

History of Anthropology at the Smithsonian

Founding of the Smithsonian

Smithsonian Anthropology began with the founding of the Institution in 1846. Early anthropological investigations were conducted by institutional collaborators (rather than staff members), for example, E. G. Squier and E. H. Davis, whose "Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley" (1847) formed the first volume of the series *Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge*.

Early Collections

The arrival of Spencer F. Baird as assistant secretary in 1850 initiated the Smithsonian's large scale, systematic collection of anthropological and other natural history specimens. In 1858, the Institution accepted the government collections previously displayed in the Great Hall of the Patent Office, which included objects gathered by the United States Exploring Expedition, Matthew Perry's voyages to Japan, and diplomatic gifts to American presidents from foreign dignitaries, including the King of Siam and the Sultan of Muscat. In 1876, Baird oversaw exhibits for the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, and afterward, convinced exhibitors to donate the art and artifacts, filling several boxcars. In 1879, the George Catlin collection, including four hundred and fifty of his paintings and numerous Native American artifacts, was bequeathed to the Smithsonian. The collections were growing so quickly that a formal Section of Ethnology was established, with curators hired to care for ethnological and archaeological collections.



Workroom for Indian Ethnology, A&I Building, ca. 1890s. Image 3680 or NHB-3680, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 95, Box 32, Folder: 19

By 1881, the U.S. National Museum (USNM) had been established as a separate entity within the Smithsonian, with Baird as its director, and the Museum was located in what was later known as the Arts and Industries Building. In 1883, the staff and collections were organized into Divisions, including a Division of Anthropology. Physical Anthropology was added to the Division in 1904. From the beginning, the Museum's collecting and research in anthropology was world-wide, but with a particular emphasis on North America.



Staff of the Department of Anthropology, United States National Museum, 1904, standing in front of the Arts and Industries Building. Standing from left to right: E. H. Hawley, G. C. Maynard, Alš Hrdlička, T. W. Sweeney, Walter Hough, H. W. Hendley, R. A. Allen, E. P. Upham, P. Beckwith, I. M. Casanowicz, and J. Palmer. Seated from left to right: Miss Malone and Louisa A. Rosenbusch. Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 9521, Box 1

Bureau of Ethnology

In 1879, Congress established the Bureau Ethnology (later Bureau of American Ethnology, or B.A.E.) as a separate, purely research unit of the Smithsonian, independent of the National Museum. The focus of the Bureau's research was on North American Indian cultures, including important projects in ethnology, archaeology, and linguistics.

The B.A.E. effectively founded American anthropology (especially ethnology and linguistics) at a time when there were no advanced university degrees in the field and there were almost no full-time anthropologists employed anywhere else. The 200 Bulletins and 48 Annual Reports of the B.A.E. were the premier publications in anthropology in the country for most of the 86 years of the Bureau's

existence. In the 1940s, the research of the Bureau expanded to cover the rest of the Americas, especially with the founding in 1943 of a sub-division for research and teaching called the Institute of Social Anthropology. In 1946, the B.A.E. established the River Basin Surveys to supervise and conduct archaeological research in areas where dams were flooding prehistoric cultural sites within the U.S.



Matthew and Marion Stirling, 1939. Matthew Stirling was director of the Bureau of American Ethnology at the time. They were at Boca San Miguel, Veracruz, Mexico to conduct anthropological field work. Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 7006, Box 174, Album 1

At the Natural History Building

The USNM moved into the new Natural History Building in 1910, giving the Department expanded exhibit and work space.

Beginning in the 1950s, the museum's Department of Anthropology increasingly emphasized research, in addition to its traditional curatorial and exhibition duties. It expanded the scope of research by hiring its first specialists in Asia, the Pacific, South America and Africa.



Anthropology Hall, United States National Museum, ca. 1911. Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 95, Box 44, Folder: 3

Reorganization and Expansion

By 1967, subdivisions within the USNM had grown large enough to split off into their own museums, including the Museum of History and Technology (later renamed the National Museum of American History), the National Museum of American Art, and the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH), which included the Department of Anthropology.

In 1965, S. Dillon Ripley, as incoming Secretary of the Smithsonian, reformed the NMNH by giving research a higher priority than caring for and exhibiting the collections. As part of this change, the Bureau of American Ethnology was eliminated, and its staff and library merged with those of the museum's Department of Anthropology. The B.A.E. Archives became the museum's National Anthropological Archives, with a correspondingly broadened mandate. The B.A.E. publication series was replaced by the new Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology (SCA).



Department of Anthropology Staff, 1959. Smithsonian Institution Archives, Acc. 16-126, Box 01, Image No. MNH-136

In 1975, Congress authorized the addition of the National Anthropological Film Center (now the Human Studies Film Archives) to the Smithsonian, and in 1981, it became part of the Department of Anthropology.

In accordance with legislation passed by Congress in 1989, a Repatriation Office was established in the museum in 1991 and moved to the Department in 1993, in order to establish a close working relationship with the Department and to facilitate access to the Department's Native American collections and the associated documentation.

Collections Online and On the Move

Museum staff began computerizing its collections records in the 1970s, pioneering the use of databases for collections management. The first item-level inventory was conducted in 1978 – 1980, and this data was merged with catalog and accession information gleaned from over 100 years' worth of museum records. Since then, the museum has continued to add information, digitized documents, and digital images of the collections, eventually making the available online, all with the aim of making collections more accessible and more meaningful to researchers and communities.

Also in 1970s, there was growing concern for the preservation of the collections, which were overcrowding the attics, basements, and hallways of the Natural History Building. The Museum Support Center (MSC) in nearby Suitland, Maryland, was custom built for collections care, with specialized storage facilities and research and conservation labs. The MSC opened in 1983, and the bulk of the

object collection was moved in the late 1980s to mid-1990s. The National Anthropological Archives followed in 2001.

Leadership in the Discipline of Anthropology

Since 1846, the Department and its predecessor organizations have maintained a leadership role in the development of the field of anthropology. Members of the department and the Bureau of American Ethnology founded the Anthropological Society of Washington in 1880, which in 1888 began publishing the *American Anthropologist*, which was taken over in 1899 by the new American Anthropological Association and became the leading professional journal of anthropology. After World War II, archaeological investigations in river basins along the Missouri, by the Bureau of American Ethnology and archaeologists in the museum, set modern standards for conducting and documenting archaeological fieldwork. The field of anthropological conservation also was developed at the Smithsonian, and its approaches and methodologies are used today around the world.

Today, Anthropology is the largest scientific department in the Museum of Natural History, with three curatorial Divisions: Ethnology, Archaeology, and Biological Anthropology. The Department is also home to several research and outreach programs, including the Repatriation Office, Recovering Voices, Human Origins, and the Arctic Studies Center. We continue to uphold the tradition of leadership in anthropological research, the care of collections, and the dissemination of information to the scholarly and lay communities.

Further Readings:

Isaac, Gwyneira, and Joshua A. Bell. 2013. Smithsonian Institution. *In* Theory in Social and Cultural Anthropology, an Encyclopedia, R. Jon McGee and Richard L. Warms, eds. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.