



Native American Mounds In Madison And Dane County

A Madison Heritage Publication

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Introduction

Human beings have lived in the Madison lakes area for nearly 12,000 years. For most of this time, residents of the Madison area were the ancestors of modern Native American tribes. These early people left behind many traces of their activities in the form of artifacts and the remains of campsites, villages, cemeteries, and earthworks. Among the most visual and impressive vestiges of these ancient cultures are earthen mounds, built over a two thousand year period for burial of the dead and other ceremonial purposes. Over 1,500 of these mounds in numerous clusters or groups were built on or near the shores of the "Four Lakes" of Dane County. Despite early attempts to protect these monuments, as many as 80% have been destroyed by modern agricultural practices and urban expansion. Fortunately, surviving mounds have become the focus of modern interest and concern.

Before the Mound Builders

The first settlers of southern Wisconsin arrived shortly after the retreat of the mountainous glaciers 12,000 years ago. Archeologists refer to this early period of settlement as the Paleo-Indian stage which is dated 10,000 to 6,500 B.C. The earliest of the Paleo-Indians shared their environment with many animal species that are now extinct, such as mammoth and mastodon. They no doubt relied on such animals for food. Little is known about the culture of these early settlers since their habitation sites are rarely found.

During what archaeologists call the Early, Middle and Late Archaic stages, which spanned the next several thousand years, early Native Americans lived in small groups and probably wandered over the land subsisting on a diversity of animal and plant species. Hunting and gathering territories became more confined after about 3,000 B.C. and people may have begun experimenting with the cultivation of native plant species. Long distance trade networks developed, bringing in new ideas and exotic items and raw material such as copper. At the same time, there was an elaboration of ritual activities, particularly those that dealt with the burial of the dead. Mound building may have developed out of this ritual emphasis.

Early Mound Builders

The custom of building burial mounds is a very old one in North America. Here in Wisconsin, it may have begun as early as 800 B.C. during the next period, referred to as the Early Woodland stage (about 700 B.C. to 0 A.D.). Early Woodland peoples were the first to use clay pots for cooking and storage. They collected wild plants such as nuts and hunted a variety of terrestrial and aquatic animals from seasonal camps established at several locations within their territories. Evidence from elsewhere in the state indicates that they cultivated such crops as sumpweed, sunflower, and goosefoot. Early Woodland people occasionally built conical or round mounds in which they buried some of their dead. Very little else is known about these early mounds in this region of the Midwest since few have been positively identified.

Mound building increased during the subsequent Middle Woodland stage (0 A.D. to about 500 A.D.). Mounds built early in this stage were round or conical shaped and were sometimes constructed to a great size and in fairly large clusters or groups. One mound from a group located near the outlet of Lake Monona measured 60 feet in diameter and seven feet high. Such mounds often contained central burial pits. They also sometimes contained rock clusters and enclosures, layers or concentrations of ash, puddled clays and special soils, and other materials that are known to have symbolized protection and rebirth of the soul in the beliefs of many later Native Americans.

Sometimes individuals were interred in these mounds in great numbers. Occasionally the same mound was used repeatedly for interments. Burials were made "in the flesh," as portions of skeletons, or in the form of bone bundles and cremations. Some people were buried in mounds a long time after they had died. This suggests that mounds were not being built continuously but rather at appointed times in conjunction with special ceremonials— a practice that appears to characterize all the periods of mound building in Wisconsin.

Some mortuary customs and artifacts of the early Middle Woodland people in the Madison area suggest a degree of influence by a spectacular cultural phenomenon called the Hopewell Interaction Sphere, named for an important archeological site from this culture in Ohio. The Hopewell Interaction Sphere was a powerful and far flung social, economic, and religious network that was centered in Illinois and Ohio. People associated with Hopewell participated in a sophisticated trade network that covered much of North America and developed a complex social system whereby some family groups occupied positions of great importance or status. Groups of large burial mounds and other elaborate earthworks served as important ceremonial centers for Hopewell-related societies.

While cultures in many areas of Wisconsin and the Midwest show close connections to the Hopewell Interaction Sphere, people in the Madison area seem to have been on the margins of this influence. For example, Madison area Middle Woodland mounds apparently lack the beautifully crafted pots, exotic trade goods, and other objects characteristic of classic Hopewell sites. Local Middle Woodland societies maintained a distinct and somewhat simpler lifestyle that was probably not too much different from earlier times.

The Effigy Mounds

Mound building reached its zenith in Madison and Wisconsin during the Late Woodland stage between about 650 A.D. and 1200 A.D. This was a time of great social, ideological, technological, and economic change. New ideas and new people entered Wisconsin from the south. Increasingly, Late Woodland people were relying on corn agriculture as the means of subsistence, and the bow-and-arrow was used for the first time. Most Late Woodland groups lived in small villages. Houses were oval and "key hole"-shaped and some were partly underground. The houses were quite small since most family and village living occurred outdoors.

At least some Late Woodland groups lived in villages surrounded by wooden stockades. The mound group in Governor Nelson State Park was built near such a stockaded town. The great town of Aztalan, constructed near Lake Mills in nearby Jefferson County, was occupied by both Late Woodland people and a group of individuals- perhaps traders- from a complex southern Illinois culture known as Middle Mississippian. Elsewhere in the state, a new agriculturally-based culture, the Oneota, emerged after 1000 A.D.

Thousands of spectacular effigy mounds were constructed throughout the southern part of the state by some Late Woodland societies. Effigy mound groups consist of low earthen mounds that are conical, linear, and constructed in the shapes of animals and other forms. Typically mound groups contained a mixture of these mound types.

Wisconsin is the heartland of this Late Woodland effigy mound tradition although some effigy mound groups are found in Iowa, Minnesota and Illinois. The Madison area has one of the largest concentrations of these unique earthworks in the state. Although effigy mound groups are generally dated between 650 A.D. and 1200 A.D., radiocarbon dates and other evidence indicate that the most intensive period of construction occurred between 800 A.D. and 1100 A.D.

Effigy mound groups in the Madison area are typically found on high places overlooking bodies of water, including wetlands. Mound groups are also inevitably located adjacent to zones of abundant and annual recurring food resources— ideal places for the congregation of people on a seasonal basis. Many of these sites are serene places of great scenic beauty. At such places, the mounds were artfully sculpted on the natural landscape, often in complex arrangements and alignments. In some cases, they were constructed around or near mounds built in earlier times. Most effigy mounds contain human burials, but apparently some do not. As with earlier mounds, burials were made in various forms. Mounds also occasionally contain pits, hearths, and rock concentrations; artifacts, however, are few.

Effigy mound groups in the Madison area varied greatly in size. Some consisted of only a few mounds while others numbered over 50. Sometimes the individual mounds were built to impressive lengths. For example, a bird effigy on the Mendota State Hospital grounds has a wing span of over 624 feet. A linear mound at the Edna Taylor Conservancy was originally over 700 feet long.

Over the last 100 years, many ideas have been advanced concerning the meaning of the effigy mound forms. Some Native American people think that the animal effigies represent the totems of various clans. Many effigy forms are also similar to Native American conceptions of important spirit beings. Some researchers have suggested that the effigies relate to stars and star constellations and may even have been used to mark solar and other astronomical events.

Whatever the meaning of the effigies, it is currently believed that effigy mound groups were more than just burial places. They appear to have functioned as multi-

purpose ceremonial centers that were periodically visited by members of a family, band, or tribal group for the purpose of conducting a variety of social, religious, political and economic activities. These activities served to integrate the group, reinforce its identity and beliefs, and to reaffirm its links to the land and the supernatural world.

As in earlier times, much of the ritual activity involved in construction and use of the mounds involved life-renewal symbolism. The burial of honored ancestors was an important part of these rituals, but apparently was not mandatory since some mounds do not contain human remains. As well, the mounds probably functioned as territorial markers for the social group who built the mounds.

Mound Building and Use in Later Times

Current dating of mounds indicates that mound construction ceased or significantly decreased in southern Wisconsin after about 1200 A.D. In the northern part of Wisconsin and Minnesota conical mounds were probably constructed right up to the time of European contact in the seventeenth century.

Although mounds have not been constructed here for a very long time, historical and archeological evidence as well as the oral traditions of Native Americans in Wisconsin indicate that the Winnebago and other tribes occasionally used existing mounds for burial places as late as the nineteenth century.

Contemporary Native Americans revere and honor mounds as both ancestral burial places and spiritual centers. Visitors to mounds and mound groups should bear in mind that these places are considered sacred to many Wisconsin Indians.

Preservation of the Mounds

During the early part of the 20th century some Madison residents became concerned about the rapid destruction of these unique ancient monuments by farming and urban development. Out of this concern came one of the earliest mound preservation movements in the country. Working .on behalf of the Wisconsin Archeological Society and the State Historical Society, archeologist and museum director Charles E. Brown led efforts to identify, map, and protect mound sites in the Madison area and to educate the public of their importance. He and others worked closely with the City of Madison, the University, and a variety of organizations and individuals to save these special places from development. While these efforts were not always successful, many of the mounds now existing on public and private lands owe their existence to this early preservation campaign.

In 1966 the National Historic Preservation Act was enacted. It offers protection to mounds and other significant historical sites that are listed on the National Register of Historic Places from potentially harmful actions funded or permitted by the federal government. In 1970 the Madison Landmarks Commission was established to protect

historic sites, including effigy mounds. During the 1970s and 1980s many mound groups in Madison were nominated and listed on the National Register and as Madison Landmarks.

To date, the strongest protection of mound sites has come from a 1985 Wisconsin state law (s. 157.70 Wisconsin Statutes) that prohibits disturbance of burial sites on both public and private land without state approval. In Madison and throughout most of the state this protection extends to a five-foot buffer around the mound and burial site. A new Dane County ordinance prohibits disturbance within 25 feet around some mounds and burial sites located in unincorporated areas.

Currently efforts are underway by the City of Madison and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin to identify all existing mounds and to protect them through a combination of City Landmark, National Register, and burial site designations. Dane County is pursuing a similar plan for mound groups located outside of incorporated areas. Individuals with knowledge of unrecorded mounds or who are aware of mound disturbances or threats should notify one of the following:

- Preservation Planner City of Madison (608) 266-6552
- Burial Sites Preservation Office State Historical Society of Wisconsin (608) 264-6503



A Tour of Native American Mound Sites

The map accompanying this booklet shows twenty Native American mound sites that are accessible to the public. The numbers on the map correspond to the numbered sites listed below. When visiting the mounds, please stay on public lands and respect the privacy of occupants of adjoining properties.

1. Burrows Park

This Late Woodland straight-winged bird effigy mound has a wingspan of about 128 feet. A running fox mound used to exist to the north of the bird. The bird effigy was restored in 1934 by removing tree stumps, repairing mutilations caused by vandals, and restoring sod. The mound is located on a rise just east of the Burrows Park parking lot on Burrows Road off of Sherman Avenue.

2. Elmside Park

At the corner of Lakeland Avenue and Maple Avenue overlooking Lake Monona are two well-preserved Late Woodland animal effigies now referred to as a lynx and a bear. These mounds were originally part of a dense and extensive cluster of mounds that extended along the north shore of Lake Monona. Once part of the Simeon Mills farm, this site was still a favored Winnebago campground as late as the late 19th century. Most of the mound cluster, which included a bird effigy with a reported wingspan of 568 feet, was destroyed by turn-of-the-century residential development. Nearby, the beautiful sculpture, entitled "Let the Great Spirits Soar," was carved by Harry Whitehorse, a Winnebago whose ancestors have lived in the Four Lakes area for hundreds of years. The sculpture was carved from a storm-damaged hackberry tree and honors his Indian ancestors and the effigy mound builders.

3. Hudson Park

At the intersection of Lakeland and Hudson Avenues is a long-tailed animal effigy variously referred to as a turtle, a lizard and a panther. Part of the tail was cut off when Lakeland Avenue was constructed.

This mound was originally part of a large group of mounds located a short distance west of the Elmside Mounds. This group included a goose mound with folded wings, at least one bird mound, animal effigies and other mounds. They were destroyed by residential development around the turn of the century.

4. Edna Taylor Conservancy

Six linear mounds and one panther effigy associated with the Late Woodland Stage are located on a high glacial drumlin. Early settlers remember this area as a hill completely covered with woods except that the mounds had no trees on them. Surrounding the drumlin was open countryside with marsh and open water to the south (the small marsh in the conservancy is a remnant of this once much larger wetland). On the northwest slope of the drumlin are three linear mounds and a well-preserved panther effigy. Three very long linears follow the crest of the hill. They have been somewhat shortened at both ends by farming and highway construction. Originally a linear mound followed the hill crest to the north of the existing group, and other mounds extended southwest along the hill. Most of the southern mounds were destroyed by farming and residential development. The entire group once stretched for nearly a mile.

To reach the mounds, start from the Edna Taylor Conservancy parking lot off Femrite Drive and walk north along the main path for about 1500 feet. The linear mounds extend along the side of the path and the panther effigy is to the right of the path near the north end of the mound group. The other linear mounds can be seen in the sledding area.

5. Mendota State Hospital Grounds

Portions of two impressive mound groups are preserved on the hospital grounds. One is referred to as the <u>Mendota State Hospital Group</u>. It contains some of the finest and largest effigy mounds anywhere in the world. Included are three very large birds, including one with an original wingspan of over 624 feet. Two panthers remain, one of which has an unusual curved tail; this one has also been called a squirrel. A rare deer effigy was sculpted with four legs, rather than the two legs usually seen. Two bears, several conicals and one undetermined shape also remain of a group that once included at least six more mounds.



The second group, called the **Farwell's Point Group**, is west of the first on a point of land 70 feet above lake level. Among these mounds are a dozen large and small conicals, the tallest of which is ten feet high. Traces of two linears, parts of two panthers, a bird and an undefined effigy also remain. Other mounds, including several conicals, linears, a bird, a goose, a bear and a possible dragonfly effigy were destroyed by construction of the state hospital buildings and roads. The mounds here were probably built over a 1000 year period. The large conicals are believed to have been built during the Middle Woodland stage, while the effigies and other low mounds probably date to the Late Woodland stage.

Archeologists have also found Native American village sites and traces of ancient corn hills on the Hospital grounds. The panoramic view of Lake Mendota and its shores from this point is one of the best anywhere on the lake.

To view these two groups, check in first at the Administration Building. From Troy Drive, take the main road into the hospital grounds; the Administration Building is the first building on the right.

After checking in, continue along the Main Drive to the first intersection and turn left. The panther with the curved tail is in a clearing on the right. Further along this road, take the next left, which will lead to a parking lot. The Mendota State Hospital Group covers a large section of ground both behind and in front of these buildings. The old Victorian fence posts mark the main formal axis of the original hospital grounds. They were taken from the grounds of the State Capitol when the current capitol building was constructed.

The Farwell's Point group is further to the west. Follow the main drive westward until it forms a T-intersection with Memorial Drive. Turn left on Memorial Drive and follow the main loop around to the north. The mounds are clearly visible on both sides of the road.

6. <u>Cherokee Park</u>

Two large conical mounds in Cherokee Park probably date to the Middle Woodland stage, hundreds of years before the effigy mounds were built. Start in the parking lot near the end of North Sherman Avenue. To reach the first mound, walk on the service drive into the park and take the third right onto the dirt and gravel trail just before the "service drive" sign. To reach the other mound from the main service trail near the parking lot, turn right at the second trail, take the next left, and then take the next right. The mound is near the top of the hill in the woods on your left. A linear mound dating to the Late Woodland stage is also located in the park. To find it, follow the service drive to its end. The mound is in the woods to the right.

7. Vilas Circle Park

When Vilas Avenue was platted in the 1890s, the developers created a small oval park in the 1400 and 1500 blocks to preserve a large Late Woodland bear effigy. The mound sits at the west side of the park. Part of the rear leg was destroyed during street reconstruction. The bear was once part of a large group that consisted of the bear, seven linears and a conical mound. Portions of two of the linear mounds remain nearby on private property (inaccessible).

8. Vilas Park

Overlooking the zoo at the, corner of Erin and Wingra Streets is a Late Woodland mound group consisting of a bird effigy, a linear and six conicals. Two or three additional conicals and another bird have been destroyed. The plaque marking this group was dedicated in 1915 in a ceremony attended by representatives of twelve Native American tribes. Other mounds were once located below, on the grounds of the zoo proper. Most of Vilas Park was originally a marsh, providing a bounty of fish, birds, small game and wild rice to the mound builders.

9. Forest Hill Cemetery

This Late Woodland effigy mound group presently consists of two panthers, a linear and most of a goose effigy (the head was destroyed when the Illinois Central Railroad was built in the 1880s). Three other linears in line with the panther's tail to the northeast were destroyed by early cemetery construction. From the main cemetery entrance follow the left-most forks in the cemetery road until you reach the back of the cemetery near the railroad tracks. During cemetery office hours, you may pick up a map to guide you to the mounds. Recognizing the quiet beauty of the spot, the City selected this acreage in 1857 as its own burial ground, thus continuing the ancient tradition to modern times. Many prominent Madisonians are buried here, including historian Frederick Jackson Turner and Progressive politician "Fighting Bob" LaFollette.



10. Edgewood College

On the grounds of Edgewood College are thirteen mounds overlooking Lake Wingra. One early historical account described Lake Wingra in the summer as a sea of reeds and wild rice. The Winnebago used Lake Wingra as an abundant food source well after Euro-Americans began settling in the area. Along Edgewood Drive, which runs along the lakeshore, are seven conical mounds and the tip of a linear mound along the edge of a drainage swale. Between Edgewood Drive and the library are two remnants of a linear mound. On the other side of the library near Woodrow Street is a large bird effigy. Three conical mounds (of an original group of eight) remain along a path to the north of the Edgewood Campus Grade School playground. Finally, a low mound along the northeast wall of the student services building may be a remnant of one of two bear effigies that once existed on the grounds. Other large mound groups once existed in the Zoo and in the Wingra Park neighborhood to the west. Residential and park development have destroyed all traces.

11. Observatory Hill

Directly to the west of the University of Wisconsin observatory, near the crest of Observatory Hill, are a bird mound and a turtle effigy. The wings of the bird mound, originally spanning 133 feet, have both been truncated. The turtle mound was unusual for its two tails (extending toward the lake) but one is barely discernable and the other is gone. The plaque for the turtle mound incorrectly states that the mound was built by the Winnebago about 500 years ago. We now know that the mounds are much older, although the Winnebago did use these mounds for their burials and religious ceremonies. Two other mounds once belonged to this group: a linear and a panther. These mounds, which were north of the turtle mound, were destroyed by the University sometime after 1922. Just south of this group, where Agriculture Hall is now, was another group of several conicals destroyed in 1902 when Ag Hall was constructed.



12. Willow Drive

On the lawn just behind the Natatorium to the north is a Late Woodland group of three mounds. The goose mound, whose head lies to the west, once had bent wings. Its tail points to three other mounds in the woods. One is a low conical mound. The other two are oddly shaped effigies called 'problematical' mounds. The goose mound was mutilated when the original Willow Drive was constructed. The other two mounds were damaged by farming and one was actually mined for sod in 1911. A conical mound about 1000 feet to the northeast along Willow Drive in the front yard of the Frederick Center is also considered part of this group.

The University of Wisconsin campus was once the site of several other mound groups, including one where the Forest Products Laboratory is now, one just north of North Hall on Bascom Hill, and one on the site of Adams and Tripp residence halls.

13. Picnic Point

Following the southerly pedestrian path that leads toward the tip of Picnic Point, you will see a group of two linear mounds and three conical mounds about halfway to the end of the point. Further along the path to your right is a fourth conical mound. Another conical in this vicinity and a linear and a panther somewhere near the base of Picnic Point have been destroyed. Picnic Point was farmland during the 19th century and all of these mounds were damaged by plowing. They were restored by archeologist Charles E. Brown in 1939.

14. Arboretum

Two Late Woodland effigy mound groups are located on both sides of the main road through the Arboretum. From the entrance to the Arboretum on Wingra Drive, go south along McCaffrey Drive about eight-tenths of a mile to the large parking lot on your right. To see <u>the first mound group</u>, follow the pedestrian path next to the large arboretum sign at the northeast corner of the parking lot. The trail winds around the mound group, along the high ground overlooking Big Spring.

The second group is also accessible from the same parking lot. Start at the "Gallistel Woods" sign across McCaffrey Drive from the parking lot. Follow left inside the fence line along the road until you reach the edge of the woods. Just inside the edge of the woods is a grass path going to the right. Follow this path to the first path leading left into the woods. The next intersection (which is marked with a wooden stake labeled "G6") is in the midst of the mounds. Just before the intersection is a panther and a small conical to the right. Just after are two linears. All of these mounds may be more visible in the winter after frost has cut down the ground cover.

The arboretum has another mound group, composed of three linears in the eastern section of the park, but they are inaccessible and barely discernable due to thick vegetative growth. There is also a mound group in the residential area inside the arboretum. A panther and a turtle remain on private property.



15. Spring Harbor School

One bear mound is located on the Spring Harbor School grounds north of the building. A linear mound (inaccessible to the public), is located on nearby private property. These two mounds are part of a Late Woodland group that once consisted of one bird, the bear, and three linears. The group sat on a ridge overlooking the floodplain of old Merrill Creek. At the mouth of Merrill Creek (now called Spring Harbor) were three springs. Four more springs were once located nearby. This mound group was once one of four distinct groups along this section of the Lake Mendota shoreline. The total of fifty or more original mounds has been diminished to less than half that number. Many of those remaining have been severely damaged by residential development and road construction.

16. <u>Governor Nelson State Park</u>, Town of Westport

Overlooking Lake Mendota in Governor Nelson State Park is a group of six conical mounds and a large panther effigy. The conical mounds may have been built before the panther, perhaps in the Middle Woodland stage, whereas the panther is most probably from the Late Woodland stage. A stockaded Late Woodland village was located to the north of these mounds. An 18th century Ho-Chunk village and remnants of prehistoric or historic Native American cornfields have also been discovered in the vicinity. This group originally also included two more panthers and two linear mounds.

Begin in the parking lot next to the Governor Nelson State Park office off of County Trunk Highway M. A guide map to the park, entitled "Welcome to Governor Nelson State Park" is available at the park office and shows the location of the mounds. From the main road leading into the park, take Indianola Trail to the south and follow the Indianola-Wakanda Trail loop southward. The mounds are on the eastern segment of the loop near the southern end of the trail.



17. <u>Yahara Heights County Park</u>

The Halvorson mound group occupies a shallow rise overlooking the Yahara River and surrounding marshes. The group originally was identified as two panther mounds, one bear, one oval and one linear mound. The bear and the panther remain, as does a possible conical mound not previously recorded. The 228 foot panther is an unusually large example of its type. Start at the yellow gate at the entrance to the county park, which is at the corner of River View Drive and Caton Lane. The panther can be seen from the main trail, and the bear is several hundred feet to the north.

18. Indian Mound Park, McFarland

Situated on the ridge of a glacial drumlin, this group overlooks Lake Waubesa and Mud Lake to the west and south. At the northeast corner of the site, on Burma Road, is the park entrance. Following the walking trail southward you will pass the southern tip of a linear mound (all that is left after the north end of the drumlin was removed for fill), a conical mound, another linear, a conical and an elliptical mound, a large bear effigy, another linear mound and a very unusual hook-shaped mound. Another linear once was located north of this group, but it was destroyed when the north end of the drumlin was removed. These mounds are in very good condition because the site was never plowed. McFarland residents have undertaken volunteer restoration of the mounds and have removed paths and trails that once crossed over them.

To reach the mounds by car, park on Burma Road at the foot of the water tower hill just west of the American Legion Post and follow the walking path up the hill.

19. Goodland County Park, Town of Dunn

This group consists of three linears and a conical mound. The group is located on both sides of the main road into the park, between the parking lot and Goodland Park Road.

20. Siggelkow Park, McFarland

Most Native American mounds in the Madison area have attracted interest from amateur and professional archeologists since as far back as the mid-19th century. But some, such as this group, were never studied and remained relatively unknown until recently. To reach the mounds, park on Rustic Way at the edge of the wooded hill just south of Siggelkow Road and climb to the top of the hill. This group includes a long, narrow linear mound about 225 feet in length. A shallow, barely discernable rise about 30 feet to the southeast may be the remnants of another mound. Further to the southwest (behind the third house south of Siggelkow Road on Paulson Road) is the northern 57 feet of another linear mound that once extended into the neighboring property. Land leveling for the adjacent residential development has destroyed the rest of the mound. From this site, one has a beautiful panoramic view of Madison and the Isthmus.



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McCaffrey Drive



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