



# Pioneers in Maya Archaeology: Charles P. Bowditch (1842-1921)

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When we think of the pioneers in Maya archaeology, names like Alfred P. Maudslay, Tobert Maler, Edward H. Thompson, Sylvanus G. Morley and Alfred Tozzer come to mind. What all of these people have in common is the financial support of Charles Pickering Bowditch.

Charles Pickering Bowditch was born in Boston, MA, on September 30, 1842, into a family well-known in Boston and around Harvard University. His grandfather, Nathaniel Bowditch, described as the father of modern maritime navigation, was a self-taught mathematician whose work in mathematics and astronomy led to an honorary Masters from Harvard and to his election as president of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences from 1829 to 1838, a post Charles P. Bowditch later would hold from 1917 to 1919.

Charles Bowditch graduated with an A.B. degree from Harvard in 1863 and then served as an officer in the Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry and the 5th Massachusetts Volunteer Cavalry during the Civil War. Returning to Harvard after the war, he completed his A.M. degree in 1866 and then married Cornelia Livingston Rockwell. In his business life he was a director of the Boston & Providence Railroad Corporation and president of several companies, including Pepperell Manufacturing Company and Massachusetts Hospital Life Insurance Company.

Bowditch traveled for pleasure in 1888 to southern Mexico and the Yucatan, developing an interest in Maya studies. In that same year, he became a benefactor of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard and continued to support its programs until his death.

In 1891, he funded the Peabody's first expedition to Central America and continued to fund these and most of the museum's publications concerning these expeditions for the remainder of his life. He did not just provide the money for the Central American Expedition Fund, he personally planned each expedition. Bowditch became a

member of the Peabody's Committee for Central American Researchers in 1891, was elected a trustee of the Museum for 1894 and 1895, and served on departmental committees from 1889 through 1899. He joined the Department of Anthropology faculty in 1894, and in 1902, Bowditch became a founding member of the American Anthropological Association.

Alfred Tozzer, first recipient of the Archeological Institute of America's Traveling Fellowship in American Archeology (primarily funded by Bowditch) wrote in his obituary of Charles Bowditch "There is hardly a man now working in the Central American field today who was not directly beholden at some time in his career to Mr. Bowditch for encouragement and aid."



Charles P. Bowditch in the field at Patuca Bar, Honduras, March, 1890.

His support began with Edward H. Thompson's work in the Yucatán in 1888-1891. For the first expedition actually dispatched by the Peabody Museum, to Copán in 1891, Bowditch had helped the Peabody secure a 10-year concession with Honduras to explore there. He became friends with Alfred Maudslay when he joined the Copán work. The Peabody and Bowditch financed Teobert Maler's work from 1899 through 1905. Other work supported by Bowditch through the Peabody included the work at Chichén Itzá on the dredging the cenote by Edward Thompson occurring from 1904 to 1910 and the mostly annual



Photograph of a painting of Charles P. Bowditch by Ignace Gaugengigl.

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exploratory expeditions starting in 1909 and continuing until his death.

Mr. Bowditch's personal work included research on hieroglyphic writing and the Maya calendar. His *Notes on the Report of Teobert Maler in Memoirs of the Peabody Museum, Vol. 2., No. 1* was published in 1901 and continues to be referenced occasionally. In 1910, he published *The Numeration, Calendar Systems and Astronomical Knowledge of the Mayas*. Many translations of Maya studies were financed by Charles Bowditch. He translated Maler's work from German to English for publication.

Other German writers whose works he had translated include Eduard Seler, Ernst Förstemann and Paul Schellhas. Bowditch had copies made of the Codex Nuttall, Codex Laud, and the Sahagun manuscript, and he purchased photographic copies of the William Gates collection of more than 50,000 pages of manuscripts and books. Charles Bowditch had amassed a large library of Maya documents, most of which was presented to the Library at the Peabody Museum.

Tozzer described Charles Bowditch's personality as "very strong," and based on comments by others, many felt this was kind. Bowditch's legacy, though, is his contribution to the early foundations of Mesoamerican Archaeology.

He is memorialized by the "Charles P. Bowditch Professor of Central American and Mexican Archaeology and History" at Harvard University, the chair currently held by Dr. William Fash.

Sources: *Who's Who in Finance, Banking and Insurance*, 1911; "Charles Pickering Bowditch" by Alfred M. Tozzer, *American Anthropologist* Vol. 23, No. 3, 1921; *Alfred Maudslay and the Maya, A Biography* by Ian Graham; "Alfred Maudslay" by Alfred M. Tozzer, *American Anthropologist* Vol. 33, No. 3; 1931.