

William C. Sturtevant (1926-2007)¹

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The field of anthropology lost a leading figure with the passing, on Friday, March 2nd 2007, of William C. Sturtevant, Curator of North American Ethnology at the National Museum of Natural History of the Smithsonian Institution.

William Curtis Sturtevant was born July 26, 1926, in Morristown, New Jersey, the first of three children of Alfred Henry Sturtevant and Phoebe Curtis Reed. His father was a pioneer in genetics, and in 1928 moved with his family to Pasadena, California, where he accepted a professorship in biology at the California Institute of Technology. His father's older brother, Edgar Howard Sturtevant, was a leading professor of linguistics at Yale University, where he specialized in Hittite and Indo-European languages.

Sturtevant earned his bachelor's degree from the University of California, Berkeley, where he studied between 1944 and 1949. His progress was interrupted by a year, 1945-1946, in the U.S. Naval Reserve, during which he was stationed on Guam. This represented only a delay in studies that were focused and progressing well. His degree in anthropology was awarded with Highest Honors. Reflecting on his training at Berkeley, he has cited courses by John Rowe, Mary Haas, R.F. Heizer, David Mandelbaum, and Robert Lowie as particularly important (1955:3). Sturtevant's commitment to Native American studies within anthropology has been steadfast, having been initiated during third-grade lessons on Indian life and history. While an undergraduate, he participated in an archaeological field school at Chaco Canyon and a UNAM summer school in Mexico City. These experiences contributed to his later interest in Spanish ethnohistorical sources.

After graduating, Sturtevant immediately took up graduate studies in anthropology at Yale University, earning his doctorate in 1955. There he was especially influenced by anthropological linguist Floyd Lounsbury. Lounsbury's example, together with his training under Haas at Berkeley and Bernard Bloch at Yale, solidified Sturtevant's commitment to linguistic approaches within anthropology. Such methods and theories were already at the core of Americanist anthropological scholarship as consolidated by Franz Boas, but Sturtevant became an exemplar of this tradition during a period when it was transforming on some fronts and being de-emphasized on others. Sharing Sturtevant's commitment to linguistically sophisticated ethnography was his friend and fellow-student Harold Conklin. His first published article was a thorough study of Seneca

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musical instruments written jointly with Conklin (1953). Beyond its ethnographic significance, this paper was an early example of rigorous ethnosemantic method, an approach to which both scholars later contributed theoretical works (Sturtevant 1964). Sturtevant's interest in the West Indies derived from work at Yale with Irving Rouse (Sturtevant 1960b).

In 1950, Sturtevant began a life-long research relationship with the Seminole people of Florida. During his doctoral research, he worked most closely with Josie Billie, an important Seminole "medicine maker" (Sturtevant 1960). This early research generated a steady stream of essays in ethnography, oral history and ethnohistory that established him as a leading figure in the anthropology of the Eastern United States. Most important among these contributions is his dissertation, an ethnoscientific ethnography of Seminole medicine, ritual and botany (1955). It stands among the most comprehensive and sophisticated studies of ethnobotany produced in the twentieth century and it remains crucial to the study of Woodland Indian cultures. Sturtevant's Seminole work was complemented by a continuation of research among the Iroquois that was also begun while a student at Yale. These experiences, supplemented by briefer periods of fieldwork throughout the Eastern Woodlands and broad study of the ethnohistorical sources about it, have provided background to his comparative studies of the region. They also informed his advocacy, in congressional testimony and other forums, for federally unrecognized Indian groups in the region (Sturtevant 1983).

Soon after graduation, Sturtevant left an instructorship at Yale and a curatorship at its Peabody Museum, for a position as Ethnologist and later General Anthropologist in the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of American Ethnology. He held this position from 1956 until 1965, when the Bureau was merged with the Department of Anthropology in the U.S. National Museum (later the National Museum of Natural History), where Sturtevant became Curator of North American Ethnology. He remained an active participant in the work of Smithsonian anthropology right up until the time of his death.

Most prominent among his Smithsonian projects was the *Handbook of North American Indians*, of which he served as general editor. Published by the Smithsonian, the handbook is a major multi-volume reference work summarizing anthropological, linguistic and historical knowledge about native peoples north of Mexico. Bearing the imprint of its editor, the thoroughness of the handbook has made it the essential resource for those interested in Native American societies.

Working throughout his career in museum contexts, Sturtevant was active in the fields of museum anthropology and the study of material culture. He has advocated for the importance of museums to general anthropology (1973), developed methods for anthropological museology (1977), and conducted research on museum collections (1967). In 1979-1981, he served as president of the Council for Museum Anthropology, publisher of Museum Anthropology and its companion weblog.

Sturtevant was also an important participant in the development of ethnohistory as an interdisciplinary field of study. He served as President of the American Society for

Ethnohistory in 1965-1966 and his essays helped to solidify and frame this developing field (1968, 1971). The confluence of such interests and his training also produced a commitment to the history anthropology, an additional field with which he was engaged. In this area, he made significant contributions to the study of early encounters between Europeans and the peoples of the New World.

In addition to his presidency of the American Anthropological Association (1980-1981) and of those organizations already discussed, Sturtevant served as President of the Anthropological Society of Washington (1992-1993) and the American Ethnological Society (1977). He received numerous research grants and fellowships. Brown University awarded him the degree of L.H.D. in 1996. The Smithsonian's National Anthropological Archives will house his professional papers.

In 1952, Sturtevant married Theda Maw with whom he raised three children, Kinthi D.M., Reed P.M. and Alfred B.M. (dec.). They divorced in 1986. In 1990, he married Sally McLendon, also a leading anthropological linguist and Americanist.

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