

University of Oklahoma College of Law

University of Oklahoma College of Law Digital Commons

American Indian and Alaskan Native Documents in the Congressional Serial Set: 1817-1899

4-17-1880

Ethnology of North American Indians. Letter from the Secretary of the Smithsonian institution, recommending an appropriation for continuing the ethnologic researches among the North American Indians.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.law.ou.edu/indianserialset>



Part of the [Indigenous, Indian, and Aboriginal Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

H.R. Misc. Doc. No. 35, 46th Cong., 2nd Sess. (1880)

This House Miscellaneous Document is brought to you for free and open access by University of Oklahoma College of Law Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in American Indian and Alaskan Native Documents in the Congressional Serial Set: 1817-1899 by an authorized administrator of University of Oklahoma College of Law Digital Commons. For more information, please contact Law-LibraryDigitalCommons@ou.edu.

ETHNOLOGY OF NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS.

LETTER

FROM THE

SECRETARY OF THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION,

RECOMMENDING

An appropriation for continuing the ethnologic researches among the North American Indians.

APRIL 17, 1880.—Referred to the Committee on Appropriations and ordered to be printed.

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION,
Washington, D. C., April 15, 1880.

SIR: I have the honor to transmit, herewith, a statement by Major J. W. Powell relative to the subject of investigations into the past and present condition of the Indian tribes of the United States—a work in which he has been engaged during the past ten years, and commenced under the direction of the Smithsonian Institution in accordance with an enactment of Congress. Subsequently it was continued by Major Powell, as director of the United States geographical and geological survey of the Rocky Mountain region, the Smithsonian Institution assisting by placing in his hands all the materials collected by its collaborators in this branch of science.

By act of Congress approved March 3, 1879, the work was again placed under the control of the Smithsonian Institution and Major Powell charged with its immediate supervision for the purpose of continuing the systematic investigations he had previously organized.

From the first the researches in question have been carried on with vigor, and the results already obtained, as shown in numerous publications and the large collections deposited in the National Museum, are of great scientific and general interest.

The plan proposed by Major Powell provides for a systematic and complete account of the aboriginal inhabitants of this country—a work of importance from the fact that at no distant time the opportunity will disappear, as the Indian tribes in their primitive condition are rapidly passing away before the advance of civilization.

A further argument for immediate action is furnished by the fact that exhaustive researches are now being prosecuted within our own territory by foreign nations. Collectors, amply provided with means, have been engaged for several years in securing objects from the modern tribes and

in disinterring the contents of aboriginal graves and mounds, the results being carried away—almost in ship loads—to foreign museums. An immense collection from the coasts of California, Oregon, and Alaska has recently been transmitted to a government museum in Paris by an agent sent to the United States for the purpose. Another French expedition will soon be under way for the almost virgin archæological fields of Arizona and New Mexico.

The retention by a country of its own historical monuments has been considered of such moment that laws have been passed by several foreign governments prohibiting the exportation of antiquities. Such laws prevail in Denmark, Greece, Mexico, and elsewhere; and while it may not be practicable or desirable for the United States to follow their example, we may at least anticipate foreigners by collecting such objects and transferring them to the National Museum in Washington. Unless some such action be taken at an early day it will be necessary to depend upon European museums for the material for investigating the antiquities of the United States.

For the foregoing reasons I would respectfully urge the careful consideration of Major Powell's suggestions, and that such appropriation be made as Congress, in its wisdom, may think proper.

I am, sir, very respectfully, your obedient servant,

SPENCER F. BAIRD,

Secretary.

Hon. SAMUEL J. RANDALL,

Speaker of the House of Representatives.

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION,
BUREAU OF ETHNOLOGY (*J. W. Powell in charge*),
Washington, D. C., April 2, 1880.

DEAR SIR:—Ethnographic researches among the North American Indians have been carried on by myself and under my direction for the last ten years. During the second session of the Forty-fifth Congress the various geographical and geological surveys were consolidated and reorganized by the establishment of a Geological Bureau in the Interior Department. In the act affecting this change it was provided that the ethnographic researches previously conducted by myself should be continued under the direction of the Smithsonian Institution, and an appropriation was made therefor.

These ethnographic studies have heretofore embraced the following subjects:

1. That portion of somatology relating to the skeleton, and especially to the crania, of the North American Indians. In this department large collections have been made.

2. Philology. Under this head a great number of the languages of the North American Indians have been studied, and a tentative classification of the linguistic stocks has been made.

In connection with this work a map of the United States has been prepared, exhibiting the original homes of the several linguistic families.

Much has also been done in the study of the sign language of the Indians, and large collections of pictographs have been made.

3. Mythology. A very large collection has been made of the myths of the various tribes of Indians scattered throughout the United States.

4. Sociology. The line of investigation originally pursued by Mr. Lewis H. Morgan, the results of which were published by the Smithsonian Institution, has been continued under my direction, and a large body of material relating to the organization of the family, clan, tribe, and confederacy among our North American Indians has been collected.

5. Habits and customs. In this field also much has been done, especially in relation to their mortuary customs and religious observances.

6. Technology. In this field extensive investigations have been pursued relating especially to the pristine dwellings of the Indians, beginning in caves and lodges made of brush and bark, and culminating in the pueblo structure of the southwestern portion of the United States. This rude architecture has been studied with special reference to the domestic life of the Indians. Their arts as exhibited in their stone implements, their pottery, their bows and arrows, their clothing, ornaments, &c., have been studied, and a large collection made for the National Museum.

7. Archæology. Much has been done in this branch of investigation, especially in California, where the works of extinct races are buried in great profusion. Throughout Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, and a part of Wyoming, ruins of ancient pueblos are also found in great abundance. The researches in this field have been of wide extent.

8. History of Indian affairs, including treaties, cessions of land by the Indians, removals, the progress of the Indians in industrial arts, and especially the efforts made to induce them to become agriculturists and manufacturers, the distribution of lands among them in severalty, and the efforts made to establish schools among the Indians and elsewhere for their education.

A large number of persons, including missionaries and teachers among the Indians, Indian agents, Army officers, scholars connected with the colleges of the United States, and others are assisting in this general work.

In the progress of settlement the western portion of the United States is being rapidly filled by people from the eastern portion, so that at present there is no valley of magnitude uninhabited by white men. Rapidly the Indians are being gathered on reservations where their original habits and customs disappear, their languages are being modified or lost, and they are abandoning their savagery and barbarism and accepting civilization. If the ethnology of our Indians is ever to receive proper scientific study and treatment the work must be done at once.

In view of the facts briefly set forth above, I would respectfully request that you forward to Congress this statement, with an estimate for "*fifty thousand dollars (\$50,000) for the purpose of continuing ethnologic researches among the North American Indians, under the direction of the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution,*" if the same meets with your approval.

I am, with respect, your obedient servant,

J. W. POWELL.

Prof. S. F. BAIRD,
Secretary Smithsonian Institution.