GEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF ALABAMA

WALTER B. JONES, STATE GEOLOGIST

MUSEUM PAPER 29

MOUNDVILLE: AN HISTORIC DOCUMENT

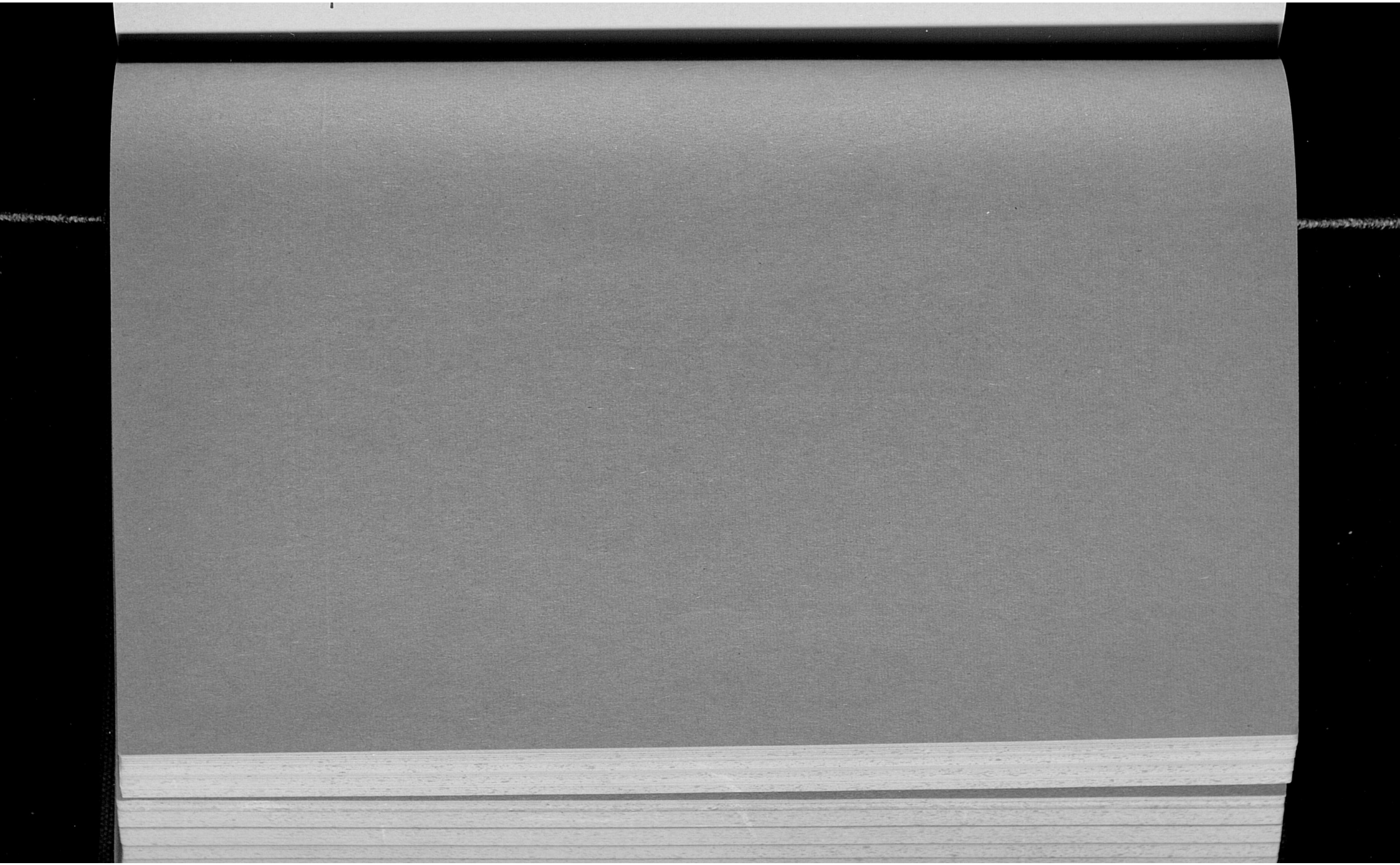
By

CARL E. GUTHE, PH. D.

DIRECTOR, NEW YORK STATE MUSEUM

UNIVERSITY, ALABAMA

FEBRUARY, 1950



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LETTER OF TRANSMITTAL

University, Alabama
February 1, 1950

Honorable James E. Folsom
Governor of Alabama
Montgomery, Alabama

Sir:

I have the honor to transmit herewith the manuscript of a speech delivered at the dedication of the Erskine Ramsay Archaeological Research Center, Mound State Monument, on September 24, 1947, by Dr. Carl E. Guthe, Director of the New York State Museum. The title of the address is "Moundville: An Historic Document". It is requested that it be printed as Museum Paper 29, of the Geological Survey of Alabama.

Very respectfully,

WALTER B. JONES,
State Geologist

PERSONNEL

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* On Leave.

MOUNDVILLE: AN HISTORIC DOCUMENT

By

Carl E. Guthe, Ph.D.

Director, New York State Museum

Thank you, Dr. Jones. Mr. McMillan, Mr. Ramsay, ladies and gentlemen:

It is an honor and a privilege to be able to be with you on this occasion. I take considerable personal satisfaction in being here for two reasons. In the first place, today marks the celebration of an important landmark in the development of a public-spirited project in which I played a humble part nearly twenty years ago. In the second place, it is something of a thrill to be able to talk to you within the limits of what once was the center of a thriving and artistic community thought of as home by several thousand people. I want to share with you now some of the thoughts which have come to me during the past hours as I have become reacquainted with Moundville itself and with the work which Dr. Jones and his colleagues have carried forward here for nearly a quarter of a century. As I stand here facing these mounds my thoughts go naturally to the people who are responsible for their creation. Let me give you briefly an outline of the history of the Mound State Monument.

Many thousands of years ago, long before the great cities of ancient Mesopotamia or ancient Egypt were even contemplated, the ancestors of the builders of Moundville came over to the New World from Asia by way of Alaska. They were people with a simple way of life who gained their food by hunting and fishing. As they spread over the two continents of the New World they adapted their activities and habits to fit the natural surroundings in which they found themselves without, however, forgetting the traditions and the customs which they had been taught by their elders. As the centuries passed the descendants of these first pioneers in the New World, mixed with descendants of relatives who came later from Asia by the same route, developed many kinds of civilizations throughout North and South America. Among the greatest of these was that which flowered in Mexico and Central America, and which left its influence upon

both North and South American communities long before the coming of the Europeans.

Some fifteen hundred years ago in the Mississippi Valley the ancestors of the mound-builders lived in the forests and along the streams as hunters, berry pickers and shell fish eaters. Our first records of them are found in the great deposits of shells along the streams, which are the refuse resulting from the feasts of shell fish which these ancient people once enjoyed. About a thousand years ago these people learned from their neighbors that containers could be made from the clay that was found near their villages. And so the concept of pottery making came into existence. Shortly thereafter they received a new idea which came originally from Mexico and Central America, although they themselves were not aware of that fact. They learned that by planting seeds of various kinds near their homes they could obtain from the resulting plants a harvest of the foods which they needed. In this way agriculture was introduced to the ancestors of the builders of Moundville. It marked a great step forward not alone for these ancient peoples but also for us today. The agriculture of the New World centered around the growing of corn, beans and squashes. When the Europeans came to the New World in the beginning of the 16th Century they found the Indians living upon these agricultural staples. They carried them back to Europe. Today, corn and beans form an important segment of our agricultural economy. We have the Indians to thank for this. We also owe the Indians many other things in addition to corn, beans and squash. Rubber was first used by the Indians of Central America. The Spaniards were astounded by the properties of rubber which came from the sap of a tree. Today, rubber plays an important part in our lives. Another gift to us from the Indians is tobacco. Here in the southern states we have reason to thank the Indians for still another important agricultural product. Short staple cotton had been known in the Old World since the days of early Egypt. But it was the Indians in the New World who developed long staple cotton, which today has superseded the ancient European form and has become an economic asset in this region. Obviously, the adoption of agriculture by the ancestors of the builders of Moundville was a great step forward for these ancient people, but it was also an

episode in the history of human experience which has great significance for us today.

If we could transport ourselves backward in time by use of some mythical time machine to this exact spot some 500 years ago, in the middle of the 15th Century, we would find ourselves in the midst of a thriving, active Indian community, the influence of which was being felt for several hundred miles in all directions. At that time, the Aztecs in the Mexican Valley were consolidating their military empire under Montezuma the First. The ancestors of the present Pueblo Indians of New Mexico and Arizona were building villages on the mesas of that region after having abandoned the cliff dwellings a few generations earlier. Up in the north the Iroquois League was being established in the Finger Lakes area by Hiawatha and his associates. Overseas, in a small and unimportant community, a man called Christopher Columbus was born.

At that time, the mounds which we see about us today were cleared of trees and had houses upon them. The walls of these houses were made of upright saplings with branches woven between them and then plastered with mud. Above the walls were roofs of thatch. These mounds were of different heights, and probably reflected in their size the importance of the house which stood upon them. The great mound which we call Mound B was the highest and the most important. Upon it stood a structure which was either the temple or the city hall of this community. The other mounds nearby were the homes of the chieftains and other leaders of this great city. The open spaces between the mounds were cleared level areas used for games and ceremonies. Scattered for several miles around this center were the houses of the common people, built like those upon the mounds but without the elaborate foundations. Close to each of these houses were the family gardens. It is not difficult to imagine the area which now forms Mound State Monument as the Center, similar to the business section of one of our modern cities, of a population of several thousand people. As successful farmers they were able to devote much of their time to the more artistic and cultural sides of life. They had developed pottery into an art, and fashioned vessels of many shapes, some of them in the form of effigies. They enjoyed ornamenting their objects and themselves, using stone, shell, bone and wood, as well as

copper, which they received from their neighbors to the north. Their ornaments, utensils and weapons, which we have found in various states of disrepair, all demonstrate that these people practiced a sophisticated art. They were not just savages, but were rather a self-respecting, peaceful, agricultural people who carried forward from generation to generation the tested traditions and the artistic achievements of their fathers. Archaeologists have found here at Moundville articles made of copper mined in the Lake Superior region. They have found incised shells which came from the Gulf coast and the Atlantic seaboard. They have found implements made of stones which originated in the west and the northeast. All this evidence supports our conclusions that these people were traders in contact with similar important communities in other parts of the eastern United States. The designs they used and the shapes of their articles are similar to those which have been found in other large archaeological sites in Georgia, Louisiana, Arkansas and as far north as the Ohio Valley. Obviously, 500 years ago the Indians of the eastern United States maintained a network of communications by which they kept in touch with one another and, through experience and exchange of ideas, gradually were developing a great civilization.

At that time, there were a number of village states in this region. It was the Indians who chose the most satisfactory places for establishing human communiites. Later, our own ancestors, the European traders and pioneers, came into this country and settled near the Indian villages. The area was not a wilderness as it is sometimes described but rather a network of Indian highways. Since they had no beasts of burdens nor wagons, these highways were footpaths. Our forefathers used these same footpaths and developed them ultimately into the roads and highways of today. So again, we find we owe a debt to these ancient builders of Moundville and their relatives for bequeathing to us the sites of our cities and the locations for our great highways.

For some reason which we do not yet fully understand, Moundville as I have described it ceased to exist about the beginning of the 16th Century. It undoubtedly had flourished for at least two centuries, longer than our own United States has been in existence. We know that it was no longer occupied

when De Soto came in the middle of the 16th Century for no trace has yet been found here of European materials which were being traded to the Indians by that time. All that was left at Moundville were the mounds as you see them, the refuse heaps, and the several generations of burials of their dead with whom had been placed reverently their most treasured and artistic objects for use in the after world.

I have told you very briefly a story which I hope reveals why these mounds are much more than mere lifeless heaps of earth upon a plateau. I have told you a story which I am convinced is true history and is not based upon imagination. In doing so, I have omitted a great many detailed facts which when combined have made this story possible. You may well ask how this history can be learned since there were no written documents to record it for us.

The answer lies, of course, in the way in which students of Indian history study and interpret the clues to their living habits which these ancient people unintentionally left behind them in the ground. Any object, whether it is whole or broken, may have intrinsic artistic value. But the story of how and when it was used lies not in itself but in the conditions which surround it when it is discovered by the student. For example, an incised pottery bowl may be a thing of beauty in itself, but its historical meaning is revealed through a knowledge of the village site in which it was found, the depth it occurred below the ground surface, its association with other vessels, implements or ornaments and its relation to burials or house foundations. Every clue, no matter how insignificant it may seem to be, must be preserved and recorded, whether it be a broken piece of pottery, a burial, the ashes in a long dead fireplace, an abandoned house floor, or only the hole left in the ground by a rotted stump of a house post.

The archaeologist's job is that of solving a very complex detective mystery. The evidence deduced by one student from a given set of clues may differ somewhat from that obtained by another from the same clues. The record secured from one village site when compared with like materials from other village sites will reveal similarities and differences in the ways in which these ancient people lived. As thousands of clues are obtained,

and the evidence associated with them is studied, analyzed and agreed upon over a period of many years, the story of the past is gradually revealed in terms of physical objects, definite associations of evidence, and logical interpretations of the records. Because of such careful and patient study of thousands of details, it has been possible to describe for you the way in which the former inhabitants of Moundville lived.

The story of Moundville as an archaeological site began a long time ago, shortly after the Prince Family bought a part of the property on which we stand. The earliest known clues were some pipes found about 1860. A link with this past study of Moundville occurs upon the programs which you hold in your hands. The circular design at the top of the first page containing an open hand and serpent symbols is a line drawing of a stone disk found here at Moundville many years ago and given to the former State Geologist, Eugene A. Smith. This stone disk which was described and illustrated in a publication of the Smithsonian Institution in 1883, was probably found some 75 years ago. It is an important clue to the philosophy of the ancient inhabitants of Moundville. Today this disk is on display in the Museum most of you visited here at Mound State Monument a short hour ago. It is one of the many hundreds of archaeological bits of evidence which have been accumulating for almost a century and which are now safely preserved here for further study as a result of the efforts of the Alabama Museum of Natural History.

In 1905 and 1906, just over forty years ago, an archaeological explorer, Clarence B. Moore, spent more than a month with a trained crew recovering evidence from the ground here at Moundville. The results of his studies were published with beautiful illustrations in the **Journal of the Academy of Natural Sciences** in Philadelphia.

Nineteen years ago it was my good fortune to visit Moundville when Walter Jones and David DeJarnette were just beginning to make their contribution to the study of this important historical monument. I recall that we talked then of what might be done with this interesting site, of the museum which might someday be built here and of the practical problems connected with the ways and means of preserving the priceless

story which still lay undiscovered in the ground. In the years that followed the staff of the Alabama Museum of Natural History never lost that vision. Patience and perseverance overcame such obstacles as were encountered. Painstaking care led to the accumulation of a mass of irreplaceable scientific records. Today, we see before us the tangible evidence of the progress made toward the goals set so many years ago.

Through the efforts of the Alabama Museum of Natural History the land on which this site is located is now state property. Mound State Monument belongs to the people of Alabama, a tribute to past generations, an historic shrine for future generations. Across the park from where we now stand is the unique museum in which the exhibits tell so intimately the story of past human accomplishments on this spot. The displays are not just a series of objects, but have been arranged tastefully to acquaint the visitor with the activities, the social life and the intellectual and artistic achievements of these ancient people. The two wings of this building, enclosing groups of graves which have been uncovered but not moved, help to make the past live for the visitor. The development of the Monument as a park, the building of hard surfaced roads, the construction of service facilities, and the plans for picnic grounds are all being carried out without destroying the unique quality of this spot as an historic shrine. Mound State Monument bids fair to become a recreational and educational center for our own and future generations and thereby live again in a new civilization.

Today, we have gathered here to celebrate another important landmark on the long road leading toward the full realization of the historical and educational significance of Mound State Monument. The Erskine Ramsay Archaeological Research Center is dedicated to the preservation and use of archaeological materials and the records associated with them. It is a repository for priceless historical archaeological materials. Just as the books in a library are filed in organized fashion on shelves for easy access, so hundreds and hundreds of archaeological objects will be filed in this building in appropriate containers on shelves so that they may be easily studied. Other rooms in the building serve as offices and laboratories to facilitate the work upon these materials. This building is a tangible expression

of the responsibility we all have to hold in trust for all the people the irreplaceable historical materials gathered not alone from Moundville but from all archaeological sites in this region, in order that the earlier history of this area may be revealed. The Erskine Ramsay Archaeological Research Center is being dedicated today to the increase of human knowledge through study and research. It is destined to become a mecca for scholars from all parts of this country who are devoting their lives to unravelling the many clues to the Indian history of southeastern United States. The collections housed in this building are a fountainhead from which will flow an ever-increasing stream of information leading to a greater understanding of the ways in which men have learned to live together. We all join with Mr. Ramsay in the great satisfaction he must feel in knowing that his name will always be associated with this important research center here at Moundville.

Moundville is an historical document bequeathed to us as Americans by the original Americans who were in the New World before us and who loved this land as we do. They gave us corn and beans, rubber and cotton, as well as many other agricultural products. They helped us pick out the sites for our cities and made the first traverses for our roads. The part they played in our history is memorialized in many of the names of our hills, our valleys, and our streams.

Today, the Freedom Train is travelling across our country giving our people an opportunity to see the outstanding written documents which have played so important a part in creating our America. In a very real sense, Moundville and other similar archaeological sites are historical documents of a like nature which record another part of the heritage which has made possible the America we know. We are under obligation to those who preceded us in this fertile country to repay in part our debt to them by preserving and interpreting to the best of our ability the archaeological documents they have left behind them. The highminded project of which we celebrate an episode today is a practical expression of gratitude to our predecessors of another race who once called Mound State Monument their home.

Finally, there is a deeper significance to this ceremony today to which I want to refer in closing. We all realize that

our civilization today is faced with tremendously complex problems because scientific technology and mechanized industry have far outdistanced our social organization. Today, the student of human relationships, the social scientist, carries a very great responsibility. It is he who must guide us in our efforts to adjust our social organization so that it may meet the stress and strain placed upon it by recent technological and industrial advances. Wisdom is achieved through the sound interpretation of experience. Human experience over many generations is recorded in our history.

In the minds of some, American Indian archaeology seems far removed from the problems of the present day. The student of this subject, forced through lack of written documents to work with archaeological materials and records, seeks to contribute to our knowledge of human experience through an understanding of the growth of human societies which existed in the New World prior to the coming of the Europeans. The results of his studies are a part of the great fund of knowledge which is now being used and will continue to be used by social scientists in their struggle to understand and interpret our current social problems. Therefore, the story of Moundville is far from being an isolated Indian episode. It is a small but significant element of the complex pattern of human experience out of which the society in which we live today has grown.

The solution of the social problems which face us today is the responsibility of everyone of us. All of us can contribute, each according to his ability, to the solution of these problems. Social scientists working alone cannot attain their objectives. They must be helped. They need the constructive criticism, the encouragement and the support of all those with whom they come in contact. Some of us can aid in increasing educational and research opportunities; others can assist in administrative and political ways. Some can help by influencing public opinion; and still others can contribute funds so necessary for progress in the work. Of one thing I am sure. Everyone who aids in furthering any small part of the work required in the solution of the critical social problems confronting us today may do so with the assurance that he is rendering a public service which will pay worthwhile social dividends both now and in future generations.

Let me again express my pleasure at being able to participate with all of you in this significant ceremony. I tender my congratulations to Mr. Ramsay, to the Alabama Museum of Natural History, and to the people of Alabama upon the dedication of the Erskine Ramsay Archaeological Research Center.