

## **James Geddes, Jr. – Biographical sketch**

James Geddes, Jr. — future teacher, translator, renowned linguistic scholar — was born in 1858 to Scottish and French parents, in Boston. Though his father dressed him in kilts and tartans for his baby portraits, it was toward the language and culture of his mother, Laure née Sazy, that he would gravitate for his fortunes and life's work.

Almost nothing is known of Geddes's boyhood, but we can confidently infer that he was an accomplished and ambitious student. He entered Harvard in 1876 and graduated four years later, a classmate of Theodore Roosevelt, having specialized in Romance languages.

It is at this point that Geddes, then 21, entered a period of adventure and experience, the scope and variety of which seem emblematic of a certain lost order of American opportunity. Directly out of school, he began a two-year position as clerk to the US Consul in Trieste, then part of Austria, and spent another year travelling through Europe as tutor and companion to the budding newspaper baron Edward Scripps. After returning home to Boston, he next went to Washington, where he served for two years as secretary to a US Congressman, Theodore Lyman of Brookline, and witnessed the inauguration of Grover Cleveland in 1885. Geddes then went on to teach at the Groton School in its relative infancy and after that, at the age of 29, in the last non-academic position he would ever occupy, became a clerk to the president of the Union Pacific Railroad. Later that same year, 1887, Geddes obtained a position as a language instructor at Boston University, where he would stay for half a century.

Clearly, this was a good fit. In the next seven years, he obtained both his Master's and PhD degrees, became an Assistant and then a full Professor, married, and established a home in Brookline.

At Harvard, he wrote his doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Edward Stevens Sheldon, a Germanist and Romanist, as well as a founding member of the American Dialect Society, for which Sheldon served as its first secretary and one of its early presidents. Through Sheldon, who was a

student in Leipzig and Berlin during the same years as Ferdinand de Saussure, James Geddes was the latest in a line of scholars that include some of the earliest Romance comparative linguists and philologists: Adolf Tobler (noted historian of the French language), Friedrich Diez (founder of the discipline of Romance Studies) and Friedrich Welcker (philologist and close friend of Wilhelm von Humboldt).

With such strong roots in Romance Studies, it is not surprising that Professor Geddes taught the four principal Western Romance languages at Boston University: Italian, French, Spanish and Portuguese. He also taught phonetics and became a proponent of its usefulness for improving language teaching. The wanderings of his early adulthood were now behind him and he turned his considerable attention to scholarship and teaching.

At Boston University, he became the successor of Professor Torricelli as chair of Italian Studies and was connected for several years with the Circolo Italiano di Boston. His interest in the Italian culture was well recognized by the Italian government. In 1909, he was made Cavaliere della Corona d'Italia. He was promoted to Ufficiale in 1932 and Commendatore in 1937. Although his publications include several titles on Spanish, Italian, and English phonetic spelling, it was on the topic of the French language that he was most prolific. Perhaps this had something to do with the fact that his wife, Mathilde née Wolfhugèl, was, like his mother, also French-born.

His work on French includes an authoritative translation of the *Chanson de Roland*, a famous Old French tale transmitted orally in the epic tradition, a textbook on the Pronunciation of French and a detailed chronicle of the literary output of French Canada. To quote Professor Adjutor Rivard, of Laval University, on the latter: "Il est vraiment étonnant que le savant professeur puisse, de Boston, suivre avec autant de sûreté le mouvement littéraire canadien." (It is truly astonishing that the eminent professor can, from Boston, follow with such reliability the *Canadien* literary movement.) A true heir to his comparative linguistic predecessors, Geddes was a pioneer in conducting fieldwork on the dialects of North American French. His PhD dissertation (1894, published in 1908) is a rigorous description of the Acadian dialect spoken on the Quebec shore of the Chaleurs Bay. He later also published

scholarly work on the French of Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré (Québec) and of a French community of Maine. Professor Geddes was also active among the community of North American French researchers of his time, as is clear from his participation in the *Congrès de la langue française au Canada* and his collaborations with the aforementioned Professor Rivard, the foremost French-Canadian lexicographer of the time. The outstanding scholarly work of James Geddes, Jr. on North American French is still abundantly cited today by the top researchers in the field, after more than a century.

Alongside the formal honors came other rewards of the well-lived academic life: an enormous book collection, a summer home on Nantucket, the esteem of his colleagues, the love of his students, and enough prosperity for him to endow a lecture series and library to his workplace. When he left the university at the age of 80 in 1937, it was full-page news in a Boston paper. After five years of quiet retirement and five more of decline, Geddes died in 1948, ninety years old. A bibliography of his works totals approximately 150 publications.