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THE WETHERILLS, THE BUREAU OF ETHNOLOGY AND MESA VERDE: A DIFFERENCE OF PERSPECTIVE

In stopping to take breath, I happened to glance up at the canyon wall. I wish I could tell you what I saw there, just as I saw it, on that first morning, through a veil of lightly falling snow. Far up above me, a thousand feet or so, set in a great cavern in the face of the cliff, I saw a little city of stone, asleep. (Cather 1925:201)

In her novel, *The Professor's House*, Willa Cather wrote of a young man, Tom Outland, who discovered a large, prehistoric cliff dwelling. He took the news of his discovery to Washington, D. C. where he attempted to convince government officials of the need to send an investigating party to the site. "They kept me hanging on through March and April," Outland recalled, "but in the end it came to nothing. Dr. Ripley told me he was sorry, but the sum Congress had allowed the Smithsonian wouldn't cover an expedition to the Southwest" (Cather 1925:235).

Figure 1.

The Wetherill brothers: front (left to right), Al, Richard, and John; rear, Winslow and Clayton. (All photographs are from Wetherill family collections in the writer's possession.)

Cather based her story on an actual affair that occurred in southwestern Colorado toward the end of the nineteenth century. It involved a ranching family—the Wetherills—who lived in Mancos, Colorado, the U.S. Bureau of Ethnology in Washington, D.C., and the prehistoric cliff dwellings of Mesa Verde.

The Wetherill family consisted of the parents, Benjamin Kite (B.K.) and his wife Marion, their daughter, Anna, and her husband, Charlie Mason, and their five sons, Richard, Al, John, Clayton, and Winslow (Figure 1). Richard, who was the oldest, was Cather's inspiration for her protagonist.¹ In



December 1888 he and Charlie Mason suddenly came upon a view of the dwelling they named "Cliff Palace" while searching for stray cattle on top of Mesa Verde.

Unlike Tom Outland, the Wetherills did not travel to Washington, but they did correspond with government officials in an attempt to convince them of the need to investigate and protect Mesa Verde. In about December 1889, B. K. Wetherill wrote to the Smithsonian Institution (Figure 2).

I have sent a party of five men to seek for relics in the numerous Cliff dwellings in the Mancos, and tributary canõns, under the same guide (R. Wetherill) who directed the party last winter i.e. Mcloyd, Wetherill, et al. when they collected such a great variety of the handiwork of this pre-historic people (a catalogue of which was sent you) & sold to the Colorado State Historical Society at Denver.

I would like for the party to work under the Auspices of your institution, as I expect them to make a thorough search, and get many interesting relics, particularly from a number of Cliff houses discovered by my son, R. Wetherill, during the past summer, while guiding tourists over the mountains to view the dwellings.

Would like to hear from you in regard to the matter. I think it desirable that the things found should be collected in one place as near as possible, and not be scattered all over the country in small lots...

I think the Mancos, and tributary canõns should be reserved as a national park, in order to preserve the curious cliff houses...(Wetherill 1889)

Wetherill's letter was received by the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, Samuel P. Langley. He sent a cordial reply that he summarized in a note, in which he wrote, "We agreed that cave relics should be collected and ref'd the letter to Major Powell and told Mr. Wetherill of the reference" (Langley 1890).

John Wesley Powell, the Colorado River explorer, was at that time Director of the Bureau of

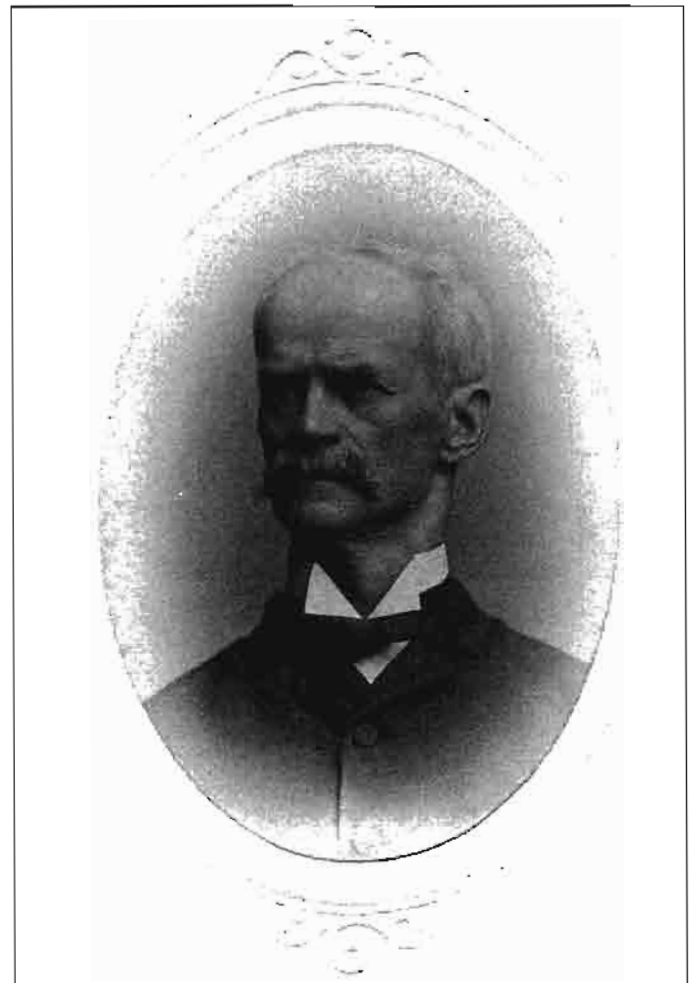


Figure 2.
B. K. Wetherill.

Ethnology. He forwarded Wetherill's letter to his staff, and it ended up on the desk of William Henry Holmes. Holmes, an archeologist, was familiar with the Mesa Verde area, having visited some of the Mancos Canyon cliff dwellings in 1875 when he was an artist with the Hayden Survey. He also replied to Wetherill.

...Of course I would be very much pleased if as you suggest we could in some way direct the work laid out by you, but it does not seem practicable at present to do so. For scientific purposes at least one half of the value of collections depend upon the record of data relating to the place and manner of discovery. If your people were required to keep and capable of keeping such records there would be less need of scientific supervision.

...Of course it is a pity that they could not be reserved and preserved, but when their multitude is considered—they cover a good part of four States and Territories—it seems a Herculean task. Is it not possible for you to map the ruins visited and to preserve for this Bureau a series of descriptive notes of work done. This would be a move in the right direction and might lead to something more.

I would be much pleased to hear from you occasionally and if we can manage to go in there again we may desire your services. (Holmes 1890a)

Wetherill quickly replied to Holmes, reiterating his concern that government action be taken. "We are particular to preserve the buildings, but fear,

unless the Gov't sees proper to make a national park of the Canõns, including Mesa Verde[,] that the tourists will destroy them," he warned (Wetherill 1890a). Receiving no answer, he wrote once again.

Last year the greater portion of the cliff houses in S. E. Utah and N. W. New Mexico were explored by those who sold their collections to parties in small lots.... The valley of the Mancos and Montezuma have been pretty thoroughly dug over, it being about the only means of support of quite a number of the Montezuma people. (Wetherill 1890b)

Wetherill was unaware that Holmes had already decided to terminate the correspondence. "There seems to be no need of other communication with him," he had recorded privately after replying to Wetherill's first letter (Holmes 1890b).

It was not until about a decade later that Holmes and others in the federal government began to support the designation of Mesa Verde as a national park, and it was not until 1906 that it was finally given that status. In the sixteen year interim, uncontrolled visitation and excavations took their toll on the structures and cultural remains.

This affair raises a number of questions. Why were the Wetherills so concerned for the protection of Mesa Verde? Why did the government, and particularly the Bureau of Ethnology, seem so unconcerned? Why did they eventually change their position? And what can we learn from these events that would help inform our current perception of Mesa Verde's significance?

THE WETHERILLS AND THEIR QUAKER PERSPECTIVE

The Wetherill family's involvement with Mesa Verde has stirred up considerable controversy down through the years. Some writers have accused them of mercenary intents or worse, while others who knew them, including Gustaf Nordenskiöld, T. Mitchell Prudden, and A. V. Kidder recognized them for their pioneering contributions to southwestern archaeology.² The inability of researchers to reach a consensus on this question after more than a century is an indication that the focus of the debate has been misdirected.

The interest of B. K. Wetherill and his sons in Mesa Verde can only be understood in light of the values that were instilled in them by their early involvement with the religious Society of Friends, or Quakers. B. K. was born in Pennsylvania in 1832. As a boy, he attended the Friends' meeting house in Chester with his family, and as a young man he received a liberal education at the Society's Westtown Boarding School. His wife, Marion, was also a member of the Society, and they involved their children in Quaker activities while they were growing up in Leavenworth, Kansas.

The Society of Friends originated in England in the mid-seventeenth century. Their theology is distinguished by a belief that all people, regardless of race, cultural affiliation, social status, or level of education, are endowed with "inner light" that serves as a moral guide. This light, they believe, involves a sense of direction that can help guide the recipient's decisions even before the course is intellectually clear. An early Quaker minister described this concept succinctly when he observed, "I have often found it good to adhere to impressions felt though at the time I knew not for why or what" (Hoag 1909:156).

Quakers believe that inner light is the birthright of all people, but that not everyone is in touch with its

subtle guidance. Various distractions can cloud the senses and cause the individual to lose sight of its message. To avoid such impediments, the Quakers advocated a simple lifestyle that avoided activities designed to manipulate their emotions. This lifestyle gave them an affinity with other societies who were unencumbered by the complexities of modern life, such as slaves and Native Americans.

Quaker beliefs often conflicted with those of the predominant culture. For example, based on his observations of the Cherokee tribe, which he visited in 1775, William Bartram, a Quaker botanist from Philadelphia, observed their "friendship without fallacy or guile, hospitality disinterested, native, undefiled, unmodified by artificial refinements" (Bartram 1791:351). Of the Creeks, he wrote, "As moral men they certainly stand in no need of European civilization. They are just, honest, liberal and hospitable to strangers; considerate, loving and affectionate to their wives and relations; fond of their children; industrious, frugal, temperate and persevering; charitable and forbearing" (p. 490). His interpretations contradicted the prevailing belief that religious training, education, and the civilizing influences of society are necessary for the development of morality and that Native Americans were inferior in this regard.

This Quaker perspective translated, in some cases, into an interest in archaeology. In 1851, a Quaker journal extolled the virtues of a prehistoric race whose remains had been discovered in Mammoth Cave with a sentimental poem:

...As well some stunted shrub compare,
With forest oak or mountain pine,
As our pale, puny race may dare,
Comparison with thine....
(Friends' Review 1851:191)

In 1870, an editorial in another Quaker journal protested the destruction of a prehistoric mound near St. Louis by developers and the random dis-

semination of the cultural remains that were found there (*The Friend* 1870:284).

B.K. Wetherill was involved with Native Americans long before his sons discovered the large cliff dwellings of Mesa Verde. In about 1853, when he was twenty-one years old, he moved from Pennsylvania to Wisconsin, possibly to help watch over the interests of the Menominee Indians on behalf of the Quaker Indian Committee of Philadelphia. Later, after residing in Iowa for several years, he moved his young family to Leavenworth, Kansas. There he was associated with Col. William G. Coffin, a Quaker who had served under Lincoln as superintendent of the Southern Indian Superintendency.³

After the Civil War, some of the midwestern Quakers became appalled at the brutality against the Indians that was occurring on the plains. A group of Iowa Quakers petitioned the federal government to change their manner of dealing with those conflicts. "The recital of the tale of the poor

red man is absolutely humiliating to our Nation, and disgraceful to our race," one of them wrote. "Our entire policy with them should be changed" (Morgan 1868:300). As a result of the lobbying of that group and others, president-elect Grant, in 1869, agreed to turn over management of the Central Indian Superintendency to the Orthodox Quakers. In 1872, B. K. Wetherill was hired to work at the Osage Agency at Pawhuska, in what is now Oklahoma. After a few months in the office, he was reassigned to serve as a trail agent with responsibility to prevent conflicts between the Indians and whites. Over the next few years, he spent a considerable portion of his time with the Osages in their hunting camps.⁴

In 1879, Wetherill moved to southwestern Colorado, and his family soon followed him. He named his homestead near Mancos the "Alamo Ranch". There they established friendships with the Ute Indians who lived nearby (Figure 3). They also took an early interest in the archaeological sites in their neighborhood.



Figure 3.
*Richard and B. K.
Wetherill (on left) at
a Ute wedding.*

The disappointing response from the Bureau of Ethnology did not end the Wetherills' advocacy for the protection of Mesa Verde. In 1890, B. K. and Al assembled a traveling exhibition of Mesa Verde artifacts that they took to Durango, Pueblo, and Denver. The Wetherill brothers guided many visitors to the cliff dwellings and assisted with a number of scientific investigations. One of the most significant of those was Gustaf Nordenskiöld's 1891 expedition that resulted in his classic book, *The Cliff Dwellers of the Mesa Verde*. In later years, Richard promoted government protection of the archaeological sites in Chaco Canyon and John of those in Tsegi Canyon, Monument Valley, and Canyon de Chelly.⁵

Al Wetherill best explained the family's interest in Mesa Verde in his autobiography. "Thus began an eighteen-year self-imposed assignment of excavation and research among the ruins of the Mesa Verde," he wrote. "It all reverts back, of course, to the fact that no one told us to do it. Any hardships were our own responsibility. But, we could not shake of the feeling that we were possibly predestined to take over the job, knowing what depredations had been committed by transients who neither revered nor cared for the ruins as symbols of the past" (Wetherill 1977:104).

The family's admiration of the Indian character was rooted in B. K.'s encounters with Native Americans when he was a young man. According to one of his granddaughters, "During the time he was with these Indians he became very much interested in everything pertaining to Indians, which interest stayed with him all the rest of his life. He had learned to love them and their simple way of life."⁶ As informed by their Quaker upbringing, the Wetherills were probably most attracted to the cliff dwellers because of their ability to prosper under humble circumstances.

THE BUREAU OF ETHNOLOGY AND THEIR PROGRESSIVIST PERSPECTIVE

The Bureau of Ethnology was also interested in Native Americans, but for a quite different reason. "The immediate purpose in instituting these researches and in organizing the Bureau in 1879 was the discovery of the relations among the native American tribes, to the end that amicable groups might be gathered on reservations," Powell explained (Powell 1896:xxvii). The underlying agenda of the Bureau was to help manage the acquisition of mineral resources that were on land controlled by Native Americans. The primary reason that they were slow to support the protection of Mesa Verde was that such an endeavor did not contribute to this goal. As Willa Cather's protagonist learned of his Washington contacts, "They don't care much about dead and gone Indians" (Cather 1975:235).

Other than academic topics, the voluminous reports of the Bureau of Ethnology contain little to suggest that a study of the Indians could help enlighten modern society. Powell was a disciple of Lewis Henry Morgan whose book, *Ancient Society*, offered "Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarianism to Civilization" (Morgan 1877). Morgan theorized that human culture evolved and progressed through these three stages. He purported to document the "Growth of intelligence through inventions and discoveries," presuming that societies that lack modern technology are intellectually immature.

In his articles, "From Savagery to Barbarism" and "From Barbarism to Civilization" Powell elaborated on Morgan's theory. He believed that civilized society was not only technologically and intellectually superior, but morally superior as well. "In

savagery, the beasts are gods; in barbarism, the gods are men; in civilization, men are as gods, knowing good from evil," he declared (Powell 1888:123).

This position was diametrically opposed to Quaker doctrine. For example, William Bartram maintained that "we act most rationally and virtuously when our actions seem to operate from simple instinct" (Fagin 1933:46).

The academic and scientific communities were also heavily influenced by progressivist beliefs. When a correspondent to the *American Journal of Archaeology* complained about their lack of coverage of North American archaeological topics, the editors replied, "Within the limits the United States the native races attained to no high faculty of performance or expression in any field. They had no intellectual life. They have left no remains indicating a probability that, had they been left in undisturbed possession of the continent, they would have succeeded in advancing their condition out of the prehistoric state" (*American Journal of Archaeology* 1888:261).

In 1893, the Bureau participated in the anthropological displays at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The fair was not intended just for entertainment, but it was also "propaganda of social ideas" (Van Brunt 1893:577). Its theme was "progress", and its campaign to promote progressive ideals proved to be quite successful. Although the exhibits of Indian materials were justified by some as helping to illustrate how far society had advanced, others took offence that they were included in the exhibition.⁷ One of these was the Cliff-Dweller exhibit—a hollow replica of a mountain that housed the Wetherill collection of Mesa Verde artifacts that B. K. and Al had first displayed in Colorado. Holmes complained about the "extraordinary and utterly unreliable teachings of the principal exhibitor of cliff-dwellers' remains on the exposition grounds" (Holmes 1893:432).

In 1897, the Bureau documented the accomplishment of their major objective in their report, *Indian Land Cessions of the United States*. In 1902, Powell died, and Holmes was promoted to chief. By that time he supported the designation of Mesa Verde as a National Park (Holmes 1901). His interest in archaeology, however, did not reflect a new-found appreciation for Native American culture, but rather a continuation of the progressivist philosophy that had defined the Bureau's agenda during the Powell era.

Holmes believed that a study of North American archaeological sites could shed light on the conditions under which the ancestors of the dominant culture had lived in ages past when they were in the barbaric stage (Holmes 1905:413). He also believed that the dominant culture eventually would supplant the weaker ones and that "the complete absorption or blotting out of the red race will be quickly accomplished." "If peaceful amalgamation fails, extinction of the weaker by less gentle means will do the work," he added (Holmes 1910:161).

By attempting to correlate technological innovation with intelligence and morality, the leaders of the Bureau of Ethnology not only politicized their scientific charter, but also promoted racist views and the unjust treatment of Native Americans.

THE CLIFF DWELLERS IN A DIFFERENT LIGHT

After failing in his attempt to interest the government in his archaeological project, Willa Cather's protagonist, Tom Outland, was anxious to leave the stultifying environment of Washington, D. C. "I wanted nothing but to get back to the mesa and live a free life and breathe free air, and never, never again to see hundreds of little black-coated men pouring out of white buildings," he declared (Cather 1975:236).

Cather's insight into the deeper issue that separated the government scientists' perspective from that of the Wetherills is remarkable. She understood that it was not only a disagreement regarding respect for Native Americans, but more fundamentally an ideological difference regarding the place of humans in the natural world.

The Bureau based their approach on the social philosophy that the human destiny is to control nature. "In savagery, the powers of nature are feared as evil demons; in barbarism, the powers of nature are worshiped as gods; in civilization, the powers of nature are apprenticed servants," Powell wrote (Powell 1888:121). He believed that progress is achieved "not by adaptation to environment, but by the creation of an artificial environment" (Powell 1885:195). Powell and his colleagues apparently did not consider the possibility that Native Americans were as intellectually astute as they were, but simply disagreed with this philosophy.

The Wetherills believed quite differently. John, who spent his adult life among the Utes, Piutes, and Navajos, understood the implications of their Quaker values most completely. "The desert will take care of you," he said. "At first it's all big and beautiful, but you're afraid of it. Then you begin to see its dangers, and you hate it. Then you learn how to overcome its dangers. And the desert is home" (Gillmor and Wetherill 1934:256). Like Tom Outland, the Wetherills distrusted the values of the city dwellers, but admired those of the cliff dwellers who lived in appreciation of their natural environment.

Modern society, with its continued belief in progress, cultural evolution, and the supremacy of artificiality, has no less a difficulty acknowledging the virtues of the ancient Indians as did the leaders of the Bureau of Ethnology more than a century ago. Investigators who are able to transcend these old biases may yet discover new insights from the ancient inhabitants of Mesa Verde.

ENDNOTES

1. For more on Willa Cather, Mesa Verde, and *The Professor's House*, see Harrell (1992).
2. For a discussion of this controversy, see Lister and Lister (1985). Fred Blackburn's recent book on the Wetherills (2006) provides the most comprehensive discussion of their involvement with Mesa Verde.
3. Holman (1973) discusses Coffin's role as an Indian agent. For several years, the Coffins and Wetherills lived next to each other in Leavenworth, Kansas. This is documented in city directories such as the one for 1868–69 published by M. S. Foley and Company.
4. For Wetherill's activities with the Osage Agency, see letters received by the Central Superintendent from the Osage Agency, National Archives Record Group 75 (Bureau of Indian Affairs), Washington, D.C.
5. See deposition of Richard Wetherill by S. J. Holsinger, 20 May 1901, copy on file in the Frank McNitt collection, New Mexico State Archive, Santa Fe; Richard Wetherill to Commissioner of General Land Office, letter, 14 January 1906, National Archives Record Group 79 (National Park Service), Chaco Canyon; John Wetherill to W. B. Douglass, letter, 7 March 1909; John Wetherill to Director,

National Park Service, letter, 13 September 1920; and George E. Goodwin to National Park Service, letter, 20 July 1922. Last three in National Archives Record Group 79, Navajo. For more information on Richard, see McNitt (1957). For more on John, see Gillmor and Wetherill (1934).

6. Daughter of Charles and Anna Wetherill Mason (first name not recorded), "Benjamin Kite Wetherill, Pioneer". Manuscript on file, Wetherill Archive, Anasazi Heritage Center, Dolores, Colorado.
7. One of the architects of the World's Columbian Exposition explained its purpose. "Many lives are begun and finished without seeing a work of good art, in painting, sculpture, or architecture; without being aroused from the apathy of a dull and colorless existence by any object

lesson in the higher regions of human effort. The farmers and their families, the ranchmen, the stock-raisers, who form so large a part of the population, are isolated from the centres of moral and intellectual life, and are so engrossed in the occupations of the soil that they are unconscious of their higher capacities, and have absolutely nothing to stimulate their mental energies or awaken their dormant faculties" (Van Brunt 1893:580). The Chicago Tribune editorialized that the city "has millions for the construction of exhibiting buildings, but no money to waste searching for the arrow heads or skulls of the stone age, nor do we believe that any persons outside of a little handful of ethnological specialists have even a languid interest in men who were hardly above the animals with whom they were associated in intelligence" (Chicago Tribune 1890:4).

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