

## OBITUARIES

### France Vinton Scholes (1897-1979): A Personal Memoir

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After a brilliant career spanning almost six decades as a professional historian, teacher, archival scholar, and university administrator, France Vinton Scholes died in Albuquerque, New Mexico on February 11, 1979. A medievalist by training, he became one of the foremost historians of colonial Latin America and the Hispanic Southwest. After studying at Harvard University with Roger Bigelow Merriman, Charles H. McIlwain, Frederick Jackson Turner—and later with Clarence Haring—Scholes first taught at Radcliffe, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Colorado College before he accepted an appointment at the University of New Mexico in the spring of 1924. Except for intervals in the 1930s and 1940s, he served the university as professor, department chairman, Graduate Dean and Academic Vice-President until 1956 when he was named Research Professor of History, a position he held until his retirement in 1962.

Between 1931 and 1946, Professor Scholes was Head of the Post-Columbian History Section, Division of Historical Research of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, D.C. During his career he published over fifty important contributions to the history of seventeenth-century New Mexico, the colonial Maya area, and central Mexico. When possible he divided his time between teaching, research, and academic administration. His historical works always exemplified a flair for discovery of new and important documentation—archival sources which revised the timeworn interpretations of his field. Most scholars believed that since the conventional documentation on the seventeenth-century New Mexico colony had been destroyed in the Pueblo Rebellion of 1680, it was impossible to write the domestic

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history of the colony. Scholes patiently mined the Inquisition archives in Mexico City for New Mexico materials and produced two definitive volumes using data from the voluminous trials to reconstruct the social and political history of the province from 1610 to 1680. Besides the books, a score of important research articles resulted from these investigations.

For the Maya area Scholes discovered unique documentation in Spanish archives for volumes on Yucatán, Cozumel, and Guatemala which he coauthored with Ralph Roys, Eleanor B. Adams, and other colleagues at the Carnegie Institution. So profound were his contributions that Alfred Marston Tozzer gave him major credit in his Landa volume, and J. Eric Thompson said Scholes was “among the giants in this century in Maya Studies.” At the apex of his career as a research professor France Scholes focused his interests on the life and times of Fernando Cortés, especially the post-conquest years. His interest in central Mexico led him to publish, with Eleanor B. Adams, seven volumes of documents on Indian policy, tribute, the Church, and social history.

France V. Scholes will be remembered by mature scholars and fledgling investigators as a generous man with an encyclopedic knowledge of the Archivo General de la Nación in Mexico City and the Archivo General de Indias in Seville. He shared his knowledge with all who came to his door. I believe that he was often generous to a fault. A smaller group of professionals, his former students, will remember him as a master teacher, a man of uncompromising scholarly standards who took the training of young historians very seriously. It is here that my personal memoir begins.

I first studied with France V. Scholes in 1953, when he was Academic Vice-President and Graduate Dean at the University of New Mexico and I was a first-year doctoral student. He completely overwhelmed me with his breadth of knowledge in all areas of Medieval and Early Modern European History as well as in Colonial Latin America and the Spanish Borderlands of North America. I took a seminar with him on Colonial Latin American Institutions held in his living room, 115 South Harvard Drive, and which met Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evenings from 7:00 to 10:30 or later. In those days, and certainly today, it was most unusual for seminars to meet for ten to twelve hours weekly. None of us complained and some of us were dismayed that the time was too short for us to acquire the knowledge that he had to offer in history, anthropology, linguistics, art, and literature. He worked harder in the seminar than any of his

students, and we worked extremely hard for he was a very demanding teacher. He knew what you ought to say and what you were going to say before you said it. It was foolhardy to face him in a seminar situation unprepared.

In those days with his steely mane of gray hair, I thought he looked like the lion that roared in MGM pictures and I was terrified of him until I learned that he was willing to help, to advise, to commiserate, and to give his time to students who were willing to work and who showed the qualities of dedication to research and writing which he himself exemplified par excellence. I remember today with some humor my first seminar project. He literally gave me a beady stare and announced that I was to work on the *encomienda* in the Spanish Empire. There followed a spate of *encomienda* historiography which I was to read, to criticize, and to report on—later I learned that he would have preferred that I did not use notes in my presentation! One of the first books I opened at random on the *encomienda*, a work by Lewis Hanke, announced that France V. Scholes knew more about the primary documentation for the *encomienda* than any other scholar! I took up the challenge and gave what finally amounted to a five-hour presentation on the *encomienda* punctuated with his criticisms, insights, and commentaries on what the unpublished archival documentation said. My heart sang when he pronounced to a third party, who later told me, that I had been “thorough.”

Scholes had the ability to teach his students how to illuminate the general through the study of the particular and they learned how to relate historical documents to the far broader context of society and history. His lectures in the seminars often came from unpublished archival documentation and his presentations were works of art and publishable contributions to knowledge. What is truly amazing, since he was an overburdened academic administrator, was that he labored long hours over these original lectures not as papers for the scholarly community but for presentation to our seminar. When he taught at Tulane University many years later, he did exactly the same thing. Scholes never gave “cold turkey” or warmed-over lectures to his graduate seminars. He continued to read voraciously in his field until the day he died.

Since I wanted to study sixteenth-century Mexico, and I already had background in Latin and Spanish, Professor Scholes decided early on that I should join his non-credit class in paleography and manuscripts. I, my colleague Robert W. Delaney, and several others met additional late afternoons to learn to decipher the *letra procesal* of

early colonial documents. Here again Scholes was demanding—if he were to spend his time we had to work hard. I remember how the class shrunk as the going got rough! Apparently he used the same techniques on us that he had used with Eleanor B. Adams and Robert Chamberlain twenty years before—sink or swim, he hit us with difficult 1520s material and then with tact and patience taught us to read. The course which spanned most of the year, with many individualized sessions, did much more than teach us how to decipher the difficult Spanish. It also dealt with archival techniques and historical criticism. We learned, for instance, why certain Juan Domínguez de Mendoza documents from seventeenth-century New Mexico were forgeries, how encomiendas were granted in legal formulary, the various types of civil and ecclesiastical documentation we might expect to encounter when we went into the archives, and much more. Of course, Professor Scholes taught us as a professional obligation and as a personal favor. This course was not part of his teaching load.

As I spent twenty-five years of intermittent research in the archives of Mexico and Spain, I came to realize the staggering intellectual and professional debt that I owed him, and I vowed to pay that debt by passing along his knowledge and mine to my own students. It was always clear to me that a Scholes student had a certain cachet in the archives of Mexico and Spain where Scholes was known as “El Decano de los Investigadores” (The Dean of Researchers). The archival staff was convinced that his students were well prepared and always knew what they were doing.

France V. Scholes communicated to me and to a whole generation of other students a feeling for historical research—history writing based upon extensive archival documentation—that I have called “The Scholes Tradition” in a France V. Scholes commemorative edition of *The Americas: A Quarterly Review of Inter-American Cultural History*, 27 (January 1971). Scholes was an “historian’s historian,” a researcher without peer. I wish to reiterate here the Scholes dictum that teaching and research go hand in hand. One reinforces the other. His entire career from the 1920s forward illuminates the truth of that statement.

Finally and personally I want to say that Lillith Scholes, his beloved wife, and “Mama Scholes” to all of us, was also an “adjunct professor.” Her humor, her humanity, and her common sense were always there in the background and tended to condition many of his attitudes and to serve as a charming counterpart to his essentially serious nature. Many were the stories she told us about him that made him wince but which also enhanced his own humanity and his status in our young

minds as a true man of letters. Like Lillith, I loved the man and admired the teacher over all of our years together. He often said that his best legacy was his students. All of us are grateful to be an extension of his qualities of mind and of his scholarly works.