

ANCIENT FACES

Native American Stone Sculptures From
Farm State Archaeological Area in Wil



CE: om Sellars ilson County

By Kevin E. Smith

Clyde Sellars must have been startled when he rolled a sizable boulder out of his father's cornfield in May 1923 to reveal a face staring up at him – an ancient face carved on a 700-year-old stone statue. The back and sides were heavily scarred by mule-drawn plows striking it since the field was first cleared around 1915 – but the undisturbed face presented a striking portrait of a Native American man from the distant past. As reported a week after the discovery (May 29, 1923, *The Tennessean*) under the headline “Stone Image of Indian is Found near Lebanon. Curious Relic is plowed up on J.W. Sellars Farm:

“The image, which had evidently been used by the Indians, was cut from sandstone and was minus arms but was otherwise perfect. The head resembled very closely the Indian chieftains but as some have it these Indian people...would never have go to the trouble of cutting this image from stone. The head is natural size with a knot resembling a bunch of hair on the back of the head...an overhanging brow, deep set eyes and wide mouth make the image very interesting to the large number of people who are viewing it in the window of Stark Goodbar, local clothing dealer...”



David H. Dye

Contrary to the naysayers who viewed it, this sculpture – which will be called herein the Stack Male, after its long-time owner, Nashville collector Guy Stack, who later purchased it from the Sellars family – was indeed created by a native artisan who lived many centuries ago in the prehistoric town now preserved as Sellars Farm State Archaeological Area in Wilson County. Although the work is depicted in the round, the artist added significant detail only to the facial features and distinctive male hair bun – with minimal attention to the arms and virtually no attention to the lower body. The Stack Male 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).

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 about 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.

Sometime around the spring of 1939, a tenant farmer and his son struck another large rock while plowing in the same part of the field. This time, the face revealed was female – and so finely detailed that it is difficult not to perceive it as a portrait. As owners of the farm, the Sellars family took possession, reportedly offering an old horse as compensation. Rendered in a strikingly different artistic style, this female figure – which will be referred to as the Waggoner female after its long-time owner John Waggoner of Carthage – is depicted in a knee-length skirt resting with both legs tucked beneath.

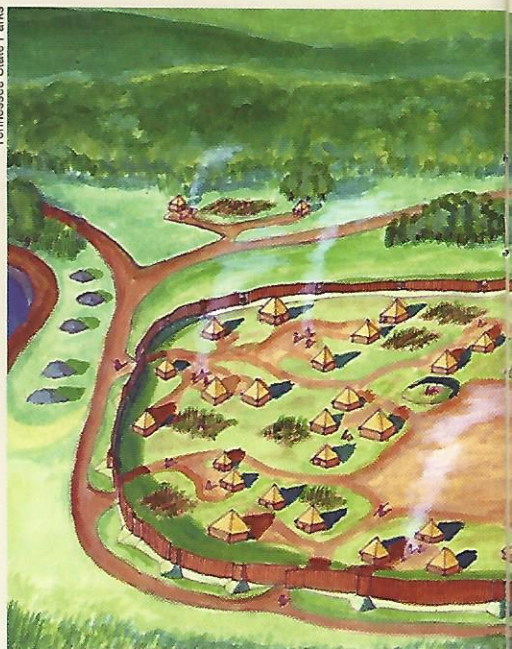
Although the features of the body are much more detailed than in the Stack



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Left: The face of the UT Male. Note the yellow painted mask on the upper face, the black painted line, and red pigment on the mouth. Below: A watercolor painting by James V. Miller illustrating the Sellars Farm site as it may have looked about A.D. 1250. Previous pages: Four prehistoric stone sculptures from Sellars Farm together for the first time. From left to right are: Stack Male, UT Male, Waggoner Female, UT Female.

Tennessee State Parks

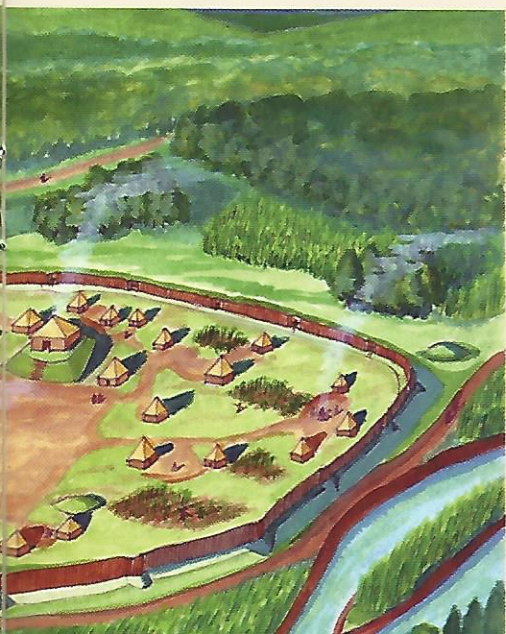


Male, once again it is the face that immediately demands attention. Engraved with lines and wrinkles, her slightly upturned face depicts that of a respected elderly woman. After purchase from the Sellars by Lillard Yeaman, she would remain on view at his filling station in South Carthage for many years.

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, another male and another female. After lengthy negotiations, the University of Tennessee purchased both of these 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, they will be referred to as the UT male and UT female.

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



David H. Dye



The profile of the Stack Male Statue shows the male hair bun and stooped posture. The cream colored wash on the statue is a modern addition.

the original U.S. Declaration of Independence and Constitution. The UT Male and the Waggoner Female share so many compelling similarities that they command attention as just such an ancient couple.

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–April 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 Museums of Art and History in Brussels, Belgium; The Art

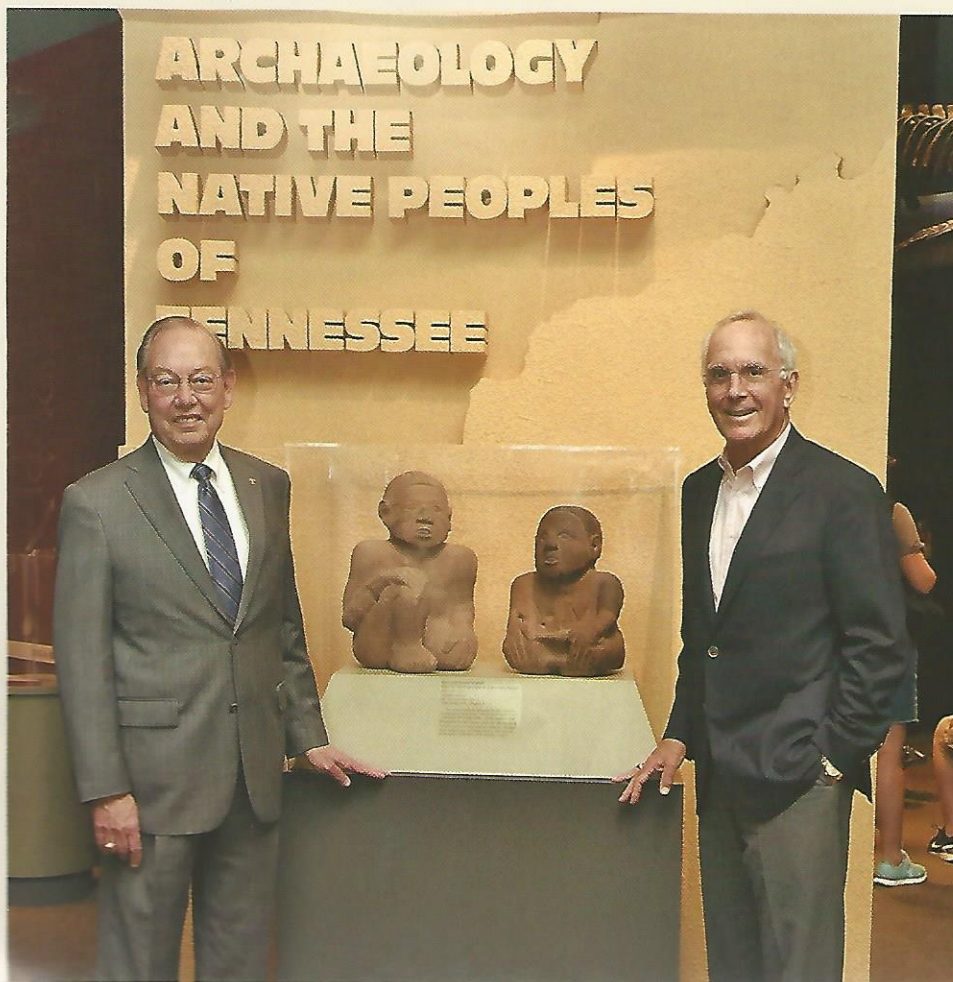


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UT Distinguished Professor of Science, Jan Simek, observes as doctoral candidate Sierra Bow scans the pigments on the Sellars statuary using reflectance spectrometry.

Institute of Chicago; and the Saint Louis Art Museum. 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.

University of Tennessee Chancellor Jimmy G. Cheek and Jeff Chapman, director, welcome the Sellars Ancestral Pair to their new permanent home at the McClung Museum of History and Culture at UT Knoxville.



University of Tennessee Video & Photography Center

A decade later in 2014, Governor Bill Haslem signed into law a bill recognizing that same statue as our 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.

Scattered in three different collections, the four Sellars statues were not exhibited together in the modern era until the recent temporary exhibition *Ancestors: Ancient Native American Sculptures of Tennessee* at the Tennessee State Museum (Oct. 30, 2015–May 15, 2016.) For the first time since prehistory, the four were reunited, including what are now recognized to be the most spectacular male–female ancestral pair created by a single indigenous artist: the UT Male and the Waggoner Female. Examined together by scholars for the first time, many new insights into the artifacts and the artists emerged—including high tech examinations of the raw stone and pigments decorating their faces using x-ray fluorescence and spectrometry.

At the close of that exhibition, it appeared that the statues would once again go their separate ways. Thanks to a recent successful fundraising campaign by the staff of the McClung Museum and



A rear view of the Sellars Ancestral Pair. Note the hair bun and plaited braid on the male at left and the hourglass shaped bun of the female at right.

University of Tennessee, the Waggoner Female will remain on display with her mate in perpetuity, along with the UT Female as well. Take the opportunity to visit these remarkable examples of prehistoric Tennessee sculpture in the permanent exhibition "Archaeology and the

Native Peoples of Tennessee" at the McClung Museum.

Additionally, thanks to purchase of the prehistoric town at Sellars Farm in 1972 by the state of Tennessee for preservation, you can also visit the place where they were discovered. Only two other

archaeological sites in the country have produced as many stone sculptures as Sellars – the nearby Beasley Mounds at Dixon Springs in Smith County and the Etowah Mounds in Georgia. Sellars Farm State Archaeological Area is managed as a satellite of Long Hunter State Park and is open for self-guided hikes, with guided tours provided periodically. There you can walk the nature trails and contemplate the mysteries of those two remarkable native workshops where Mississippian sculptors captured magnificent faces in stone so many centuries ago.



(Kevin E. Smith is professor of anthropology at Middle Tennessee State University and a regular contributor to *The Tennessee Conservationist* on topics of archaeological interest. Co-author of *Speaking with the Ancestors: Mississippian Stone Statuary of the Tennessee-Cumberland Style* published by University of Alabama Press in 2009, he is currently editing a new book on Tennessee's stone sculptural tradition.)

The four Sellars Statuary greet visitors to the Tennessee State Museum in 2015.



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