

The Leakey Family



WHY THEY MADE HISTORY The Leakey family discovered many hominid fossils in East Africa during their work as anthropologists. This discovery showed that humans first evolved in Africa.



As you read the biography below, think about how the Leakeys' perseverance to study in Africa led them to important discoveries.



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LOUIS LEAKEY 1903–1972

Louis Leakey was born to missionary parents in Kenya. He was the first white baby ever seen by the Kikuyu, a native people of Kenya. Louis was interested in **anthropology** and became an expert on the culture of the Kikuyu. During a medical leave from college, Louis joined his first archaeological expedition. He was so interested in this work that he led four more expeditions in East Africa to search for the ancestors of humans. Louis Leakey's decision to search in East Africa made him different than other scientists. At that time, scientists believed that Asia, not Africa, was where hominids and ancient humans existed. Louis, working with his wife Mary, proved otherwise.

MARY LEAKEY 1913–1996

Mary Leakey had been interested in **archaeology** from an early age. Her father was a respected artist and Mary also developed her own art skills. She combined her ability to draw with her interest in science and was recognized as a master of

VOCABULARY

anthropology the science of human beings

archaeology the scientific study of the remains of past human lives and activities

scientific illustration. She met Louis Leakey in 1933. He asked her to join him in Africa to draw stone tools he had found. The Leakeys were married three years later.

Mary and Louis searched throughout Africa. Mary made an important discovery when she found a set of footprints that were 3.6 million years old. The footprints proved that ancestors of humans had walked upright. Together, Mary and Louis found three different sets of fossils, each believed to be a human ancestor.

RICHARD LEAKEY

1944-

Richard Leakey was born to Mary and Louis in 1944. It is not hard to see why he, too, became interested in learning about hominids and early humans. Richard worked with the National Museums of Kenya to lead expeditions in a region of Kenya near Lake Turkana called Koobi Fora. Richard and his team discovered Stone Age tools that were 1.9 million years old. He also found several skulls of early humans. Perhaps Richard's most important discovery is the almost-complete 1.6-million-year-old skeleton of a boy.

Richard Leakey is no longer active in fieldwork, but he continues to educate people about the dangers to the environment through his lectures and books. Richard's discoveries, and those of his parents, remain some of the most important contributions to anthropology to date.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. Draw Conclusions Why do you think that Louis Leakey became interested in studying human ancestors in Africa?

2. Evaluate Why do you think the Leakeys' discoveries were so important?

ACTIVITY

3. Do research to find more information on the fossils found by the Leakeys. Make a chart that shows how each species of human differed.