

Four Mississippian Stone Statues from Sellars Farm State Archaeological Area, Wilson County, Tennessee

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Errata: Article should
be cited as Smith and
Sharp.



Among the over two dozen stone statues assembled for the 2015-2016 exhibition *Ancestors: Ancient Native American Stone Sculpture of Tennessee at the Tennessee State Museum in Nashville* (Weeks, Smith, and Sharp 2015), were a set of four from the Sellars Mounds in Wilson County Tennessee – two females and two males. Brought together for the first time in at least 700 years, the group provided a stunning greeting to visitors at the entrance of the museum gallery (Fig. 1).

The Sellars family purchased what is now known as the Sellars site around 1909 and by at least 1915 had cleared the beech grove and were regularly plowing the town site, turning up “knives, pipes, hatchets, arrow heads and pottery.” According to local tradition, James W. Sellars and his descendants would only allow friends to surface hunt for artifacts when the area was plowed. A few years thereafter, the plow was consistently hitting a large boulder and Clyde Sellars determined to dig it out in May 1923. He must have been startled when he rolled the boulder out to reveal the face and torso of a large sandstone statue. A week after the discovery, the *Tennessean* (May 29, 1923) provided a

brief report on page 8 under the headline “Stone Image of Indian is Found Near Lebanon: Curious Relic is Plowed Up on J.W. Sellars Farm.” A recently discovered photograph taken about the same time (Fig. 2) reveals significant probable plow damage to the left arm, suggesting the figure was buried lying on its right side. Created by a native artisan who lived many centuries ago in the prehistoric town now preserved as Sellars Farm State Archaeological Area, the figure is depicted in the round but the artist added significant detail only to the facial features and distinctive male hair bun. Like most of the Tennessee-Cumberland statuary, only minimal attention was paid to the arms and virtually no attention to the lower body. A great local curiosity, he remained on display at Stark Goodbar’s clothing store on the Lebanon square until Parmenio E. Cox, Tennessee’s first state archaeologist, borrowed it from the family for temporary display in Nashville’s War Memorial Building (March 1, 1926-Oct. 9, 1937). We refer to this figure as the Stack Male, after its long-time owner Nashville collector Guy Stack, who later purchased it from the Sellars family for \$100 (reportedly he was prepared to go as high as \$200). Stack would later do restoration work to the damaged

portions of the left arm and other parts of the body, covering the seams with an overlying modern cream wash.

Sculpting of the human image in stone was quite uncommon in the prehistoric United States. This form of indigenous art spans only two relatively brief periods of time – the earliest between A.D. 1100 and 1200 in the American Bottom region around the grand city of Cahokia in southern Illinois and then between A.D. 1250 and 1350 in two areas centered on the Cumberland River around Nashville and the Etowah Mounds in northern Georgia. Of the latter Tennessee-Cumberland Statuary Tradition, the majority of the 50 or so examples were created within 100 miles of downtown Nashville. As a result, discovery of the Stack Male alone was enough to draw attention to this rural farm – but by 1939 three even more astonishing discoveries would solidify the place of Sellars Farm as one of the primary centers of prehistoric stone sculpture in North America (Fig. 3).

Sometime around the spring of 1939, a tenant farmer and his son struck yet another large rock while plowing in the same part of the field. This time, the figure revealed was female – and so finely detailed that it is difficult not to perceive it as a portrait. Rendered in a strikingly different artistic style, this female figure – which we refer to as the Waggoner female after its long-time owner John C. Waggoner Jr. of Carthage – is depicted in a knee length skirt resting with both legs tucked beneath. Although the features of the body are much more detailed than in the Stack Male, once again it is the face that immediately demands attention. Engraved with lines and wrinkles, her slightly upturned face depicts that of a respected elderly woman. First purchased from the Sellars by Lillard Yeaman, she would remain on view at his filling station in South Carthage for many years (see McDonald and Smith, this issue). Yeaman later related that he paid the equivalent of a



Figure 2. Photograph of the Stack Male soon after discovery (Photographer unknown).

month of his sheriff's salary to acquire the statue – a hardship on his family at the time, but a solid investment. Like the Stack Male, the Waggoner Female shows plow damage primarily on the left arm, side, and back – again suggesting she was buried in a very similar position.

Inspired by the discovery of two statues in apparently the same part of the cornfield, the tenant farmer explored that area in earnest over the next few months – astonishingly turning up not one but two more statues. After lengthy negotiations, the University of Tennessee purchased both of these statues in December 1940 and they later became part of the collections of the McClung Museum of Natural History and Culture when it opened on the Knoxville campus in 1963. In view of their long stay in the university's collections, we refer to them as the UT Male and UT Female.



Figure 3. Four prehistoric stone sculptures from Sellars Farm together for the first time. LtoR: Stack Male, UT Male, Waggoner Female, UT Female. *Photograph by David H. Dye*



Figure 4. Jan Simek, UT Distinguished Professor of Science, observes as doctoral candidate Sierra Bow scans the pigments on the Sellars statuary using reflectance spectrometry. Photograph by Kevin E. Smith

A distinctive characteristic found only in the Tennessee-Cumberland statuary was the creation of male-female pairs – representing perhaps both real and semi-legendary couples revered as the founding ancestors of their home communities. Sculpted by the same artist (or at least in the same workshop), these pairs were housed in community shrines commemorating the heart and soul of these ancient towns – analogous perhaps in some ways to how the now semi-mythical couple of George and Martha Washington are viewed in modern times, and housed alongside relics as spiritually significant in those days as the original U.S. Declaration of Independence and Constitution. The UT Male and Waggoner Female share so many compelling similarities that they command attention as just such an ancient couple. Interestingly enough, the UT Male also shows plow damage primarily to the left shoulder, arm and back – again suggesting he was buried in a similar position to the Stack Male and Waggoner Female.

The UT Male quickly became one of Tennessee's most iconic of prehistoric images – traveling almost immediately from Knoxville to the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan for exhibition in *Indian Art of the United States* (Jan 22-Apr 27, 1941). A review of this ground-breaking exhibition in *Time* magazine (Feb 17, 1941) described the statue as “the finest piece of prehistoric sculpture ever found in the U.S.” As an ambassador for both ancient and modern Tennesseans, the male sculpture has traveled over 15,000 miles in the last 30 years as part of almost every major exhibition of indigenous prehistoric art of the eastern United States – appearing in such prestigious places as the National

Gallery of Art in Washington D.C.; the Detroit Institute of Arts in Michigan; the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas; the Royal Museum of Art and History in Brussels, Belgium; The Art Institute of Chicago; the St. Louis Art Museum; and most recently in the *Ancestors* exhibition. His fame would continue when in 2004 the U.S. Postal Service selected the UT Male – out of literally millions of possible objects – as one of the premier artifacts on a 10-stamp panel “Art of the American Indian” commemorating the grand opening of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. A decade later in 2014, Governor Bill Haslem signed into law a bill recognizing that same statue as the first official “Tennessee State Artifact.”

Created in a style more similar to that of the Stack Male, the UT Female exhibits the same simple but compelling treatment of the face and hair and the absence of detail in the lower body and legs. Although similar stylistically, the two were probably not carved by the same sculptor but rather by artisans from about the same time period who shared ideas about how to present the human figure. Of the four, she is the only one that does not exhibit any apparent plow damage.

As part of an ongoing research project on Mississippian pigments and stone sources, UT Distinguished Professor of Science Jan Simek and doctoral candidate Sierra Bow have examined many of the Tennessee-Cumberland statuary using reflectance spectrometry and X-ray fluorescence (Fig. 4). Strikingly, their preliminary results indicate that the four Sellars pieces are the only ones retaining clear evidence that they were painted by their prehistoric creators – a factor still vividly clear



Figure 5. Pigments on the faces of the UT Male (Kevin E. Smith), Waggoner Female (David H. Dye), and UT Female (David H. Dye). Note the yellow painted mask on the upper face, the black painted line, and red pigment on the mouth on the UT Male; Black pigment on the face and hair of the Waggoner Female; and black painted lines on the face of the UT Female.



Figure 6. Jimmy G. Cheek, University of Tennessee Chancellor, and Jeff Chapman, Director, welcome the Sellars Ancestral Pair to their new permanent home at the McClung Museum of History and Culture *Photograph, University of Tennessee Video & Photography Center*

on the UT Male, UT Female, and Waggoner Female, but obscured somewhat on the Stack Male by the modern cream colored slip hiding the restorations (Fig. 5).

At the close of the *Ancestors* exhibition, it appeared that the statues would once again go their separate ways. Thanks to a successful fundraising campaign by the McClung Museum and University of Tennessee, the UT Male and Waggoner Female are now reunited in perpetuity (along with the UT Female) – greeting visitors to the permanent exhibition “Archaeology and the Native Peoples of Tennessee” at the museum (Fig. 6).

Portions of this article were originally published in Smith (2017). More detailed information on other Tennessee-Cumberland statuary can be found in Smith and Miller (2009).

References Cited

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This small owl effigy bowl was found at the Gordontown site (40DV6) many years ago. The bowl held a surprise, as prehistorically placed within it were two shell spoons, one right on top of the other. Gordontown was just outside of Nashville on the border with Williamson County. It was written about by William Edward Myer in *Two Prehistoric Villages in Middle Tennessee* (1928). The site consisted of at least two mounds, more than 87 ‘house circles’ and a well-defined palisade wall. Myer had thought the site worthy of being declared a National Monument, but sadly, nothing remains of it today, and it is now a subdivision.

*Collection of Doug Wall,
Clarksville, Tennessee*

