project; and although now I can’t remember just how it all came about, we must have talked over the ways in which American archaeologists, particularly North American archaeologists, had carried out archaeological classifications and systematics. As a result we did two papers for the *American Anthropologist*, setting out our views about such matters (1953, 1955). These prompted an invitation from a university press to combine these into a book, and *Method and Theory in American Archaeology* (1958) was the result. As I think back about this collabo-

ration, I recall that Phil was always more interested in the explicitly methodological aspects of what we said, and in the theoretical grounding of these, than I was. This was particularly true of our attempts to establish classificatory archaeological equivalents to social units, especially as these pertained to the North American scene. Perhaps because my center of interests lay farther south in the Americas, I was conjuring up visions of complex civilizations and speculating on how they had arisen, developmentally and historically. In general, I think he was always a little “tougher-minded” than I was, less inclined to venture into speculation. We argued as we wrote and exchanged sections, but in no painful way. In sum, it was a happy time and one that I now look back on with great fondness and nostalgia.

In his later years of research, Phil turned especially toward the artistic and aesthetic dimensions of his data. Perhaps this grew out of old, abiding interests, ones that had originally attracted him to architecture. I used to think that if he had followed Alfred Tozzer’s advice about his choice of a geographic field, he might have devoted himself to Maya architecture. I know that on a trip to the Maya area, which Phil, Harry Pollock, and I made together in 1957, he was much enamored with the masterpieces of Maya great constructions. Within the context of southeastern United States archaeology, he turned to Mississippian-Caddoan art, most specifically the fascinatingly carved shell engravings that had been recovered from the famed Spiro Mound in eastern Oklahoma. This is the art that relates to, or is a part of, the late prehistoric “Southeastern Ceremonial Complex” or “Southern Cult.” Working throughout the 1970s, in collaboration with James Brown, Phil brought out six quarto-size volumes on *Pre-Columbian Shell Engravings from the Craig Mound at Spiro, Oklahoma* (1975–1982). These extraordinarily handsome books are both works of art and a scholarly resource. These same interests continued to engage Phil’s attention throughout his later life. Indeed, with Jeffrey Brain he was working on such matters at the time of his death, and the two of them had just finished a major, two-volume work, to be published by the Peabody Museum.

I should add that Phil, while working steadily and devotedly, was not one to rush things. Never particularly anxious about “getting into print,” he liked to savor the data, to think about it, and to go back to it. He was never hesitant to point out in later publications what he considered to be his mistakes in earlier ones. With Phil, there was very little professional ego involved in his archaeology. For him, the work itself was the prime thing.

Finally, it should be said that while archaeology was important to Phil, he had other interests. One of these was literature. He had a profound knowledge of Proust and Joyce, both of whom he continued to read with pleasure. In fact, the last time I ever saw and spoke with him, an open copy of *Finnegan’s Wake*—a first edition—lay on an end table near the davenport on which he was sitting before the fire in his Bolton home. He had just put it down as I came in so we could start up a conversation about southeastern ceremonial art and some of the perplexities of its dating. He was then in his 95th year. In spite of his age, he looked well and obviously at peace with himself and everyone else. But then this was always his manner. He, Jeff Brain, and I then drove to a restaurant in a nearby town—a favorite hangout of Phil’s—where we had a pleasant lunch and talked of archaeology and other things, as we always did.

Phil’s wife Ruth, had died in 1962. He subsequently married Wilhelmina Schoellkopf Hodgson, who also predeceased him. He is survived by his two daughters, Patricia (Lady Davies) of England and Sayre Sheldon Morgan of Cambridge, Massachusetts, by stepchildren, by a host of grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and by one great-great-grandchild.

Let me close by saying that in Phil’s passing American archaeology has lost one of its very best practitioners. His work will live on after him. Finally, those of us who knew him well have lost a wonderful and unforgettable friend, a man of great sensitivity and warmth.

GORDON R. WILLEY

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