

THE STORY
OF
JOSEPH BUFORD MAHAN, JR.
(1921-1995)

by

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[Editors note: Dr. Joseph B Mahan, a distinguished historian from Columbus, GA, is winner of the 1995 MES Barry Fell Award. Joe is best known to MES members for his establishment and leadership of ISAC. When he died on September 2, 1995, we all knew that we had lost a true and noble friend. The 1995 winners, Dr. Mahan and Isaac Vail, shared enthusiasm for research of antiquity and a willingness to pursue a better understanding of the truth. In other words, they published and promoted what they believed to be correct and were little effected by those who are biased against open discussion of the myriad possibilities for the interpretation of prehistory. Please celebrate with the MES membership the life and works of this distinguished contributor to our understanding of the past.]

Dr. Mahan died quite suddenly at age 74 on Saturday, September 2, 1995. Observers knew that Joe was struggling a bit physically to get around. Still, we weren't ready for it. In Joe's eyes, his work wasn't done yet, and we all expected that the old bulldog was going to wrestle with fate until he was at least 85 years old. Well, he up and left unexpectedly, and it hurts.

Whether you were friend or foe, you knew you could count on the challenge of Joseph Mahan. And further, and I don't mean to impugn the capabilities of his ISAC associates, many of us counted on Joe to supply leadership and hard work toward progress with some challenging aspects of diffusionist prehistory and related topics. The MES hopes to take up some of the slack. We can only hope that others will follow suit, but frankly, at this moment, the prospects don't look nearly as good as they did in 1990 or in 1985.

Now my relationship with Joe was professional, and thus I can't tell you very many folksy stories about little visits out behind the barn, just Joe and me. Joe was a consummate Georgia politician with all the affable people skills that is implied. On our first encounter, he barked at me a little to test my mettle as an upstart newcomer. Then he learned that my family has lived in Georgia since 1956, that I went to

graduate school at the University of North Carolina (like Joe), that I served to the rank of Army Captain during the Vietnam War, and that I had been an Assistant Professor at the University of Georgia for six years (like Joe). And so Joe knew that I was well experienced with the rules of Georgia social etiquette. Thereafter, it was Dr. Mahan and Dr. White; the dance was quite pleasant and rewarding while it lasted.

One final remark on my comment above that, the unexpected demise of Dr. Mahan hurts. Joe was a great leader, a real doer, and a pretty fair scholar. I don't relish his loss on any plane I'm aware of. When ISAC's Kristi Morrison sent me a copy of the Columbus, GA Ledger-Enquirer's story on Joe's death, I nearly swallowed my gum. The headline read, "Local historian dies at 74." Now I know this expression was well intended. Joe Mahan was loved and admired in Columbus, GA. But for me the headline said something like, "Local bumpkin dies at 74." So in my heart of hearts, let me suggest that a modest but reasonably accurate headline would have read, "Notable Georgia historian dies at 74."

Joseph Buford Mahan, Jr. was born in Rydal, GA on June 11, 1921. Rydal is located in northeast Bartow County on US 411 about 20 miles north of Cartersville. The sacred Etowah Mounds lie about 10 miles west of the Cartersville exit off I-75 in northwest GA. In historical terms, this is Cherokee country. And if you are not familiar with one of the worst blights on the record of our great nation, you need to return to middle school to learn about the civilized Cherokees and the monstrous Trail of Tears.² I don't think it was any accident that Joe Mahan developed a deep-seated admiration for Native American culture and made comprehension of a poorly understood prehistory a major priority of his life.

Mahan was a member of the generation that defended his country bravely in WW II. Joe was an Army man that got shot up in the Battle of the Bulge in 1945. He received a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart for his combat efforts.

He received a rather good education for his particular generation. He obtained Undergraduate degrees at Reinhart College in Waleska, GA and the University of Georgia in Athens (1946). He obtained an MA from the University of Georgia in 1950 and much later (1970) a Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Joe majored in history, anthropology, and archaeology. His Ph.D. dissertation was entitled, "Tsoyaga Waeno, Builders of Temple Mounds." He researched his topic for many years in order to give it the justice it deserved. A portion of his legacy from this effort is the Mahan Collection, some 10,000 items archived at Columbus College. Dr. Mahan developed his archaeology skills at the University of Georgia during the years 1949-50, where he had the opportunity to work with Professor Arthur Kelly, a principal excavator at the Ocmulgee site in Macon, GA. This led quite naturally to a

position (1952-58) as an Assistant Professor in the Departments of Continuing Education and History at the same institution.

Promotions are quite rare for college teachers who have not completed their Ph.D.. So Joe had to find a spot that would respond to his immense energy and that was the city of Columbus, GA. He accepted the position of Curator of the Columbus Museum, his base of operations for 14 years (1958-72). During this time, he discovered Chief Sam Brown of the Yuchis who was looking for a good listener. The richness of the Yuchi story with its implications of migration during historical times were not lost on Joe. His life-long interest in ancient Georgia and surrounds had suddenly come into focus.

One of his favorite projects was the Confederate Naval Museum in Columbus. He was partly responsible for locating and raising the Confederate gunboat CSS Chattahoochee from the river during the early 1960's. At the April, 1994 ISAC meeting, Joe took time to give Beverly Moseley and myself a guided tour of Columbus, and he was quite proud of the Naval Museum. He had his eye on a diffusionist artifact museum, but regrettably, he didn't have time to put it together.

Joe was above all things a visionary. He had a feeling for projects that the community needed and would support. The Civil Rights Movement had drained Georgia's energy. With Fort Benning on its outskirts, Columbus carried a heavy burden during the Vietnam War, especially when the critics became quite vocal. Joe found a big Georgia history project in 1966 that everyone could support, and he had it going by 1970.

Mahan became the founder of executive director of the Westville Living History Museum (1972-78). Westville is a planned ante-bellum village on the outskirts of Lumpkin, GA, the buildings being brought in from nearby communities. Lumpkin is the county seat of Stewart County 30 miles south of Columbus on US 27. When asked why he chose Lumpkin, Joe told the simple truth, "They were the only folks that said yes!" The Westville/Joe Mahan story is so interesting that we have prepared a separate article on this subject.³

Dr. Mahan's research life took a shot in the arm in 1977 when he and his wife, musicologist Katherine Hines Mahan, won a joint grant from the Institute for Pakistan Studies. He spent six months in Pakistan studying the Indus Valley Culture, a necessary step to confirm his tentative interpretations of the Yuchi cultural traditions. This research was the basis of his book *The Secret* published in 1982.¹

The next chapter in Joe's working life was to become the Historic Preservation Planner for the Lower Chattahoochee Regional Development Center (1982-93). Douglas Purcell, in a moving letter to the Columbus newspaper on Sept. 3, 1995, praised Mahan for his work and for being such an "unconventional" historian. What a wonderful compliment! Think about all the historians you have known or have heard

of. How many have had the courage to pursue the truth like Joe, and have the energy to work hard at preservation, research and communication like Joe?

Mahan's public interest in research really accelerated once he obtained final approval on his Ph.D. Dissertation. The Westville project provided Joe with a unique forum for meetings and conferences that promoted the reporting of new ideas on the history of ancient America. These meetings began in 1973 and ended in 1983 under the simple title Westville Conference.

At that point, Joe saw a need for a more serious, formal organization. During the conference held in Columbus in 1983, the Mahan group founded the Institute for the Study of American Cultures, (ISAC), which like Westville was Joe's baby. Their purpose was to form an organization devoted to competent, unbiased research on the ancient history of the America's. They held important conferences, developed a library, published several books, preserved several collections, collected artifacts, and supported controversial discoveries and interpretations of American prehistory.

Mahan became a full-fledged supporter of the alleged Burrows Cave of southern Illinois in 1989 or somewhat earlier. The rancor over this discovery would have defeated most people, but not Joe Mahan. He held conferences, acquired some of the artifacts for study, encouraged translations of the stones by Schaffranke, and nurtured one of its leading researchers. One of his personal contributions is a brief history of the King Juba era of northwest Africa, which helps to define a significant context for the Burrows Cave or Tomb of Alexander culture. The final word on this amazing discovery is still a question, particularly because none of us claims to have been inside the cave to see the alleged burial crypts that are claimed.

The opposition, however, doesn't appear to have a leg to stand on. They resent the circumstances, and they resent Russell Burrows because he's a jerk. The Burrows Cave group of supporters is hardly organized for profit, only Russell Burrows is. Nevertheless, inspired in part by Joe Mahan, we have a common vision of truth about prehistory. If it looks like a duck, it is! When we contemplate the entire collection of Tomb artifacts looted by Russell Burrows as a fraud candidate, the questions of who had the interest, the talent, the skills, the time, the resources, the technology, and the motivation are asked, and we come up with few serious answers. The project would have taken at least 10 world class experts at least 10 years apiece; but Hubbard and Schaffranke did it in two. Perhaps Burrows Cave qualifies as a travesty.

To summarize, I can only restate the expressions of many others. Joseph Mahan was a beloved leader with vision, inspiration, determination, perspicacity, talent, and character. He will be well remembered and respected.

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