
Elias Howard Sellards (*Florida*)**Frank Rupert** (*Florida Geological Survey*)

Elias Howard Sellards was born May 2, 1875, at Carter, Ky., the son of Wiley W. and Sarah Menach Sellards. His early school years were spent in Carter, and his family later moved to Kansas while Sellards was a youth. He continued his schooling at Scranton, Kan., completing high school in 1894. Sellards enrolled at Washburn Academy in Topeka, Kan., and later attended the University of Kansas in Lawrence, from which he received his B.A. degree in 1899 and an M.A. degree in 1900.



In 1899, while a student at the University of Kansas, Sellards discovered the Elmo fossil site, an extremely rich deposit that yielded some 6,000 specimens of Permian insects and plants, exceeding in volume all such material collected from American sites during the previous century. He continued his graduate study in paleontology at Yale University, and received his Ph.D. degree in 1903.

After a brief stint at the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh, Sellards began a teaching career as instructor in geology and mineralogy at Rutgers College in New Brunswick, N.J., during the 1903–04 school year. In 1904, he accepted the chair of professor of geology and zoology at the newly formed University of Florida in Gainesville. While at the University of Florida, Sellards also served as the state entomologist during 1904–05.

In June of 1907 the Florida legislature established funding for a permanent state geological survey, and Gov. Napoleon Broward appointed Sellards to the new state geologist position. Sellards moved to Tallahassee to start the fledgling Florida Geological Survey. On September 4, 1907, he married Anna Alford, with whom he would later have two daughters, Helen and Daphne.

Sellards spent his first year at the Florida survey creating the new agency from scratch, first occupying an unused committee meeting room in the capitol, and later in a two-room office shared with the state chemist. By 1908, Sellards had hired Herman Gunter as his assistant, and engaged the services of George Matson and Frederick Clapp to prepare a report on the general geology and stratigraphy of the state and coordinate activities with the U.S. Geological Survey. He also established the Florida Geological Survey library and its first museum collections. In addition to attending the inaugural meeting of the Association of American State Geologists in 1908, Sellards was invited to the first Conference for the Preservation of

Natural Resources, held the same year in Washington, and presided over by President Theodore Roosevelt.

Sellards devoted considerable attention to Florida's fossil vertebrates, especially early man. In 1913, human remains were found in the undisturbed wall of a canal at Vero (now Vero Beach), Fla., seemingly in association with extinct Pleistocene fauna. Since this discovery suggested that man may have arrived in Florida much earlier than previously thought at the time, the discovery resulted in a conference of noted scientists at the site in 1916. Subsequent controversy over the true age of "Vero Man" plagued Sellards for much of his career, but nonetheless fortified his interest in early human cultures.

Sellards served the Florida Geological Survey with distinction until April of 1919. He had firmly established the foundation of a successful agency that would grow throughout the next century along with the state it served. During his 12-year tenure at the Florida survey he published 12 annual reports, two bulletins, a geologic map, and numerous articles. These publications were primers on the geology, groundwater, and mineral resources of Florida, and set the pace for subsequent research into the solid earth systems so vital to Florida's developing economy.

In 1919, Sellards resigned from the Florida survey to take a more lucrative position as a research geologist with the Texas Bureau of Economic Geology and Technology, in Austin. One of his first assignments, given him by the Texas attorney general, was to determine the original boundary between Oklahoma and Texas along the Red River. Oil had recently been discovered in the river valley, and a long-running interstate dispute over land ownership prompted what would become one of the first judicial trials to utilize expert witnesses. Sellards presented his painstaking research so thoroughly that the Supreme Court of the United States ruled favorably for Texas (see chapter 5 of this volume, 1928). His knowledge, talents, and ability to carry an extraordinary workload served him well. He was appointed associate director of the Bureau in 1925, and he became director in 1932, a position he held until 1945. Concurrently, he was appointed professor of geology and a member of the graduate faculty at the University of Texas in 1926 and was director of the Texas Memorial Museum in Austin from 1938 until his retirement in 1957. As time permitted, Sellards remained active in field work. He directed a paleontological project that assembled an outstanding collection of Pleistocene fossils for the Texas Memorial Museum, and he made other numerous significant paleontological and anthropological discoveries around Texas. Through this period Sellards also served as president of the Society of Economic Paleontologists and Mineralogists in 1938, councilor of the Geological Society of America from 1938 to 1940, president of

the Paleontological Society in 1942, and vice president of the Geological Society of America in 1943.

In spite of his administrative responsibilities, Sellards found time to teach, write, and edit extensive reports on the geology, mineral resources, and early human inhabitants of Texas. He authored or co-authored 179 publications during his remarkable career, which spanned nearly 60 years. Among his most noted published contributions are the two-volume compendium *The Geology of Texas*, and a book, *Early Man in America*, including a bibliography of literature on the subject. Sellards also taught stratigraphy at the UT Department of Geology and supervised 17 master's students and one Ph.D. student. He was instrumental in the creation of the Petroleum Engineering Department of the university. For his distinguished service and devotion to the science of petroleum geology, Sellards was awarded honorary membership in the American Association of Petroleum Geologists in 1946. He was named director emeritus of the Texas Bureau of Economic Geology in 1945, a position he held until his death, in Austin, on February 4, 1961.

Biography adapted from Texas State Historical Association (2006) and Jackson School of Geosciences (2006).