

J. Alden Mason: Our Link with Ancient Panama Gold

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J. Alden Mason was one of the most famous archaeologists in mid-20th century America. He was also an anthropologist and linguist, known for his scholarship on the Mayan, Aztec and Incan civilizations, as well as the languages of the South American Indians. He joined the staff at the Penn Museum in 1926, spending the next thirty years there. Mason's most famous contribution to archaeology was his team's discovery in 1940 of a Pre-Columbian burial site on the Pacific coast of Panama. Remains of at least twenty-three individuals were found at Sitio Conte, along with a large trove of gold ornaments and pottery. The Coclé people buried there were members of a mysterious culture within Meso-American history, having flourished only from about 400 to 900 AD.

A native of Indiana, Mason grew up in the Germantown area of Philadelphia, attending the prestigious Central High School, and then on to the University of Pennsylvania for undergraduate study. He completed his Ph.D. at the University of California, Berkeley in 1911. After his arrival at Penn, he moved into Berwyn, settling at 725 Conestoga Road. One of his avocations was gardening, and this prompted him to found the Berwyn Men's Gardening Club in 1933. During World War II he organized numerous local victory gardens. He was also a founding member of the Main Line Unitarian Church. His other significant passion was local history, and this led him to the Tredyffrin Easttown History Club in 1937, the second year of its existence. He was part of the editorial staff from the start, and was editor of the *Quarterly* magazine from 1954 until his death in 1967. In addition he served a term as club President in 1944. Mason enjoyed writing, as evidenced by his six editorials, and over a dozen articles on subjects such as Chester County folklore and archeological sites, Pre-Columbian cultures, biographical sketches of local citizens, the Garden Club, and the Main Line Unitarian Church. He also penned a very creative "acrostic" poem using the first letters of the club's name. In 1941 Alden published the editorial below, in which he argues for the importance of recording local history (*History Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 2, p. 2 (April 1941)). It is well worth reading.

A recent February 2015 article in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* brought Mason's name into the public eye once again. (http://articles.philly.com/2015-02-19/news/59273576_1_penn-museum-artifacts-lab-archaeology). The article featured young Jessie Schwartz, whose father Dave loved visiting the Penn Museum in his youth. He was mentored for years by a then-retired J. Alden Mason. Jessie, age 12, has followed in her father's footsteps at the Museum by becoming a young intern in the conservation labs. She and her parents were invited to the Museum in February for the opening week of its 2015 major exhibition "Beneath the Surface: Life, Death, and Gold in Ancient Panama," based on Mason's 1940 excavations at Sitio Conte.

If you search for "J. Alden Mason" in the *History Quarterly Digital Archives* you will find at least 45 citations, attesting to how often he was published, or memorialized, in our journal. A lengthy article on his life and work appears in the *History Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 3, pp. 105-16 (July 1988). To read his "acrostic" poem, take a look at *History Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 4, inside back cover (July 1938.)



J. Alden Mason at his dig site in Panama. 1940.
(Note baby chimp clinging to his shirt.)

Courtesy of Penn Museum Archives, image #15999

LOCAL HISTORY AND HISTORIANS

Recently a man from a small town in the far west, who had published in his local newspaper some articles on ancient sites in his region, visited the nearest metropolitan museum. After introducing himself, he diffidently inquired who was considered the authority on the archeology of his district. "You are," said the experts. At first, he thought that the museum men were kidding him, but after spending most of the day answering their questions instead of asking ones of his own, he returned home with a new pride in his knowledge and an increased appreciation of its importance.

Emerson said that if a man made a better type of mouse-trap, the world would beat a path to his door. Equal credit will always be accorded to the man who makes himself the authority in any subject, be it ever so local or restricted. Every amateur archeologist is continually being told by the professionals that he can become the authority on the archeology of his township or county, and that this should be his aim, rather than the accumulation of a collection of interesting specimens from all over the world. The advice applies equally well to the amateur historian. This is an age of specialization, of attention to details. Pepy's diary, daily jottings of trivial details of his life, has given us the best insight into the spirit of the latter half of the seventeenth century. The diaries of otherwise unimportant minor officers in the Revolution have supplied the only information on day-to-day activities in some campaigns.

What would we not give for a few similar notes of daily life from other ages and important periods in the world's history! Brief records of births, marriages, and deaths on old tombstones, or in old Bibles or official records, have afforded the keys to long genealogical records.

Similar data and records, it seems to me, form the reason for the existence of historical societies such as ours; such should be the principal interests of our members, and such the main content of our *Quarterly*. By noting, recording and publishing such details of local history, we preserve for later historians information that may some day prove of the greatest importance in a topic of historical research. Let no one think that because he does not have the time or the facilities to delve into published historical tones that historical research is beyond his ability. The professional historian can do this far better.

Our field should be primarily to search out and publish material otherwise unrecorded, such as local traditions and tombstone records, and the digesting of data found in such non-historical sources as local newspapers and church and court records.

J. A. M.

For further reading, the article entitled "Chicken Soup and Canvas Bags" (*Expedition* Volume 43 Issue 3 November 2001 published by the Penn Museum) contains more about the expedition.

<http://www.penn.museum/sites/expedition/chicken-soup-and-canvas-bags/>

On 20 March 2015, former *Quarterly* editor and History Club president Herb Fry sent a clipping from the *Wall Street Journal* (dated 19 March 2015) of an article entitled "An Expedition Brought Back to Life," written by Julia M. Klein, and containing a review of a new special exhibition at the Penn Museum, itself titled "Beneath the Surface: Life, Death, and Gold in Ancient Panama." (see <http://www.wsj.com/articles/review-of-beneath-the-surface-life-death-and-gold-in-ancient-panama-at-the-university-of-pennsylvania-museum-of-archaeology-and-anthropology-1426713949>). The special exhibition will be on display at the Penn Museum through 1 November 2015.

Herb also noted:

Alden Mason lived on Conestoga Road near Paul Teamer. After Teamer died, Mason was President of the History Club in 1944.

Mason contributed two articles about his 1940 archaeological adventure to Panama (Vol. 3 No. 3 p. 53 and Vol. 3 No. 4 p. 87). Some of this information is in the newspaper review.

Also see Vol. 26. No. 3 p. 105 for a biographical sketch of Mason by Elizabeth Goshorn.