

Blanche Wheeler Williams (1870 – 1936)

By

Anne Windham, Ph.D.

Project Coordinator Office of the Vice President for Research Brown University Box
1937, Providence, RI 02912 Anne_Windham@Brown.edu

Blanche Wheeler Williams was a Smith graduate and a friend and colleague of the noted archaeologist, Harriet Boyd Hawes. Although her career in the field was short, she taught at a preparatory school for a number of years and undoubtedly influenced a number of young women to study ancient art and archaeology.

Blanche Wheeler was born on January 9th, 1870 in Concord, Massachusetts. Her family could trace its ancestry to the pilgrims of the Plymouth colony, and was related through marriage to many of the other old New England clans. Her early years were spent in close association with her grandmother, Harriet Lincoln Wheeler, a devout churchgoer and member of the Transcendentalist Movement, who immersed her in the milieu of 19th century intellectual life and culture. Mrs. Wheeler and her family were friendly with important thinkers and writers of the period, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and the Alcott family. Coming from a background that prized the intellectual life, it is not surprising that Blanche chose to attend to Smith College, where she studied Greek, Latin, ancient art and archaeology, and also drawing and painting. One of her fellow students at Smith, Harriet Boyd (later Harriet Boyd Hawes), would become a close personal friend and colleague. Although a good student, Blanche made the decision not to continue her education beyond an undergraduate degree, which was not unusual for young women of the time.

In 1892, after completing her degree at Smith, she went to work as a Latin, Greek, and English teacher at her aunt's preparatory school in Providence, Rhode Island (The Mary C. Wheeler School, now the Wheeler School). With the exception of several sabbaticals, she taught there until her marriage in 1904. Although a beloved teacher, there were times when it got to be too much for Blanche. While in Rome doing the standard European tour with some of her students, she wrote to a friend of her frustration of traveling with young women, who had no interest in "the sweet loitering about places which we used to do." She continued "I'm tired of them, and girls generally."¹

She cured her malaise of teaching by taking a sabbatical in 1898 – 99 to travel through Greece and Italy with Harriet Boyd and another Smith alumna, Mary Waring.² Then in 1901 she accompanied Harriet to Crete and helped her to discover the Minoan site of Gournia. This was undoubtedly an important event in her life, one she shared with

¹ Letter dated Sept. 10, 1900, Smith College Archives.

² Mary K. Waring, "About the Author. In memoriam Blanche Wheeler Williams," in *Mary C. Wheeler. Leader in Art and Education*, by Blanche E. Wheeler Williams (Providence 2000, 2nd ed.): 254-255.

her students back in Providence. Her aunt, Mary Wheeler, records that Blanche sent regular letters to the school, and “. . . through her experiences the school was brought into close contact with the excavations at Gournia and thus became interested in the wonderful revelation of early Cretan history from the moment that it was becoming known in the archaeological world.”³

This was Harriet’s second year in the area, known as the Isthmus of Hierapetra; in 1900 she had some good luck at the site of Kavousi nearby, finding an undisturbed Bronze Age bee-hive tomb.⁴ That same year she presented the finds at the December meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America, held in Philadelphia. Her very thorough and scientific talk attracted the attention of Sara Yorke Stevenson (Mrs. Cornelius Stevenson) the secretary of the American Exploration Society, council member of the Archaeological Institute and also President of the Pennsylvania branch of the society.⁵ Mrs. Stevenson realized both the potential importance of the site and the very definite advantage for women to have this brave, intelligent representative of their sex actually directing an archaeological dig. The American Exploration Society therefore funded her excavation in 1901, and then most of her 1903 campaign as well.

1901 was Blanche Wheeler’s only year of excavation, but she was certainly an invaluable assistant and good-natured friend to the more experienced archaeologist. The adventures of Harriet Boyd Hawes have been detailed in several publications,⁶ and the independent spirit shown by these two women was quite remarkable for the time and political situation. Crete had emerged from a bloody conflict involving the Turks and Britain just three years before; the intrepid adventurers saw signs of this recent war in the burned out villages they passed by. However, their welcome by the Cretans was warm and generous, even if all that could be extended to them was a simple dinner and a small hut in which to sleep.

Harriet abandoned her site of the previous year; her heart was set on finding a true Bronze Age village to complement the palaces of Knossos and Phaestos that had been discovered by her colleagues Sir Arthur Evans and Federico Halbherr, and she did not believe that it would be found at Kavousi. At first Blanche and Harriet set up camp at Avgos, a mountain valley east of Kavousi. There they endured great privation while attempting to carry on an excavation. They lived in a tiny hovel on a hillside for weeks; the hut had only one room that was barely large enough for two small beds, several chairs, and a table made of a board set on rocks about three inches off the ground. Shortly after their arrival they were delayed in their hut by days of spring rain (it was May). Blanche wrote to Mary Waring that as she had just written a letter to a mutual acquaintance describing the living conditions, she could not repeat it for Miss Waring, “for living it once and writing it once is about all I’m good for.”⁷

³ Mary Wheeler, *Half a Century of Girls*, (publication of the Wheeler School, 1939). p. 8.

⁴ Harriet Boyd Hawes, “Memoirs of a Pioneer Excavator in Crete,” *Archaeology* 18.1(1965): 101.

⁵ Vasso Fotou and Ann Brown, “Harriet Boyd Hawes,” in G. Cohen and M. Sharp Joukowsky, eds., *Breaking Ground: Pioneering Women Archaeologists*. (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Mich Press, 2004): 217.

⁶ Mary Allsebrook. *Born to Rebel: The Life of Harriet Boyd Hawes*. (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1992). Fotou and Brown 2004.

⁷ Letter dated May 15, 1901, Smith College Archives.

Eventually though the rain did stop, and they were able to get out and tour the area. Harriet, who had the greater training in fieldwork, led the way with that aspect of the dig, sinking test pits and taking measurements. Blanche was the artist in charge of drawing the finds, as well as making detailed maps and plans of the area. In mid May, after following up on a number of unsuccessful tips, they were directed to the site of Gournia by a local farmer/antiquarian. An initial visual survey turned up ancient walls, and potsherds lying on the surface of the soil; they decided to come back and dig.

Within the first days of excavation they discovered not only a wealth of small finds such as vase fragments and bronze implements, but also architectural features like house walls and a paved road.⁸ Harriet had finally achieved in her dream of finding an important Bronze Age town site. They immediately cabled their success to the American Exploration Society, and set about getting more trench workers. In fact, their number swelled from under 40 to 110 in a week, increasing the difficulty of logistics like supervision, account keeping and payroll. Harriet organized the more experienced workers to supervise those who were new to the task, which left her more time to handle the tasks of a director.

During this first season of excavation they found hundreds of artifacts, and Blanche was put in charge of drawing the most important ones. These “major finds” were vases, since not only was the decoration beautiful, but it could be correlated to the finds at other Bronze Age sites and therefore help to establish a relative chronology of the site. When excavation was finally completed, several years later, the town was discovered to have over sixty houses in addition to a central plaza and a small “provincial palace” structure. One of the most important features was a small shrine room that contained several offering tables and a female idol.⁹

After that first season, fieldwork was delayed until 1903. Blanche was not able to return that year, and then in 1904 married Emile Francis Williams, a Boston oriental rug importer, amateur botanist and Chinese porcelain collector. They never had children. Blanche and Harriet Boyd Hawes remained good friends and corresponded regularly, Hawes reporting on her Cretan fieldwork and also her later experiences as a nurse in France during the First World War. Blanche contributed to the publication of 1908, *Gournia, Vasiliki and Other Prehistoric Sites on the Isthmus of Hierapetra Crete. Excavations of the Wells-Houston-Cramp Expeditions. 1901, 1903, 1904.*¹⁰ She wrote essays on the stone vases, so-called “cult objects,” seal stones, and the Minoan religion. The book was well-received in the scholarly community and cemented Mrs. Hawes’ reputation as a respected archaeologist. After this publication Blanche did not write any more on Mediterranean archaeology, but did assist her husband in the writing of his travel book, *Undiscovered France*,¹¹ and also wrote a biography of her aunt, Mary

⁸ Allesbrook 1992, 102.

⁹ Fotou and Brown 2004, 222.

¹⁰ Published by the American Exploration Society and the Free Museum of Science and Art, 1908.

¹¹ Emile Francis Williams. *Undiscovered France; an eight-weeks automobile trip in the provinces with special reference to the architecture, archaeology, history, and scenery.* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1927).

Wheeler. Blanche Wheeler Williams passed away on December 9, 1936, at her home in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

WORKS CITED (for those authored by Blanche Wheeler Williams, see below)

- Allsebrook, Mary. *Born to Rebel: The Life of Harriet Boyd Hawes*. Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1992.
- Fotou, Vasso and Ann Brown, "Harriet Boyd Hawes," in G. Cohen and M. Sharp Joukowsky, eds. *Breaking Ground: Pioneering Women Archaeologists*. (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Mich Press, 2004): 198 - 273.
- Hawes, Harriet Boyd. *Gournia, Vasiliki and Other Prehistoric Sites on the Isthmus of Hierapetra Crete. Excavations of the Wells-Houston-Cramp Expeditions. 1901, 1903, 1904*. Philadelphia: The American Exploration Society and The Free Museum of Science and Art, 1908.
- Hawes, Harriet Boyd. "Memoirs of a Pioneer Excavator in Crete." *Archaeology* 18.1 (1965): 94 – 101.
- Hawes, Harriet Boyd. "Memoirs of a Pioneer Excavator in Crete: Part II." *Archaeology* 18.4 (1965): 268 - 276.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Blanche Wheeler Williams

- 1908 "Stone Vases," "Cult Objects," "Religion of the Minoans," "Seal Stones from Gournia," and "Minoan Writing and Dress." In H. Boyd Hawes. *Gournia, Vasiliki and Other Prehistoric Sites on the Isthmus of Hierapetra Crete. Excavations of the Wells-Houston-Cramp Expeditions. 1901, 1903, 1904*. Philadelphia: The American Exploration Society and The Free Museum of Science and Art, 1908.
- 1927 with Emile Francis Williams. *Undiscovered France; an eight-weeks automobile trip in the provinces with special reference to the architecture, archaeology, history, and scenery*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1927).
- 2000 (2nd ed.) *Mary C. Wheeler. Leader in Art and Education*. Providence: Wheeler School.