



JESSE ERWIN WRENCH  
1882–1958

Jesse Erwin Wrench, the “Father of Missouri Archaeology,” died in his sleep October 14, 1958 at his home in Columbia, Missouri, just two days after he had been re-elected president of the Missouri Archaeological Society for the 25th consecutive year. “Prof” Wrench had an all-consuming desire that the prehistoric story of Missouri should not be lost, and he worked consistently toward that end until his death.

Born in North Afton, New York, September 10, 1882, he was the son of Marquis de Lafayette and Sara Minor Wrench. He was a descendant of a Hopkins who came over on the Mayflower and of Stephen Hopkins, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. On February 26, 1906 he married Jane Shurter. Surviving are Mrs. Wrench, two sisters, two brothers, and a daughter, Mrs. W. H. Heller of Columbia, Missouri.

*(Continued on next page)*

After receiving an A.B. degree from Cornell University in 1903 he did field work for the American School for Oriental Study and Research in Palestine, May, 1904 through August, 1905, together with two other students, Albert Ten Eyck Olmstead and Benson Brush Charles. Nathaniel Schmidt, director of the school and their former teacher at Cornell, reported that their special preparation "included Latin, Greek, and Semitic epigraphy as well as Arabic, Hebrew, and Aramaic, the topography of Syria as well as the history of Western Asia, and also photography, squeeze-taking, and surveying." Apparently this was pioneer work in this area; the party was armed and really had a rough time of it. Schmidt writes:

From Ba'albek they went up the Orontes valley to 'Ain Lebweh. Here they found themselves in a Metawileh town and were obliged to make their escape at three o'clock in the morning. A little north of Ras Ba'albek an attempt was made to rob them, and shots were fired, but no serious damage was done. From Homs (Emesa) they hoped to proceed to Palmyra, but orders came from the Wali of Damascus prohibiting the excursion, as the region was not considered safe. After a short visit to Hamah, they returned to Homs, walking the first day 29¾ miles. Next they went south through the plain of Homs, carefully examining the lake and the many mounds in this district. From Hermil they proceeded to Wadi Brissa to secure squeezes of the famous cuneiform inscription. After two days' work under peculiar difficulties — they had to carry water over a mile, were forced to use swing-ropes, and could secure no food — their supply of squeeze paper ran out and they were not able to finish the inscription. During the two days 150 sheets had been put on. From Hermil they went over the Hermil pass, nearly ten thousand feet high, to the Cedars, and having visited Hasrun, Tannurin, 'Akura, 'Afka, and Mezra'at, they reached Beirut by way of Nahr el-Kelb. As their photographic supplies had failed them, Mr. Wrench returned on a four days' trip and secured a good collection of photographs.

He returned to the Near East with a Cornell expedition to Assyria and Babylonia in 1907–08. A member of Phi Beta Kappa, he had been an instructor at Syracuse University before he joined the faculty of the University of Missouri in 1911. He became a full professor of history in 1930, professor emeritus in 1953 when he retired after 42 years of teaching service at Missouri. Upon his retirement the Missouri Legislature passed a resolution citing Professor Wrench as "a symbol of the University itself."

"Prof" Wrench was the most colorful member of the University of Missouri faculty and certainly the one best known to most students. His Vandyke beard, his flowing hair, his knickers, and his beret were known to everyone. In his earlier years he wore a cape and rode a bicycle. As Clarence Cannon recently wrote to me:

"Prof Wrench was a very colorful figure, and it contributed much to the effectiveness of his life work." He was, indeed, a highly stimulating and effective classroom teacher and an efficient organizer.

He was prominent in activities both on and off the campus. He was an unofficial advisor to students long before the days of counseling and he and Mrs. Wrench were the "Missouri parents" of all the foreign students who attended the University. He sponsored the Tiger Claws pep squad and founded the "Wrench Wranglers" which became the basis for the "Thundering Thousand." Four student cooperative houses on the Missouri campus today are due in great part to his efforts. He was one of the principal organizers of several cooperative business enterprises in which fellow faculty members and Columbia citizens participated. For 20 years he guarded the door during registration at the University. From the beginning he oversaw student elections and chaperoned dances. He kept strict discipline, but some of us who were students in that day recognized the need for some faculty supervision at student gatherings and came to consider him as more of a silent ally rather than as a stern disciplinarian. There were also times when he took the student side in difficulties with the University administration.

In 1930, he conducted excavations of Indian sites along the Sac River, a branch of the Osage River. In the early thirties he helped carry out archaeological investigations in both Boone and Wayne counties in Missouri and also started the Archaeological Survey of Missouri in which he continued to be active until his death. Since he was teaching history, all of his archaeological effort was purely extra-curricular.

On December 11, 1934, he called a meeting of about a dozen persons from all over the state and with the help of J. Brewton Berry founded the Missouri Archaeological Society. We met in old Switzler Hall on the University of Missouri campus and he presented us with a set of objectives and suggestions for a constitution and by-laws for the new organization. We adopted these practically as he presented them and they have served the Society almost without change to the present time. I remember thinking at the time that "Prof" had obviously already spent a great deal of effort, thought, and energy in their preparation. The objectives of the Society, as stated at that first meeting, were to preserve the remains of the prehistoric people of Missouri,

to study these remains scientifically, to publish information about them, to provide both amateur and professional archaeologists with opportunities to discuss their common interests, and to arouse public opinion to an appreciation of the prehistoric past. Another objective, and a primary one, though it was not stated in the written goals of the Society, was to get an archaeologist on the staff at the University of Missouri.

One summer afternoon in 1935 "Prof" and several students came into my office in Marshall. He had been studying the records of the Lewis and Clark expedition and had determined approximately the location on the north bank of the Missouri where the explorers had spent the night. The records stated that at night the lights of the villages of the Missouri and the Little Osage had been plainly visible across the river about three miles from the Lewis and Clark camp and about three miles from each other. "Prof" requested a plat map and asked me if there were village sites within a certain arc along the river. I told him that there were two large and prominent ones, named the landowners, and explained how to get to them. How I wished that I had been free at the moment to go with them and to participate in the first work by which the prehistoric past of the once powerful Missouri and the Little Osage was being worked out.

No one was more active at University and Society excavations than "Prof." A picture that some of us will always carry is that of "Prof" back in the active days at Graham Cave, working all day long in clouds of dust, operating the power sifter, keeping the sacks of materials straight, and hollering every now and then both because he liked hollering and because he knew that it helped to keep everything moving. He was a man in motion. He did not like to write, and he wrote little, but he did a great deal of translating. He authored one book, *The March of Civilization* (1931), and co-authored another, *American Citizenship Practice* (1926). He also published in the *Missouri Archaeologist*: Archaeological Investigations in Boone County, Missouri (1938, Vol. 4, No. 3, with Berry, Chapman, and Seitz); Early Investigations in Northeast Missouri (1939, Vol. 5, No. 1); The Archaeology of Wayne County (1940, Vol. 6, No. 1, with Berry and Chapman); and a foreword (1951, Vol. 13, No. 2).

"Prof" lived to see the Missouri Archaeological Society become the largest organization of its kind in this country with a membership of more than 1400 in recent years. The University of Missouri obtained an archaeologist for its staff soon after the founding of the Society and Carl H. Chapman has long been Director of Archaeology at the University. In 1958 the *Missouri Archaeologist* reached its 24th year of publication. After retirement "Prof" again took up the archaeological survey as his particular and personal assignment and worked at it almost daily. Through the years many people had cooperated in this work. At his death, 82 of the 114 counties in the state were represented in the survey and a total of 5006 Missouri sites had been recorded on the permanent forms that had been provided for that purpose more than 26 years before. In addition, there were records on 1821 sites that were yet to be verified. This important body of data is in itself an impressive monument to his energy and influence in Missouri archaeology.

In 1952 the Missouri Archaeological Society presented him its "Honors Award" with the following citation:

Be it known to all to whom these presents come that Jesse E. Wrench is hereby honored for his meritorious deeds in the furtherance of the aims, objectives, and ideals of the Missouri Archaeological Society, for his twenty years of unstinted diligence in guiding and leading the Society as its President, and for vigorous devotion to the advancement of scientific archaeology in Missouri.

In the name of the Society this certificate is awarded and Jesse E. Wrench is designated the "Father of Missouri Archaeology" and his name is inscribed on the Achievement Plaque displayed in the Museum of Anthropology of the University of Missouri.

On October 12, 1958, just two days before his death, the Society presented a resolution at its annual meeting expressing again its appreciation to both Prof. and Mrs. Wrench for their support of the "archaeological movement" in Missouri. A memorial held on the University of Missouri campus, November 2, 1958 was attended by students, faculty, townspeople, and friends from all over the state. At this gathering 11 people gave tributes to Jesse E. Wrench for his active participation in 11 organizations and institutions. Missouri will long remember him. Archaeology particularly will give lasting gratitude to him for contributing so much.

HENRY W. HAMILTON