

J. Alden Mason

January 14, 1885—November 7, 1967



The death of J. Alden Mason brought sadness to all of his colleagues at the University Museum and to many of his fellow anthropologists. As Linton Satterthwaite has written below, Alden had an enormously wide and varied acquaintance in many parts of the world, especially in the Americas. He was one of the ever decreasing group of general anthropologists, trained before the days of extreme specialization, who were competent in nearly all the branches of their profession.

But Alden will also be remembered by many people who were not anthropologists. He had a lively interest in the history of the region around his home in Chester County, Pennsylvania, and was a valued member of the local historical society. He was also for many years an ardent gardener and a member of the Men's Garden Club of Berwyn, Pennsylvania. Many of his friends in the Museum, especially the ladies of the staff, will not soon forget the flowers that

I was Alden's assistant at the University Museum for some twenty-five years, until he became Emeritus Curator of the American Indian Section in 1955. The fact that I loved him throughout those years, and since, and in that relationship, speaks for itself as to his innate kindness and generosity as a person. There was a fundamental drive to be of service, to help the other scholar and, especially, younger would-be scholars.

Our association began in 1929 when he picked me as a graduate student-assistant for an archaeological reconnaissance of parts of New Mexico, Texas, and Arizona, organized by the late Edgar Howard. I was lucky, for grants and

he used to bring them, and I have a living memorial of his kindness in the form of a thriving bed of lilies of the valley that was once a part of his garden.

Alden was, in addition to his own scholarly work, a most conscientious contributor to his profession in other ways. He belonged to a number of national and regional anthropological societies and he attended their meetings with extraordinary regularity and did more than his share of work in their behalf. He held various offices in them and for several years he took on the thankless and unpaid task of editing the *American Anthropologist*, the journal of the American Anthropological Association.

He lived a long and full life, giving a great deal more to others than he took from them. We shall all miss his gentle presence in the Museum. Linton Satterthwaite's account of Alden's professional career follows.

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fellowships for work on the Anthropology of the American Indian were scarce in those days.

By that time, Alden's reputation in that developing field was well established. It already rested on field work and publications in the ethnology, folklore, and especially the linguistics of modern Indians, as well as in archaeology, which has a more direct appeal to the layman. Geographically, these early studies involved field work in Canada (Great Slave Lake), California, Utah, Arizona, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and the Colombia coast of South America.

This pattern of wide interests and field work to obtain data, as well as library research in organizing it, was well fixed by 1916. Alden did

his undergraduate and part of his graduate work at the University of Pennsylvania, completing the latter at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1911. This brought him under the influence of Kroeber at Berkeley, as well as of Speck and Sapir at Pennsylvania. In 1911-13 he was chosen to represent Pennsylvania for two seasons in Mexico in a joint enterprise called the International School of Archaeology and Ethnology, and in 1914-15 he spent more than a year with the Puerto Rican Survey. Both of these experiences brought him in close contact with Boas, of Columbia University, another of the great founders of modern American Anthropology.

Alden became Assistant Curator at Field Museum, Chicago, in 1917, and thereafter research had to be combined with administrative duties, but he was in intimate contact with a great American Indian collection. This remained true when he moved to the American Museum of Natural History in New York, and, very shortly thereafter, to Pennsylvania, in 1925. Alden took his curatorial duties very seriously. No query from another scholar or layman went without full answer and he was alert in the matter of exhibition and new acquisitions. But the old drive for field work continued. By my calculation in the nine years from 1910 to 1917 Alden was in the field eight times, a pace which could hardly continue. But in the thirty-eight years from 1917 to his retirement in 1955 he was in the field sixteen times, and at least once after it, in 1958. These later trips during the long curatorship period were archaeological, with the significant exception of a field trip to the Pima Bajo of northern Mexico in 1953, for linguistic research.

When he officially (but not really) retired, the geographical range of Mason field work included five western and four eastern states of the United States, six states of Mexico, Puerto Rico, Colombia, Panama, and Guatemala. The last represented an archaeological invasion, so to speak, of the ancient Maya country, with export of large carved stone stelae and "lintels" of the Classic period at Piedras Negras. For the time, 1931-32, this was a bold and imaginative undertaking.

Alden was a frequent contributor to scientific journals. When his bibliography is brought down to date it will probably exceed two hundred titles. It will show a keen interest in American Indian languages throughout, side by side with concern for archaeology, for which Alden is probably better known among the younger people. While the archaeology and linguistics of an area may be considered as special disciplines, one supplements the other in ultimate synthesis.

This is no place to evaluate particular contributions; however, I will mention two as indicating the respect in which Alden was held by his peers. These are "present-state-of-the-art" syntheses of Middle American languages (1940) and of all South American languages (1950) commissioned respectively for the basic source publications *The Maya and their Neighbors* and the *South American Handbook*.

One other book deserves special mention because it aims successfully at the general public as well as fellow archaeologists. This is *The Ancient Civilizations of Peru*, which first appeared after his retirement, in 1957. It was commissioned as a paperback by Pelican, but, characteristically, Alden was unwilling to tackle the job on a mere library research basis. The Viking Fund financed an extended field trip specifically in preparation for the writing of this book, and doubtless this partly explains its enormous success. It went through many printings, was revised in 1961, and has been translated into Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and German.

Alden was a member of numerous professional societies, local, state, national, and foreign, and at one time or another was an officer in most of them, including the presidency of the Society for American Archaeology. Franklin and Marshall College conferred an honorary degree in 1958.

For a five-year term beginning about 1940 he was Editor of the *American Anthropologist*. I happen to know that this honor sought the man, and not the other way round. He had a tremendous sense of responsibility and was afraid he could not do the job properly without neglecting his normal Museum-related duties. He was persuaded that he must accept for the sake of the greater prestige of the Museum, if not for his own. The welfare of the Anthropological Association was also involved. It was a time when old and new guard elements were disputing about the directions which anthropology should take, and a judicially-minded editor was especially important, since he held life or death power over the brain-children of the members.

With mandatory retirement in 1955 Alden was in no mood to stop his research and in 1958 he was digging in Chiapas, Mexico, warming up as Editor and Archaeological Adviser to the New World Archaeological Foundation, a post which he held until his death. He was always a tremendously hard worker and I know that he wanted to be busy and useful to the end. I feel the loss of a great friend, but am glad this wish was not denied him.

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