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Nels Nelson in Southern California: The Context and Culture of Archaeology, 1909–1912

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Archaeologist Nels C. Nelson was active during much of the first half of the twentieth century. His career began in the heyday of “museum anthropology” and ended just at the dawn of the processual era. Typically acting on behalf of more senior figures, such as Alfred Kroeber and Clark Wissler, he had a deep personal involvement in the culture of American archaeology at a time of transition. The complex politics and personalities that shaped regional institutions, as well as Nelson’s own circumstances, are particularly well-documented in associated archival materials. This paper discusses these themes in the context of Nelson’s fieldwork in Southern California between 1908 and 1912, with reference to the longer arc of his engagement with the profession.

Archaeologist Nels Christian Nelson (Fig. 1) occupies an ambivalent niche in the history of the discipline. He is largely credited with the innovation of arbitrary stratigraphy as an excavation technique, developed while working at Castillo Cave in Spain and fully implemented at Pueblo San Cristobal in New Mexico (see Snead 2001). In California, however, he is also remembered for his indefatigable survey of shell mounds around San Francisco Bay, a feat that must have worn out many pairs of boots. These highlights occurred between 1905 and 1915, during a brief segment of Nelson’s career, and by the time he died in 1964 they had acquired mythological status within the profession. Yet his activities during the intervening decades, while not as focused, were distinctive. Archaeological fieldwork conducted on behalf of the American Museum of Natural History had taken him to Florida, Montana, Mammoth Cave, and even to China, where he worked for Roy Chapman Andrews and searched for Paleolithic deposits along the Yangtze by boat (Broughton 1996; Browman and Givens 1996; Lyman and O’Brien 1999:79–80; Snead 2001, 2003, 2014; Woodbury 1960a, 1960b).



Figure 1. Nels C. Nelson, early 1920s.
Box 7, Folder 3, NCN PE.

Yet most of Nelson’s body of work has been neglected by disciplinary historians. He was not a theorist, nor—despite working down the boulevard from Columbia—was he ever provided time to study for a Ph.D. Nelson was a patient empiricist at a time when few points of archaeological reference had been established. His preferred mode of operation—methodical, and time-intensive—was repeatedly frustrated by reassignments, budgetary crises, and the shifting tides of institutional politics.

Nelson’s observations on the context and culture of archaeology are, however, a particularly distinctive aspect of his archival legacy. Personal accounts of his “tramps” around California, for example, were scribbled in pencil on index cards, and subsequently filed away in small envelopes. He also kept rough journals over the course of his career. Not a literary stylist, he nonetheless labored to portray his work within specific environments and circumstances. His preserved correspondence is also extensive, capturing professional relationships in fine-grained detail. In addition to providing evidence for traditional research topics—the results of fieldwork, innovations in theory/practice, institutional/professional dynamics—Nelson’s commentaries describe “ecologies”

of archaeology. These include practices in context, the nature of particular research settings, negotiations between various participants, and the diverse audiences engaged by archaeological work. They can also be used to trace the dynamics of lives in archaeology, perhaps ultimately to better understand the role of individual experiences and the conditions of practice in the field.

Nels Nelson's early life epitomized the immigrant experience in nineteenth-century America. He was born in 1875 in the Danish province of Jutland, to a poor farming family. He had no formal education, and had been apprenticed to another farmer when an uncle in Minnesota offered to pay his way across the Atlantic. As a teenager, he attended school with the younger children in Marshall, Minnesota. In 1901, armed with a letter of recommendation from the local Superintendent of Schools, Nelson took a train to California. There he drifted through various jobs, applied for a position teaching "in the Phillipine Service," and ended up at the University of California (NCN OH; S. Civil Service Commission to Nelson [12 October 1903]; C. M. Boutell to Nelson [7 December 1901], Folder 1, NCN PE 37; cf., Snead 2001:106).

Although several archaeologists were associated with the University of California during this era—particularly Frederick Ward Putnam, who served as department chair—Nelson's primary mentor was paleontologist J. C. Merriam. Merriam had supported fieldwork on the shell mounds of the San Francisco Bay, including that conducted by Max Uhle, and continued the effort through his new student. Nelson's first reconnaissance, however, seems to have been to Tehama, California, in January 1906. "There is nothing promising here," the young man reported, while noting the periodic exposure of burials by the river and some associated village sites (Merriam to Kroeber [28 November 1904]; Nelson to Merriam [4 January 1906]; Merriam to Putnam [24 October 1906, 1 October 1907]; JCM. For Merriam, see Stock 1938; for Uhle, see Rowe 1954).

The following summer and beyond was devoted to work at several of the more noted shell mounds, including West Berkeley and Ellis Landing. Merriam deployed Nelson to follow up on Uhle's earlier work at Emeryville. His celebrated walk around San Francisco Bay occurred during this era. Nelson also worked for Alfred Kroeber on small excavation projects, such as at

Ukiah in May 1906, and developed working relationships with the other anthropologists at Berkeley, including Pliny Earle Goddard, T. T. Waterman, and Samuel Barrett. There were various interesting currents within this anthropological community, including the fact that both Waterman and Nelson had originally envisioned careers in the clergy, while Goddard had served as a Quaker missionary among the Hupa (Nelson 1909; Kroeber to Nelson [2 May 1906], Box 3, ALK. For Goddard, see Kroeber 1929; for Waterman, see Kroeber 1937).

Kroeber responded positively to these early efforts. "I have recently spoken with [Nelson] about extending his work for a short time at least," he wrote. Support, however, remained modest, and although Nelson's needs were few, the uncertainty of the situation wore on him. "I ask for very little beyond the means to support a decent home," he wrote Merriam, "...and I want a home badly. I never had one" (Nelson to Merriam [1 July 1907]; Kroeber to Merriam [28 December 1907], JCM).

Nelson earned his BA in 1907 and MA in 1908. He received an Adolph Knopf Scholarship for 1908–09, providing some support for continuing curation work and numerous reconnaissance trips for the museum. These included visits to the Russian River Valley, Angel Island, Walnut Grove, Napa, and the Suisun Bay marshes. In some instances he was accompanied by others, particularly Waterman, but often they were solitary tramps (Nelson Resume @ 1911, NCN CF; *The University of California Chronicle* 1908:34).

BUTTONWILLOW, 1909

Until 1909, Nelson's reconnaissance trips were limited to northern California and the Bay Area, but that winter he was dispatched to the southern part of the state. The origins of the project are obscure, but he left San Francisco on February 19 "[a]rmed with credentials from the President's office and on the way to Buttonwillow to gather 'bones' for the Museum and for the love of science" (Fig. 2). He moved down the transportation chain into the southern San Joaquin Valley, first on the overnight "Owl" to Bakersfield, then via local train carrying farmers and livestock to Buttonwillow, and finally by wagon out into the hinterlands. Nelson's notes make passing reference to his fellow travelers, including a "jolly German" singing songs on the Buttonwillow

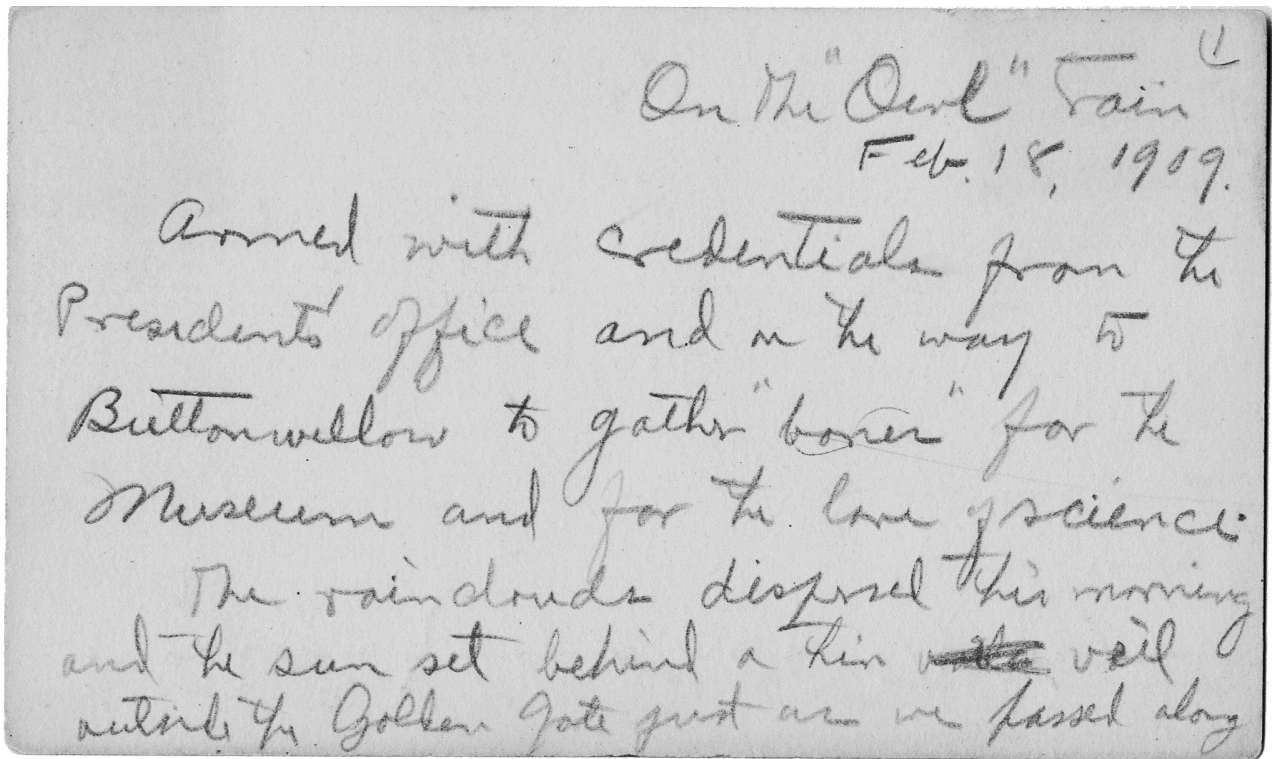


Figure 2. Nelson Buttonwillow journal. Box 1, Folder 9 NCN PE.

train. They also describe a countryside already radically transformed by the industrial farming strategy of Miller & Lux, the dominant landowning corporation of the region, which provided him lodging at ranch headquarters (Folder 9, NCN PE 1; cf. Iglar 2000).

One ironic aspect of Nelson's notes about the Buttonwillow project is that they never describe, precisely, what he was doing there, except that the excavation of burials was involved. "The scene of our errand was most gruesome to anyone but an anthrop [sic]," he noted. But the work was done in less than a day, and he was then en route back to Bakersfield. That evening Nelson wandered the town, ending up at a revival meeting in a Baptist church: "we were put to all the old-fashioned tests but none were convicted of sin" (Folder 9, NCN PE 1).

On his way back north, it became evident that Nelson's work had attracted some local attention:

We had scarcely crept 1 mi. out of B.[akersfield] before the conductor came along & sat down by me asking: are you the gentleman who came out to get those Indian skulls? Yes. Well, what do you think about them? Etc. etc...have you that skull in your suit case (he knew all from the station agent, of course). Yes. Would you let me have a look? Sure. Three or

four others came and looked & stared & went away visibly impressed. I hope to God they don't blabber all over and give me a lot of newspaper notoriety [Folder 9, NCN PE 1].

Once back at the museum the collection—consisting of human remains and a small number of associated artifacts—were stored away (Acc. 361, Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology). The Buttonwillow episode helped to secure his reputation as a productive assistant, as did the work at Emeryville. "Nelson is doing fine work in the Museum," Kroeber wrote in 1909,

and the way he has straightened out Uhle's tangles and has classified our miscellaneous Pacific materials has been very remarkable. How well he likes the work I do not know, but he seems content, and in any case he is doing it in such a way that he gets more out of it than any of the men who have handled our collections before [Kroeber to Goddard (17 November 1909), Box 4, ALK].

Regular reports written during this period indeed show Nelson to have been a central member of the Berkeley team. By all accounts, his career in California archaeology had been successfully launched (Nelson to Kroeber [9 July 1909], Box 4, ALK).

INTERIM: NELSON AT THE MUSEUM

Even while Nelson was enjoying his more secure status, structural changes were rippling through the museum and department. The patronage of Phoebe Hearst, through which the programs had been launched, came largely to an end by December 1908. This was followed, in early 1909, by the retirement of Frederick Ward Putnam and the departure of Pliny Goddard for the American Museum of Natural History in New York (Dexter 1989; Kroeber 1929; Thoresen 1975).

Kroeber, with limited funding but unfettered by senior colleagues, seized the opportunity to rebuild the program around more junior staff. “I think we should follow up this work,” he wrote Putnam, “by trying to make similar excavations in say three mounds each year for a period of five years, if we cannot obtain resources for work at a more rapid rate.” The approach was to have

two men of the same grade, each of whom will teach for one semester and then take charge of the Museum for six months while his team-mate lectures across the bay. A man who is permanently immured in museum work the year round, loses many of the advantages of contact with Berkeley which for his own good and ours he should enjoy....

The men I should like to have are Nelson and Waterman, both of whom have experience in the Museum and both of whom are very anxious to teach [Kroeber to Putnam (2 March 1910), FWP].

The new system was accordingly instituted. Nelson taught “American Archaeology” and “The Origin and Antiquity of Man” while keeping up with his museum responsibilities. These developments apparently persuaded him to turn down other professional opportunities, including an offer from the Bureau of American Ethnology. “I hope Nelson has made the right choice,” wrote Kroeber, “and am inclined to think in many ways that he has done so, even in spite of the difference in salary and the contact with eastern men which he is desirous of” (Kroeber to Putnam [1 June 1910], FWP; W. Henderson to Nelson [13 April 1910], F. W. Hodge to Nelson [10 May 1910], Folder 1, NCN PE 37).

Over time, however, conditions grew increasingly unsatisfactory. Correspondence between Nelson and Goddard provides a window on circumstances at the museum. “Kroeber keeps me swamped in work of all kinds,” he wrote, “from plain ‘rough carpentering’ to high society stunts requiring the swallow tail outfit

etc.” This changing situation may have had much to do with the arrival of Ishi—Theodora Kroeber notes that “the Museum was overrun with mountebanks” at the time, and it can be expected that the reticent Nelson found the newly-hectic environment uncongenial. It may be that ambitions associated with Ishi shook up the relative harmony previously evident, and made him less optimistic about his own future. Although Nelson studied Ishi’s flintknapping techniques, he is otherwise largely invisible in scholarly literature about the episode, which instead feature his associate Waterman (Nelson to Goddard [24 April 1911], Folder 1, NCN PE 1; Kroeber 1961:129; Nelson 1916; cf. Shackley 2003).

Even while duties at the University of California became more onerous, Nelson’s visibility in the broader anthropological community was increasing. In the winter of 1911, he toured the mountain states for the Archaeological Institute of America, giving public lectures on “the Incas.” “It’s a fine bit of experience,” he wrote Kroeber from Denver, “but it’s damned hard work” (Nelson to Kroeber [14 February 1911], ALK; Francis Kelsey to Nelson [4 March 1911], Folder 1, NCN PE 37).

By the early 1910s the small world of American anthropology had become increasingly competitive. The emergence of new institutions, such as the University of California, had opened new niches for scholarship, but limited expertise, professional rivalries, and the vagaries of funding made it difficult to establish and maintain stable research programs (see Thoresen 1975). For instance, under Putnam’s guidance, the Department of Anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History had flourished in the 1890s. Chaos, however, followed in the wake of his 1903 departure for Berkeley, exacerbated by the failure of Franz Boas to establish himself as Putnam’s successor (Cole 1999; cf. Jacknis 2002). In these circumstances, the junior staff member appointed to run the department, Clark Wissler, needed several years to re-organize the unit and develop new initiatives. Although a Columbia graduate, Wissler had not been—strictly speaking—a student of Boas, and had his own ambitions for a museum-based program of anthropological research (Freed and Freed 1983).

Wissler gradually consolidated his position, and by 1908 found himself in a situation similar to that of Kroeber, with plans for the future in hand, but few reliable patrons. Working closely with museum president Henry Fairfield

Osborn and director Hermon Carey Bumpus, however, he was able to attract the attention of philanthropist Archer Milton Huntington. Interested in Spanish colonial history, Huntington agreed to fund fieldwork on indigenous societies in New Mexico and Arizona. What came to be called the “Huntington Southwest Survey” was launched in 1909 (Snead 2001:101–102).

As with Phoebe Hearst’s patronage at Berkeley, Huntington’s support supplied the resources for a burst of activity at the American Museum. But the cadre of academically-trained anthropologists in the first decade of the twentieth century remained small; with expertise at a premium, institutions struggled to attract competent fieldworkers. Pliny Goddard had been Wissler’s first hire with Huntington funding, and he was followed by Harvard graduate Herbert Spinden. As ethnographic work progressed, it became increasingly obvious that the Huntington Southwest Survey would require an archaeologist. Goddard saw an opportunity to recruit Nelson, and worked behind the scenes to promote his California colleague. Other professional and personal networks were also in play; Osborn was a friend of Merriam, and consulted with him regarding Nelson’s fitness for the job (Osborn to Wissler [1 June 1911], AMC; Merriam to Goddard, 13 February 1911). Osborn had his own uses for the talents of any new recruit, which resulted in considerable internal negotiation (cf. Snead 2014).

Communications flew back and forth between the American Museum and Berkeley in the spring of 1911. When Nelson stopped in New York on his way to Europe in the summer of 1911, he was assiduously courted. Waterman sensed that something was up. “Don’t take a job at the American Museum,” he wrote, “we can’t do without you here.... It was a mistake in the first place to let you start out on your rambles without a chaperone.” When staff archaeologist Harlan Smith resigned to take a position in Canada, however, Wissler was free to make an offer, which Nelson accepted with alacrity (Merriam to Nelson, 13 February 1911; Goddard to Nelson, 5 May 1911; Goddard to Nelson, 12 September 1911; Waterman to Nelson, 23 June 1911; Nelson to Ethelyn Field, 10 August 1911; Wissler to Nelson, 25 October 1911; Folders 1, 13, NCN PE 32).

Kroeber played a double game regarding Nelson’s new opportunity. To Goddard he expressed congratulations, and regretted that the American

Museum had not “been a trifle more liberal with his salary.” Waterman passed along the rumor that Kroeber had hoped to use the offer to gain leverage with the University to increase Nelson’s salary; a ploy, however, which was not successful. Kroeber then began to delay, implying that it would be difficult to find a replacement. A telegram from Nelson to Goddard was direct: “Kroeber wishes early notice annoyed consider it discourteous... could wait a year consider that he will blame you not me for leaving” (Nelson to Goddard [16 October 1911, 29 November 1911], Box 44, Folder 8; Fig. 3). As a result, hiring was postponed until the summer of 1912. Nelson’s bitterness about the delay welled up in another letter to Goddard, in which he described “throwing away practically a whole year of my life” (Waterman to Nelson [23 June 1911], Folder 1, NCN PE 1; Wissler to Nelson [12 December 1911], NCN CF).

Nelson’s personal circumstances were also changing. He was engaged to Kroeber’s secretary, Ethelyn Hobbes Field, and Goddard offered a positive assessment. “You both seem to me to have the universe greatly in your debt and I trust you will have brighter and happier days.” They were married in December 1911, and Ethelyn Nelson participated in her husband’s projects over the next several years (Goddard to Nelson [29 September 1911, 22 September 1911], NCN PE). It was clear for most of those involved that a better future for the couple awaited in New York.

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, 1912

Thus the circumstances of Nelson’s second archaeological trip to Southern California, in 1912, differed significantly from those of the first. He went as an emissary of the university, but also as a professional who sought to expand his own knowledge about the archaeological record. His future in California research may have been cloudy, but Nelson seems to have anticipated that the information gathered would eventually be put to use.

The trip also served as a honeymoon. The precise dates are uncertain, but the Nelsons devoted much of January 1912 to the excursion, spending two weeks on Santa Catalina Island and some additional time on the adjacent coast. With little available detail, it is difficult to reconstruct their activities. Some insight is obtained from correspondence—a letter to Kroeber described

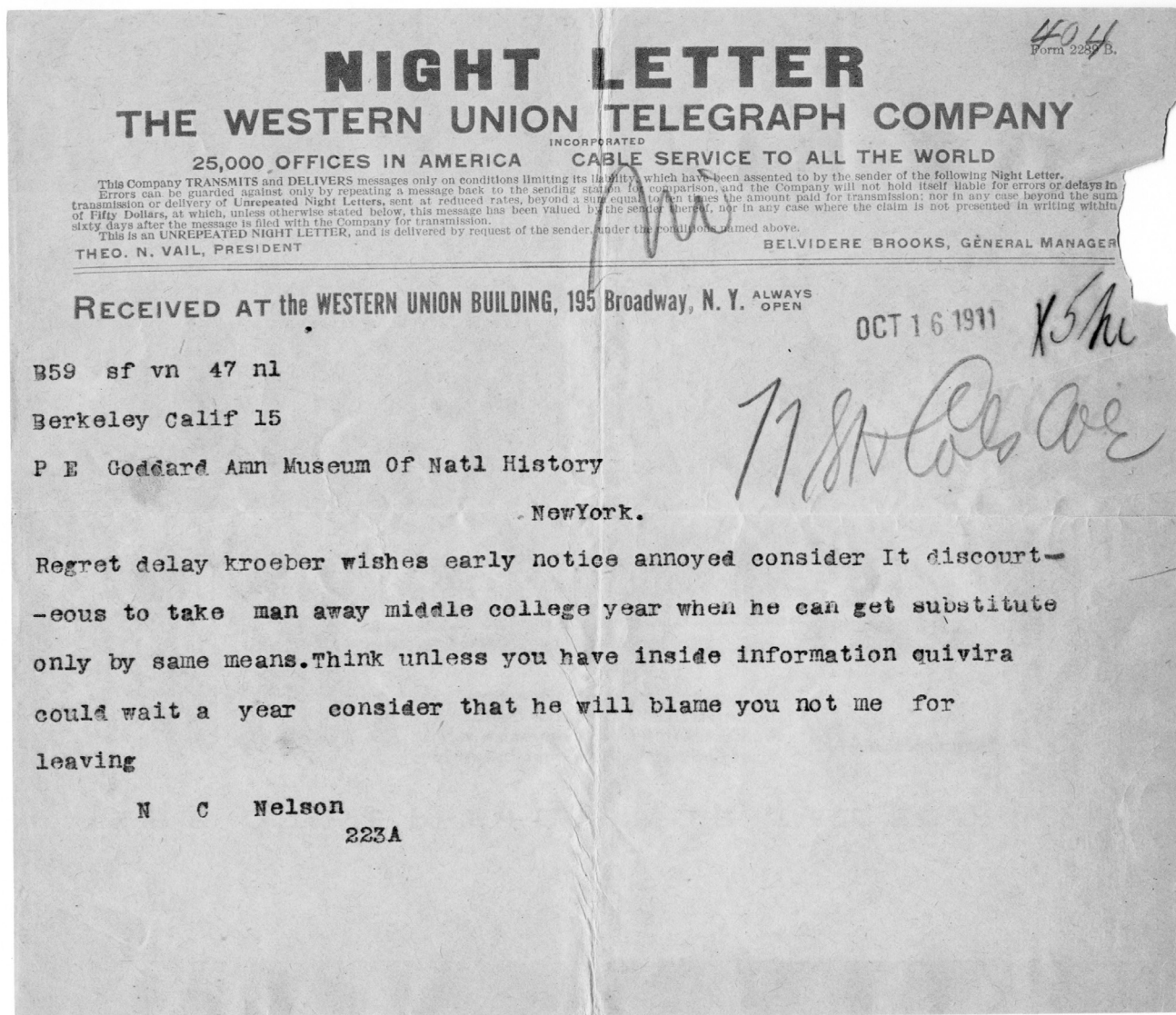


Figure 3. Nelson to Goddard, 16 October 1911. NCN CF.

“sitting out by a campfire one night, when we got too far from Avalon to get back again the same day. We hadn’t planned on staying out, however, had no provisions along & got nothing to eat until next day at 3 PM.” A brief note to Merriam was more formal, observing the deteriorating island ecology and suggesting that it was due to the grazing of goats. Ultimately, 29 sites were recorded (Fig. 4). Afterwards, Nelson shifted to the mainland, walking long stretches of the coast between Topanga Canyon and Newport, then moving down to La Jolla and San Diego Bay, and documenting an additional 59 sites (Nelson to Kroeber [14 January 1912], ALK. Nelson to Merriam [31 December 1911], JCM).

The information produced by this reconnaissance was much more telegraphic than Nelson’s previous efforts, a result both of haste and the fact that—as indicated by a penciled notation on the original copy—it was not typed up until 1923. Brief information about both the coastal and island sites is included. But only a few associated maps and photographs are available, and the associated file contains only minimal additional information regarding the small set of artifacts returned to Berkeley (Acc.36, Phoebe Hearst Museum of Anthropology). The concern with context and association previously evident, however, can be glimpsed even in the brief paragraphs that Nelson prepared.

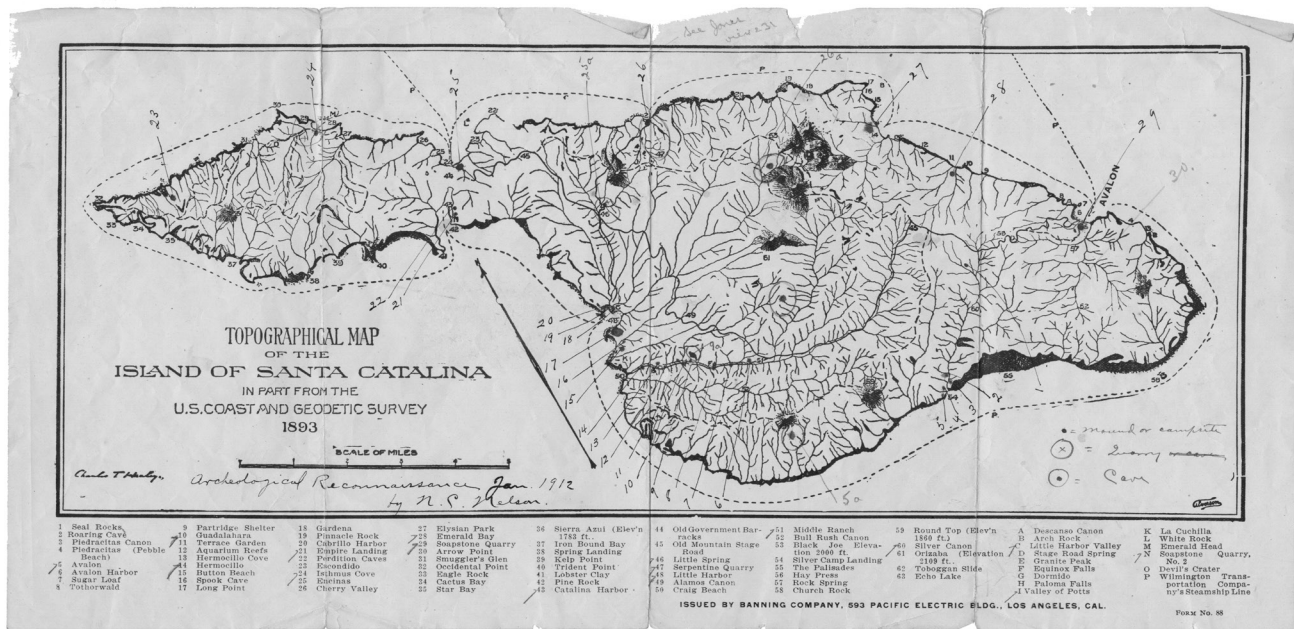


Figure 4. 1893 map of Santa Catalina Island, annotated by Nelson to indicate the location of archaeological sites seen in January 1912. Box 1, Folder 12, NCN PE.

Indeed, by 1912 Santa Catalina Island was well-known to archaeologists, and the local public also took interest in the subject. Despite the large swath of country covered, Nelson took time to converse with local collectors, where possible making connections between places on the landscape and artifacts previously removed to museums. Everywhere Nelson noted the complex juxtaposition between the modern and the ancient in the southern California landscape. For example, the site he designated #29 had to be located “entirely from hearsay reports, but its presence seems well authenticated having been excavated within the past two years by the boys of some Southern California Reform school.” He urged caution in interpreting shell materials associated with coastal site #11 on the Palos Verdes Peninsula, “inasmuch as the Japanese are running an abalone fishing establishment on the beach immediately below,” and therefore might have compromised the locality. Site #49, along San Diego Bay, was “occupied at present by U.S. Fort Rosecrans, and some of the small guns are placed on the refuse accumulation” (Folder 12–13, NCN PE 1).

LEGACIES

The Nelsons wrapped up their affairs in California that spring, and on May 23, 1912, were staying at Peat’s Hotel

at Casa Grande Station in Arizona, visiting the famous site en route to fieldwork in New Mexico. “Took a few snap shots & picked some potsherds,” he noted in his new journal, marking the major personal and professional transition (Nelson 1912 Journal, NCN PE).

The southern California reconnaissance marks the end of Nelson’s formal involvement in regional archaeology, although it is evident from ongoing correspondence that he did not expect to depart the scene completely. A significant amount of the information he had collected also remained in note form, and he felt the responsibility of completing associated reports. Kroeber pushed for their completion, particularly as none of his remaining protégés took a particular interest in archaeology. To Merriam, he expressed confidence “that he can complete it in a comparatively short time;” he was more direct with Nelson, writing that “we are compelled to continue in the same field and yet there is no one who has your knowledge, or even the results of your knowledge, available.” He kept up the pressure over the years: “I can understand why your old California shellmound work is sliding farther and farther into the background...” he wrote in 1914, and then, in 1923, if there is no hope of producing anything further on California shell mounds—and I have almost given up hope—will you not return the manuscript and notes that

you have?” (Kroeber to Merriam [22 May 1912], JCM. Kroeber to Nelson, [8 October 1912, 22 January 1914, 13 February 1913], NCN PE).

Despite the lack of resolution on the shell mound research, over the years Kroeber and Nelson kept in relatively close contact. Kroeber’s connections and wide correspondence meant that he was in a position to understand the opportunities presented by the Huntington Southwest Survey. In the summers of 1915 and 1916 he himself went to work for Wissler, conducting kinship studies at Zuni and freelancing a seriation study that directly engaged Nelson’s own experiments with chronological methods. Over time, Kroeber came to appreciate Nelson’s insights: “...you live up to your reputation,” he wrote in 1920, “of having more going on inside of you than you let on” (Kroeber to Nelson [1 August 1920], NCN PE; Kroeber 1916, 1917; cf. Snead 2001:116–117).

Nelson’s work for the American Museum spanned more than thirty years. At first the Huntington Southwest Survey commanded his attention, and he spent several field seasons in New Mexico between 1912 and 1917. Under Osborn’s direction, he also traveled to Europe, collecting information for museum exhibits on human evolution, at the same time garnering experience that would assist him in developing the excavation strategies for which he is primarily known today. When the Huntington funding ran out he was delegated to other projects, resulting in the eclectic pattern of fieldwork that lasted until his retirement.

But while Nelson was necessarily absent from his New York role for long periods, his museum responsibilities remained heavy. Often the only archaeologist on staff, he was expected to do everything from cataloging collections to installing exhibits. Goddard made an effort to cast this in a light-hearted vein:

You should hear us frequently saying, ‘We’ll leave this until Nelson gets back.’ This being in one case a great big cluttered up storeroom full of archaeological stuff from the Southwest and in another case an important exhibition hall that looks as if there had been an earthquake [Goddard to Nelson (10 October 1912), NCN CF].

Such a heavy, disorganized work load, however, would ultimately limit Nelson’s ability to implement a coherent research program and to follow up on promising



Figure 5. Nels Nelson at a shell mound on Santa Catalina Island. Box 1, Folder 12, NCN PE.

initiatives. He also felt that implied opportunities to attend graduate school at Columbia and to study with Boas were never provided, creating considerable intellectual insecurity.

Nelson confided in Kroeber about his disillusionment with his position in New York, which he felt had not only doomed the completion of the California reports but truncated his ambitions in the field. In 1921 he described himself as

buried under a multiplicity of data, trying constantly to issue forth now at one point and now at another with an armful of stuff organized into some kind of intelligible structure, but kept half paralyzed by a network of red tape spun out of ignorance, tradition, and conflicting personal interests [Nelson to Kroeber (28 February 1921), NCN PE; Snead 2001].

Under these oppressive conditions, it is evident that Nelson frequently looked back on his California work with fondness.

Whether or not Santa Catalina and Buttonwillow figured in these recollections, these two trips illustrate the intricacy of his experience in the region, and his engagement with the people and the landscape. This experience—both ecological and aesthetic—was succinctly captured by Goddard, who shortly after his arrival in New York reminisced with Nelson about

...your graduate work of walking around San Francisco Bay with a blanket on your back and tramping down the beach of the Pacific Coast with one side of your face exposed to the sweep of the wind and the burning of the sun [Goddard to Nelson (11 November 1912), NCN PE (Fig. 5)].

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- JCM J. C. Merriam Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
- NCN PE 1, 32, 37 The Papers of Nels Nelson, .N457 (by box number). Archives, Department of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History.
- NCN CF Nels Christian Nelson Correspondence, File 404, Archives, Department of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History.
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