THE AMERICAN PALESTINE EXPLORATION SOCIETY
AND THE SURVEY OF EASTERN PALESTINE

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ABSTRACT

The Survey of Western Palestine, carried out from 1871 to 1878 by the Palestine Exploration Fund, has become one of the central pieces of scientific research for this region. From its outset, it was conceived as one half of a two-fold project, the other being a survey conducted in the same manner in Transjordan. The Society that was to undertake this, in collaboration with the PEF and their work in Western Palestine, was the American Palestine Exploration Society (APES), founded in 1870. However, by the autumn of 1877, the APES had ceased to exist, and their survey was never widely published. As the first American Society to focus on the Levant as an area of study, the APES is significant, despite its failure to produce a map of lasting value. Many of the founding members went on to be significant players in later, more successful American ventures, notably the American School of Oriental Research. The PEF’s archives hold a record of the relationship between the APES in New York, and the PEF in London, and chart the fortunes of the two societies, and their endeavours to map the region east of the Jordan.

The first concerted effort to produce a scientifically accurate survey of Transjordan was that of the American Palestine Exploration Society, or the APES as it is fondly referred to in the offices of the Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF). Founded in New York in October 1870, with high hopes of success, the Atlantic cousin of the British PEF embarked on its mission to continue the fine tradition of American scholarship in the field of biblical research and geographical exploration exemplified by Dr Edward Robinson and Lieutenant W. F. Lynch some years earlier. The Society proposed a campaign to survey the country east of the River Jordan, and to produce a map that would be published alongside the PEF’s own Survey of Western Palestine. However, only ten years after its inaugural meeting, the American Society was disbanded, apparently under something of a cloud. Writing in the Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research, Warren J. Moulton states that:

That there was once an American Palestine Exploration Society, . . . that it sent to the field two well-equipped scientific expeditions as well as individual investigators, has been well nigh forgotten in this country. So much is this the case that one of the surviving members of the committee of whom inquiry was made apparently had no memory that such an organization had ever existed. (1928, 55)

This somewhat surprising attitude was probably the result of the perceived failure of the American Society to fulfil its brief to produce an accurate map which could be teamed up with the PEF’s own Survey of Western Palestine, and thus satisfy the demands of its subscribers. The precise causes for the failure of the American Society to produce a ‘PEF compatible’ map are somewhat difficult to pin down with absolute certainty, largely due to the incomplete nature of the material left to us.

The published records of the APES consist of a printed map of thirteen sheets covering some five thousand seven hundred square miles, from Jebel esh-Sheik in the north to the district of Hesban in the south, an accompanying notebook of archaeological sites and one volume of statements and reports. In addition there are the related correspondence and minutes in the PEF’s archives. It is on this limited material that our current understanding of the American Palestine Exploration Society is formed.

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In 1870, two representatives of the British Palestine Exploration Fund, the Rev. Henry Allon and the Rev. James Mullens, D.D., addressed a meeting of influential clergy and businessmen in the Madison Square Church in New York. The Englishmen were interested in promoting the PEF’s own proposed *Survey of Western Palestine* to a potentially lucrative American market. The Americans received the representatives with enthusiasm. Instead of merely creating an American branch of the PEF, however, it was decided to form an equivalent but independent American society. A committee was formed under the chairmanship of the Rev. Josiah Thompson, D.D., LL.D., and consisted of no less than 29 members. For the following two years, the Americans set about acquiring subscriptions and donations. Much of their support came exclusively and very generously from the moneyed families of the northern American cities, who were perhaps anxious to establish cultural and intellectual credentials. Outside this small circle, and in some contrast to the experience of
the British Fund, the American Society received little attention. Possibly the majority of the population of a nation that had only recently emerged from civil war was more interested in the frontiers that were opening up to them on their doorsteps, than those in a foreign land far away.

At the beginning of the 1870s, the British PEF was about to embark upon the Survey of Western Palestine, covering the area west of the River Jordan. The Americans resolved to survey the land east of the river, in the biblical territories of Bashan, Gilead, Ammon and Moab. This region was, by comparison with the densely settled and relatively civilized Western Palestine, largely unexplored, and, in consequence, was very much an unknown quantity. At this time, the Turkish administration was struggling to maintain a semblance of control over the fiercely independent and often warring Bedouin tribes that loosely populated the territory. Supplies and settlements were few and far between, and the terrain was, for the most part, rugged and apparently desolate. In reality, therefore, the task that the Americans had set themselves was, in many respects, far more difficult than that which the British were undertaking at the same time. This must surely have been appreciated by the British team who not only had had several years of experience in the field, but had made significant forays across the Jordan, most notably that of Charles Warren and his party in the late 1860s and early 1870s. In any event, at the time, the proposed American expedition to Transjordan appeared to all concerned to be a very acceptable arrangement. The enormous task that the PEF had set itself to survey the whole country was now to be a shared venture, and the Americans, for their part, could look forward to a high profile, high quality publication of their work, linked and associated with the PEF’s map of Western Palestine.

In 1872, Lieutenant Edgar Z. Steever of the US Army was seconded to the American Palestine Exploration Society for one year on full officer’s pay for the purpose of leading the survey. The army also supplied a selection of surveying instruments. Steever was a recent graduate of West Point Academy, and was at the time on active duty on the plains of Nebraska. He was joined in Beirut by the Rev. Professor John Paine of New York, who was employed as Archaeologist and Naturalist. It was decided to engage additional engineering and general staff once in the field. Before sailing to Beirut, Steever spent three weeks in England, meeting with members of the PEF and discussing the task ahead. It was at this point that the first signs of a problem with the American expedition appeared. Steever, a relatively inexperienced officer, was, it seems, suddenly overwhelmed by the enormity of the task entrusted to him, having, at this point in time, no engineering assistants at all.

Nevertheless, Steever left for Beirut, with no less than twenty-three boxes of equipment and books, and with assurances from New York that funds would be there on his arrival for the purchase of additional equipment and the employment of staff. However, when he landed in Beirut on 6 January 1873, no funds were forthcoming, and he and Paine seemed to be at a loss as to what to do. Now painfully aware of their lack of preparation, Steever made contact with Lieutenant Claude Regnier Conder R.E., the leader of the British party, to seek advice as to how to proceed. In a letter to the Fund’s secretary in London, Walter Besant, dated 29 January 1873, Conder writes of his first impressions after receiving an introductory letter from Steever:

Lt. Steever wrote to me most politely but did not know what to do. . . . It appears they have been trying vainly to get the assistance of a surveyor here. . . . They are not accompanied by any non-Commissioned Officer or subordinates. They are unprovided with any linguist as far as I can understand and I cannot discover any instruments but chronometers and barometers in their possession. (PEF/DA/WS/CON/34)

Conder persuaded Steever that he should visit the British team and observe them at work. He appears to some extent to have taken the very green young American under his wing,
clearly relishing the chance to play the wise and experienced man of the world — at the grand old age of twenty-five! In a letter to Walter Besant:

I gave him every possible information as to our work and general arrangements and he went away with every protestation of gratitude and esteem on one of my horses, with a good breakfast and a supply of Arabic words with English translations...which I gave him to prevent his being speechless by the way. (PEF/DA/WS/CON/36)

Steever decided that a full and comprehensive survey would be impossible given the prevailing conditions, and instead restricted himself, for the year that he would be in the field, to the undertaking of a limited reconnaissance of the area. This might have been a wise decision, but it appears that it was not one that was fully understood by the committee of the American Society back in New York. The repercussions of this misunderstanding would not be felt for a few years. The funds which had been promised were still not forthcoming, and all in all, Steever and Paine spent an exasperating few weeks in Beirut, talking to the ‘Beirut-American Advisory Committee’, who advised Steever as to how he and his colleagues might conduct themselves in this ‘strange land’.

Finally, in mid March, remittance of some ten thousand dollars arrived from the committee in New York, $4,000 of which had been put up by the committee members themselves. The survey could, at last, begin.

Personnel were hired, and provisions were bought to get the party underway. New equipment was also purchased. On the 18 March 1873, Steever reported from his first camp in es-Salt, on the Transjordanian plateau. His party consisted of himself, Professor Paine, and the following: Rev. Alanson A. Haines (First Assistant Engineer), William G. Ballantine (Second Assistant Engineer), George Subbet (Interpreter), Bishara Abou Shafateer (Collector of Natural History), and Melville B. Ward (First General Assistant). Nine riding animals were provided for the core staff. In addition there were eighteen muleteers to handle the 27 pack animals, as well as those that they brought along themselves. This was an exceedingly large party by comparison with that of the British team on the other side of the river, but one which, it was argued, was necessary, given the uninhabited and desolate nature of the land. It is interesting to observe, however, that despite all this, and for reasons which are not at all clear, the equipment did not include a theodolite — a recent invention, employed by the PEF Western Survey team, that enabled highly accurate measurements to be determined over long distances and in three dimensions.

The party remained in Moab until the end of August, surveying the plateau, presumably using traditional methods of plane geometry, and producing notes on the archaeology of the region. Throughout the survey, very fine photographs were taken to form a visual record of the antiquities of the country. However, at no point is the photographer mentioned in the reports. At this stage, the committee in New York did not appear to have understood the limitations of the work being undertaken by Steever and Paine, although suspicions that the work was not moving at the anticipated and hoped-for pace were voiced in various items of correspondence by members of the PEF.

In 1874, Sir George Grove ended his address at the PEF’s Annual Meeting with the following, telling statement:

I trust, too, we shall not be content with surveying the western side of the Jordan, but that we shall give some aid to our friends who have undertaken to survey the eastern side, not to take it from them, but to enable them to complete it sooner. (PEFQST 1874, 4, 238. Report of the Annual Meeting)

At the end of his year in the field, Lieutenant Steever, having triangulated about 500 square miles of country around Hesban, returned to his army duties in Nebraska, no doubt relieved to get back to a relatively simple life on the American frontier. Back in New York, Professor Roswell D. Hitchcock was elected President of the American Society.
It was at this stage that problems with funding began to seriously affect the further progress of field work in Eastern Palestine. The American Society's limited funding base was beginning to show. Its few wealthy patrons soon became less willing to give substantial sums on a regular basis, especially without something to show in return. In reality, although the PEF in London was very envious of the American's large donations, its own membership, which included many much smaller donors, was probably much more successful in maintaining a regular and long term source of funding. Notwithstanding these difficulties, however, Hitchcock and the American Committee managed to persuade their donors to dig into their pockets again, in order to send out a second expedition.

In 1875, therefore, a new team was sent out to Beirut. Filling John Paine's shoes as archaeologist was one Dr Selah Merrill, a former Congregationalist minister. The replacement for Lieutenant Steever was an experienced surveyor, Colonel James C. Lane, American Civil War hero and railroad engineer. One would have thought that this was a sensible choice. Lane was experienced, very capable, and undoubtedly a leader. However, he was also a man who was used to being in absolute charge, and, one who, it might be suspected, could at times be a little abrupt, with perhaps a somewhat too militaristic manner for the gentle clergymen of the American committee. His reports to the committee make it clear that he demanded that an entirely different, much more military approach be applied to the job of surveying the country, one which, of course, involved large amounts of money that the committee no longer had at its disposal. In reality, Lane was probably correct in his assessment of the situation. His suggestion was to employ three different surveying techniques each suited to a different terrain. When his demands for more equipment (including a theodolite) and trained men were rejected by the Beirut Advisory Committee, Lane returned to the States somewhat out of sorts, leaving Merrill in the field to continue an 'archaeological survey' of the country. Merrill was accompanied by three other men, including the photographer, T. R. Dumas, a resident of Beirut, and until August 1877 the archaeological survey of Transjordan continued.

At this point, however, problems with finances and security in this very wild territory led to the final abandonment of any work in the field. The American Society's Beirut Advisory Committee approached Lieutenant Herbert Horatio Kitchener R.E., who had succeeded Claude Conder as leader of the PEF's Western Survey, with the proposal that he, on behalf of the Fund, should take on the survey of the Hauran. For whatever reason, this particular suggestion did not come to anything, although the PEF was not to be absent from Transjordan for very long.

In February 1879, the committee of the American Society dispatched the results of its survey of Transjordan to the PEF, in, it appears, the full belief that its map would, without any difficulty, be published alongside the PEF's own Western Survey. In addition, high-ranking members of the British Government were very interested in the map of Transjordan for reasons other than those of biblical scholarship. The then Foreign Secretary and future Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, had spent part of his career in Constantinople during the APES survey of Transjordan, and was well aware of the possible strategic and political importance of the area. At his request, the thirteen map sheets were passed to the Intelligence Department of the War Office, under a similar arrangement to that made previously for the production of the map of the Western Survey. On the arrival of the map sheets at the PEF's offices in London, before their transfer to the War Office, and on the eventual production of the printed map sheets, members of the PEF Committee had the opportunity to examine the American map more closely. In the course of this examination, significant problems began to emerge which jeopardized the final publication of the American map alongside the PEF's own Western Survey. In the correspondence between various members of the PEF and
Roswell Hitchcock that follows, it is apparent how the American committee had misunderstood the nature of the work they had entrusted to Steever and Lane, and the implications when it came to publication.

Throughout their reports, both Steever and Lane refer to their work as 'reconnaissance' — recognizing the preliminary nature of their survey. However, it would appear that at no point did the committee — or perhaps the Society’s membership — truly understand why this was different from the full-blown survey being undertaken by the British on the other side of the river. Likewise, when the map arrived in Britain, its shortcomings, which had been suspected for some time by the PEF, gradually came into the open. The following is an extract from an internal report submitted to the PEF by Kitchener in 1879:

It is evident that the American Survey so-called is simply an ordinary military road reconnaissance sketch but in no sense a survey as we understand that term . . . I would submit that as the map . . . is merely the iteration of a few routes, it would be unwise to expend a very large sum in its reproduction, when we may reasonably hope that a correct survey will be made at no distant date. (PEF/DA/WS/KIT/68)

It was becoming apparent that a large scale unified map was unlikely to be feasible, and efforts were made to incorporate the American portion into a smaller scale map, in which
the discrepancies might seem less visible. However, expert advice from the chief draughtsman
at Stanford’s map-makers threw even this possibility into doubt. The PEF was of course
obliged to take a very firm line with regards to the technical quality of the work produced,
not least for the sake of its own reputation, but communicating the realities of the situation
to the Americans proved to be problematic, and sometimes the language employed by the
PEF was somewhat short of tactful. The Stanford report and an accompanying letter from
W. Hepworth-Dixon, the current Chairman of the PEF, were sent to Roswell Hitchcock on
the 22 March, 1880. In this rather blunt letter, the incompatibility of the two maps was
stated, as was the intention of the PEF to conduct their own triangulated survey of
Transjordan at some time in the future. In the meantime, the American map would be used
as an ‘auxiliary in our own work’ (PEF/DA/APES/13) east of the Jordan, and would be
printed separately from the Survey of Western Palestine.

A reply, dated 16 April 1880 from Hitchcock to James Glaischer, Hepworth-Dixon’s
recent successor as PEF Chairman, clearly expressed the disappointment that was keenly felt
on the other side of the Atlantic and hinted at the great expectations that were held by the
membership of the American Society:

... we are sorry to hear that your draughtsman finds it impracticable to incorporate our work with
your own in a reduced map of the whole country. This is just what is required for our American
subscribers. Mr. Meyer (the assistant engineer) and Dr. Selah Merrill together can give us, within a
few months, a reduced map of the whole country, which will be immensely better than any now in
existence, and will meet the demands made upon us by our subscribers. (PEF/DA/APES/14)

This letter was reported to the PEF’s Committee and, as a result, it was decided to appoint a
sub-committee to reassess the issue. This sub-committee consisted of James Glaischer,
Colonel Warren, and Major Anderson, the final editor of the printed map of Western
Palestine. Walter Besant, the PEF’s secretary, wrote to Roswell Hitchcock on the 19 May
1880, informing Hitchcock of the decision to reassess the map with a view to some hope of
an end solution:

The Committee are most anxious to meet your views as much as possible and have decided on
reconsidering their resolution which I forwarded to you on the 22nd of March ... You will by this time
have received our map and you have seen for yourself that the two maps cannot be placed side by side
on terms of equality. (PEF/DA/APES/16)

In the archives of the PEF there is a rough undated draft of a ‘Memorandum for the
Committee’, authored by Major Anderson, concerning the American map. This report
ruled out the chance of a joint large-scale map with the PEF’s Western Survey, owing to
inaccuracies. However, it did leave open a window of hope for a smaller scale map:

The maps appear to have been prepared from Reconnaissance notes and not from a trigonometrical
Survey as in the case of our own work. The American maps consequently are not sufficiently accurate
in detail to be embodied in our large scale map, but they would afford most valuable data to the
geographer in compiling a small scale map of Palestine ... As far as I can judge the American maps
are ... valuable in giving general information concerning the roads, rivers, and principal topographical
features but they are not strictly accurate as to distances and smaller details such as the numerous
bends of the Jordan.

The attached tracings show such small discrepancies where the American work is placed over our
work. (PEF/DA/APES/18)

However, another report by Colonel Charles Warren and Major Anderson, submitted to the
PEF Committee on the 1 July 1880, paints a rather less flattering picture of the work of the
American Society:
Fig. 3. Tracing by George Armstrong showing the discrepancy between the British and American Survey in the region of the southern end of the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan Valley, the line along which the PEF's Survey of Western Palestine and the American Survey were supposed to join. (PEF/M/APES/21)
Fig. 4. Detail of Sheet 10 (Central Jordan Valley) of the American map, with pencil annotations showing the proposed positions of features according to the PEF’s own calculations. (PEF/M/APES/22: Sheet 10)

The American Map when compared with previous maps was found to contain the whole of Colonel Warren’s work but out of true position. It represents very few new features. Our knowledge of Eastern Palestine in fact at the moment may be fairly compared with that of Western Palestine before the Survey was begun. That is to say we have some reconnaissance [sic] work of Colonel Warren, some reconnaissance work by the Americans with observations and notes made by travellers.

Under these circumstances we consider that it would be most unadvisable and injudicious to place inexact and incomplete work beside exact work or to attempt to reduce for the small map any portions of these sheets. At the same time we beg to express our opinion that the sheets will be useful and are a distinct step in advance. S.A. 30.5.680 C.W. 1.6.80 (PEF/DA/EC/1/6/1880)

The job of communicating the unfortunate news to the Americans fell to Walter Besant, and this he did in a letter to Hitchcock dated the 17 June, 1880. He concludes with the following statement:
You have by this time received our map and I think you will perceive on comparison of a Survey with a reconnaissance the impossibility of putting exact and inexact work side by side. At the same time your reports as published have always kept before the eyes of your subscribers the fact that it is a reconnaissance and not a survey that you have worked at, so that no one will have any right to be disappointed.

I remain, Dear Sir,

Yours Faithfully

Walter Besant, Secretary of the English Palestine Exploration Fund. (PEF/DA/APES/17)

So it was that the plan of a joint Anglo-American map, covering the whole of Palestine, was eventually laid to rest, and very soon after the American Palestine Exploration Society ceased to exist as a functioning society.

After the failure of the APES to produce an accurate map of Eastern Palestine, the PEF conducted its own survey in the regions of Ammon and Moab in 1881. This was led by Claude Conder, accompanied by Lieut. A. M. Mantell R.E. The ‘Eastern Survey’ covered 510 square miles, but was eventually abandoned as a firman from the Ottoman administration was not forthcoming. The map and memoirs from this expedition were published in an 1889 edition of the Survey of Western Palestine. In an even later edition of the Survey (1897), the PEF published the work conducted in the Hauran and Bashan areas from 1884 to 1888 by a German railway engineer, the Rev. Gottlieb Schumacher. Schumacher went on to produce much valuable survey and reconnaissance work in both Transjordan and western Palestine, much of it for the PEF, but also for others, most notably the German Palestine Exploration Society. The relative swiftness with which much of the work of the APES map was superseded has probably contributed to its seeming obscurity in the history of exploration in the southern Levant. Yet it would be unfair to discount all the enthusiasm, determination, and hard work of the APES without reviewing some of its legacy.

The territory covered was considerable, and, as Major Anderson was at pains to mention in his report:

... the American maps are very valuable in ... general information concerning the roads, rivers, and all principal topographical details ... (PEF/DA/APES/18)

In this respect, the American Survey provided more detail about the resources, ruins, and topography of Transjordan than had previously been available. It might even be fair to say that if the American Society had completed its work before the Palestine Exploration Fund had begun surveying in the country itself, it could have been regarded very differently — as a pioneering effort. As it was, the superior technology and experience of the Royal Engineers meant that the American Survey would only ever be compared unfavourably with its more sophisticated contemporary.

The American Survey, like the British Survey, was conceived as a holistic account of the physical character of the land with which it was concerned, and so there was not just a map, but also the archaeological and natural history reports sent back, first by James Paine, and then by Selah Merrill amongst others. Although often less than thorough (a feature about which Claude Conder, true to character, was particularly scathing) these reports provided new information about previously unvisited or undocumented sites.

Relating to the reports are the stunning photographs that were taken throughout the tour by T. R. Dumas, seventy-five examples of which are housed in the PEF’s collections. These, in particular, constitute a valuable resource, documenting many sites and landscapes of southern Syria, Lebanon and Transjordan as they existed in the 1870s. As reliable records of sites, many of which have since been destroyed, built-around or restored beyond recognition, it is these photographs which, as well as being very beautiful, have proved to be of lasting value to the researcher.
The APES expeditions to Transjordan were significant as the ‘training ground’ for individual scholars, particularly Selah Merrill, who in the manner of Warren and Conder, produced a popular account of his experiences entitled *East of the Jordan* (1881). Merrill went on to become US Consul in Jerusalem, and an early exponent of Herodian period archaeology in Jerusalem. Furthermore, the APES was the first American organization (as opposed to individuals) to exist exclusively for the purposes of scientific research in the southern Levant. In this respect, one can see the beginnings of the American tradition of biblical and scientific research in the Levant that is so vigorous today. Indeed, the connection is direct. Many of the founding members of the APES became founding members of the American Schools of Oriental Research just a few years later, as Walter Moulton (1928) elaborates:

Dr. J. Henry Thayer, whose presidential address before the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis on June 13 1895 resulted in active measures for organizing this School, had been a generous contributor and promoter of the American Palestine Exploration Society. The same was true of Dr. William Hayes Ward . . . who bequeathed his valuable oriental library to the American School in Bagdad.

In conclusion, the story of the APES in Transjordan is a cautionary tale from the beginnings of scientific research in the then difficult and often dangerous part of the world with which
we are concerned. But despite its obvious shortcomings, the APES contributed a lasting legacy of information for the region, some of which is unique. This, together with the learning curve that the whole experience provided the Americans when establishing a long-lasting and effective research strategy in the Levant means that perhaps, in retrospect, the American Palestine Exploration Society was more significant than the recalcitrant gentleman pursued by Moulton in 1926 was happy to acknowledge.

NOTES

1. This article is based on a paper presented by the writer to the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Travel in Egypt and the Near East (ASTENE) in Edinburgh, July, 2001.
4. PEF/DA/EC 2 Minutes for meetings held on 23 May and 17 June 1879. Two items referring to the acceptance by the Intelligence Department to undertake the photozincographing of the American Map under the same terms as those agreed for the printing of the Western Survey map, with the additional clause.
that the original maps be returned to the PEF’s offices on completion of the printing process. The PEF received one printed set of the thirteen sheets (see below) which show annotated corrections made by Wilson and Anderson during their inspection of the map. The originals were never returned.

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