Dispelling myths about the Indian mounds

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ANCIENT WORKS
ON THE
COLLEGE GROUNDS,
BELOIT.
Surveyed in 1852 by Prof. S. P. Lathrop.

SCALE
80 ft. to an inch.

Beloit
College
Building
Hallowed Ground

The Indian mounds that dot Beloit's campus have long been surrounded by myth and conjecture, but current scholarship sheds new light on Beloit's oldest feature.

By William Green

Where Beloit College now stands, ancient Native Americans led rich lives for more than 500 generations. These earliest Americans belonged to many groups, spoke many languages, employed diverse technologies, and had a wide array of customs and traditions. Long before European contact, they built communities, agricultural fields, trails, and dams; extracted and worked stone, copper, clay, wood, and other products; managed forest and prairie resources; traded over hundreds of miles; and carved and painted sacred and ritual images on rock.

Between about 500 B.C. and A.D.1200, most Indians also built mounds. They built so many—perhaps as many as 100,000 in eastern North America—that 19th-century observers coined the term “Mound Builders” to identify the then-uncertain creators of these features.

The Mound Builders came to be considered an advanced, civilized race that had been obliterated by the Indians. To many Americans, it was inconceivable that Indians—familiar as decimated, nomadic, and impoverished natives—could have built sophisticated earthworks that bespoke large, stable, long-lived, and prosperous past populations.

It turned out, of course, that Indians had built the mounds. Archaeological work showed that North American Indian history was much longer and more complex than observers had suspected. Some mounds and village sites could...
Beloit's mound group once contained 27 mounds in three main shapes: 19 were circular or oval, six were linear, and 2 were effigy mounds. Only one other mound group in Rock County contained as many, and it was located at the confluence of the Yahara and Rock Rivers, in the northern part of the county. Similarly, the setting of the Beloit College mounds on a bluff overlooking both the Rock River and Turtle Creek—after the Yahara, the second-largest tributary stream in the county—likely reflects the builders' preference for siting mounds close to travel routes, flowing water, natural landmarks, and ecologically diverse locations.

Who built the Beloit College mounds? Indians did, of course. But what group of Indians or tribes might be descended from the builders? Answering these questions is difficult. In the 1800s, Wisconsin tribes said they did not know who built the mounds. More recently, Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) elders have said their ancestors built them. Some researchers questioned the claims, suggesting that those beliefs migrated from anthropologists to the Ho-Chunk. Today, the issue is still contentious.

Wisconsin mounds may reflect beliefs and traditions of the Ho-Chunk and other tribes, but most mounds are 1,000 to 2,000 years old, older than many researchers think a distinct tribal identity can be reasonably traced. Only one of the Beloit College mounds has been firmly dated by radiocarbon. Excavation in 1956 of a small, circular mound near the World Affairs Center recovered charcoal dating to A.D. 500, plus or minus 150 years.

**Early Preservation Efforts**

Interest in the Beloit College mounds began as early as the founding of the College itself. As in the rest of the Midwest, the mid-19th century was a time of extensive mound mapping and excavation. A lot of the mapping was done carefully, by trained surveyors. Prof. Stephen P. Lathrop's 1852 survey of the College mounds was printed in Increase A. Lapham's *Antiquities of Wisconsin*, one of the Smithsonian Institution's earliest books. Lathrop, Beloit's first professor of science, produced the first of several published maps of the mounds, and his is by far the most attractive.

In contrast to the careful surveys, 19th-century mound digging in the Midwest was mostly undocumented and poorly controlled. American archaeology had not developed a standard set of field methods. Curiosity-driven efforts—well meaning as many were—destroyed a great deal of information.

Gradually, people began to appreciate the seriousness of this loss of data and the need to balance research-oriented excavations with site preservation.

Anthropology major Julia Test Parker '42 (digging) and her classmates excavate a mound in the 1940s under the supervision of anthropology professor Paul Nesbitt (not shown).

be tied to living groups. Most, however, were not identifiable to particular tribes.

**Beloit's Mounds: A Closer Look**

The mounds on Beloit's campus have been part of the Rock River valley landscape for at least 1,500 years. They tell fascinating stories—not only about their builders, but also about how today's dominant society tries to understand and contend with the region's ancient human past.
At the College, this recognition came early. As soon as he arrived in 1848, Professor of Ancient Languages Joseph Emerson wrote to his father about the College mounds. The Rev. Ralph Emerson (not the writer Ralph Waldo Emerson) was a professor at Andover (Mass.) Theological Seminary. Intrigued by reports that excavation in one mound had exposed distinct soil strata, Ralph wrote in 1857 that additional “small temporary excavations” in the mound could determine “the length of time elapsed since its original formation,” and he laid out a plausible explanation for the observed soil stratigraphy.

However, he firmly believed that limited digging was all that should be permitted. Ralph gave Joseph $100 to donate to the College with the condition that the excavated mound be restored and that “no part of said mound is ever again to be removed” except for small-scale work such as would be useful in ascertaining the mound’s age. Farsightedly, the Emersons supported both research and preservation. Ralph wrote, “I think some future explorer of the tenth generation may thank me much more for the condition than for the gift.” Their stewardship constituted one of the earliest applications of the conservation ethic to American archaeology.

The College mounds fared better than most other mounds in southern Wisconsin during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Up to 80 percent of the mounds once present in the region were leveled or destroyed. On campus, most mounds were left relatively intact, although they, too, suffered to an extent. Some mounds apparently were excavated or leveled by construction, though documentation is sparse.

The turtle effigy mound described by Joseph Emerson in 1848 as having “body, legs, and tail perfectly distinct” was plowed in the 1870s and partially restored in 1882. The mound group received wide recognition in the 1880s and 1890s through the publications of Stephen Denison Peet, the son of a College founder, a graduate of the College’s first class (1851), and a self-taught archaeological surveyor and prolific publisher. With the founding of the Logan Museum in 1894, the College began extensive, professional anthropological collecting, research, and eventually teaching. Faculty members George Collie and Ira Buell conducted local mound...
mapping and excavation, although after 1920 most field studies and collecting were done in exotic locales such as North Dakota, New Mexico, France, and Algeria.

In this era, Charles E. Brown of the State Historical Society promoted and coordinated local mound preservation efforts throughout Wisconsin. Marking mounds with bronze plaques and stone monuments helped develop local pride and made it more difficult for mounds to be “inadvertently” damaged by construction.

An Outdoor Classroom

Mound excavation resumed in 1934 under the supervision of anthropology professor Paul Nesbitt and again in the 1940s under Nesbitt and Professor Moreau Maxwell. Excavations continued on a periodic basis until 1959 under Professor William Godfrey, Logan Teaching Fellows Robert Alberts and Richard Keslin, and then-student Tyler Bastian’58.

Students participated by excavating square units and trenches into at least five mounds. Initially, Nesbitt wanted to prove that these were in fact ancient Indian mounds, not piles of ash dumped by a college maintenance man (apparently a standard bit of College folklore). Excavators also sought to learn about the mounds' ages and significance, as well as the mortuary behavior of their builders. The digs served as local, small-scale field schools to train students in archaeological methods.

Students apparently enjoyed the experience, even though the work was termed “Operation Back Break” in at least one year. Several participants (including Charles DiPeso’42, Lee Parsons’54, Tyler Bastian’58, and Norman Barka’60) went on to distinguished careers in archaeology. The usual pranks were discovered: Lois Malone Hough’42 reports that her group found pork chop bones and an “Indian Club,” an exercise club from the gym.

Nevertheless, most mounds proved to have been largely undisturbed, offering glimpses into the lives—and deaths—of their builders.

Most mounds contained burials, the skeletons either “flexed” (on the side, knees folded toward the head) or “bundled” (the bones gathered and buried well after death). Adult
individuals of both sexes and a child were found. The remains from excavated mounds are in the Logan Museum collection, though they are not displayed.

Rock piles found in two mounds are termed "altars," but their purpose is unknown. Scattered artifacts were found, mostly bits of broken pottery and stone chips from toolmaking, as well as a few projectile points and scrapers. None appear to have been deliberately placed with burials. Instead, they were likely accidental inclusions in the dirt that was used to build the mounds.

Artifacts from the mounds appear to be of Middle Woodland and the Late Woodland age, 1,000 to 2,000 years old. One mound is dated more precisely: the radiocarbon age of A.D. 500 mentioned earlier comes from charred wood found at the base of a circular mound. We don't know whether the other mounds are of the same age, but the frequency of Late Woodland artifacts suggests that most of the mounds were built around that time or a little later.

People may have built one or more mounds on the site every few years for a few generations, or different groups may have built them hundreds of years apart. Most linear mounds are on the west side of campus, whereas most circular and oval mounds are located to the east. The distinction may relate to ideological or cosmological mapping: if the linear mounds represented mythical water panthers as some people suggest, it makes sense that they are situated closer to the river. Alternatively, if different cultures built the differently shaped mounds, the clusters may represent ritual precincts traditionally used by each social group. Feasting and ceremonies probably accompanied mound building; these rituals most likely were held at seasonal gatherings in the fall when resources were abundant.

**Future of the Mounds**

The final reported excavation and restoration occurred in 1971 under Professor of Anthropology Frederick Lange. Since then, the mounds have been preserved and maintained in good condition. Erosion is a problem on a couple of mounds, but post-excavation restoration work has held up well.

Mound preservation is now law as well as policy. Wisconsin's tough burial sites law, passed in 1986, protects all cemeteries, whether ancient or modern, so no more excavation is planned.

Excavations directed by Assistant Professor of Anthropology Shannon Fie in 2002 were the first to focus on an area between mounds. As reported in *Beloit College Magazine* (spring 2003), this dig recovered Late Woodland pottery from what appears to have been a temporary habitation site adjacent to the mounds. Was this a site of mound-related rituals? Further archaeological testing on campus may answer this question.

The mounds are resting again, as their builders and Ralph Emerson intended. There are many ways to learn about them now without additional excavations: geophysical surveys using electrical, magnetic, and even subsurface radar techniques; soil testing with advanced chemical methods; new dating tools that require only a fraction of a gram of carbon.

The Logan Museum plans to install new interpretive panels on its second-floor railings so community members and visitors can view the mounds and learn about their builders.

The ancient sculptors of Beloit's landscape left us with an intriguing legacy as well as weighty responsibilities: to preserve their works and to learn about their lives. In so doing, we help Beloit's ancient residents live into yet another millennium.

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