

## Toolesboro Mounds History



### The Hopewell Tradition

The Hopewell tradition dates from approximately 200 BC to AD 450, during a time period known to archaeologists as the Middle Woodland. The name of the tradition comes from an excavation of a mound on the Ohio farm of Mordecai Hopewell, and not from the name these people called themselves.

Since we only know the Hopewell people through archaeological excavations and no evidence of written language was preserved, we will never know how they referred to themselves.

The Hopewell tradition is defined by a common set of burial practices among certain Native American groups: the burial of high status individuals in large, conical, earthen mounds with exotic trade goods. The term "Hopewell" refers to this set of shared burial customs, and not to a culture. The phrase "Hopewell people" is used to refer to those groups that participated in the mortuary rituals and constructed the mounds. The Hopewell tradition can be compared to a world religion--an overarching system of beliefs with minor differences, such as language, on the local and individual levels.

### The Mound Builders

The construction of burial mounds and geometric earthworks occurred throughout the eastern half of the United States, centered in Ohio. The Hopewell tradition is one of many burial traditions that constructed mounds throughout the United States. During the nineteenth century, the construction of these earthworks, Hopewell and others, was incorrectly attributed to a "long-lost race" of people referred to as "the Mound Builders." At the time, few scholars believed that the mounds and other earthworks could have been built by ancient Native American groups. Since then, the notion of a "long lost race" has been discredited through scientific excavation and study of the mounds.

### Mound Structure

The Hopewell had various ways of interring their dead within the mounds. Some individuals were placed lying down, others propped in a sitting position against the side of the tomb. Some individuals were cremated, others were placed in structures called charnel houses where the decomposition process was begun, and then later buried. The tombs and the mounds themselves were constructed in a number of different ways. Mound construction typically began with the laying of a sand or clay floor, or a platform in the center, upon which the body and artifacts were placed. Over this, layers of earth, clay, sand, and gravel were piled up to

make a mound. Alternatively, the mound was built up around a tomb made of logs or large stone slabs. Many mounds contain several burials dispersed through the different layers.

## **Way of Life**

The Hopewell diet was based on hunting and gathering, and supplemented by rudimentary agriculture.

They lived in villages located along the flood plains of rivers. They built mounds near their villages, typically on high bluffs. The large clusters of mounds, such as those at Toolesboro, probably served as ceremonial centers for regions. The Hopewell groups also had an extensive exchange network, indicated by artifacts made from Great Lakes copper, Rocky Mountain obsidian (volcanic glass), marine shells and pearls from the Gulf of Mexico, Appalachian mica, and shark teeth from Chesapeake Bay.

Those groups participating in the Hopewell traditions had a high degree of social stratification, that is, they had a social hierarchy. The individuals buried within the mounds represent only the highest level of society. The highest level was made up of leaders, probably chiefs and priests. When the leaders died, they were interred with the exotic goods that symbolized their power. These items were not used daily, but only for ceremonial purposes, as indicated by the absence of marks showing frequent usage.

## **What Happened to the Hopewell?**

After approximately AD 500, the Hopewell tradition of mound building disappears from the archaeological record, an occurrence that has puzzled scholars. Two things could have happened to the people of the Hopewell groups and their traditions. One, they could have shifted south and merged with a later mound building tradition known as the Mississippian. Alternatively, they could have been absorbed by the other local, non-Hopewell groups. This blending would have caused their traditions to change over time into what archaeologists classify as a different cultural and burial tradition.

## **The Toolesboro Indian Mounds Site**

The Toolesboro site consists of seven burial mounds on a bluff overlooking the Iowa River near where it joins the Mississippi River. The conical mounds were constructed between 100 BC and AD 200 by a local Hopewell group. At one time, there may have been as many as twelve mounds, but subsequent settlement and excavation have reduced that number to the present seven. As of yet, no village site near the Toolesboro mounds has been located, and this is attributed to the shifting path of the Iowa River which has obliterated possible village sites on the flood plain over the last 2000 years.

Of the seven mounds, only two are visible on the grounds of the Educational Center. The rest are off in the woods, and are separated by a wire fence from the Educational Center. One of the mounds maintained near the Center, known as Mound 2, is the largest of the remaining mounds, measuring 100 feet in diameter and 8 feet in height. This mound was possibly the largest Hopewell mound in Iowa.

## **After the Hopewell**

The mounds have been excavated by different groups of people since the middle of the nineteenth century. The Davenport Academy of Natural Sciences undertook extensive excavations in the last half of the nineteenth century. Contained within the mounds were typical Hopewell artifacts: copper tools, stone platform pipes, shell and pearl beads, chipped stone tools, and mica sheets. It is difficult to say the number of individuals contained within the mounds and their association to the artifacts and to each other, because of the non-scientific excavations. The mounds did contain a number of burials, although the human remains still available for analysis are few in numbers and poorly preserved.

Since the Hopewell construction and use of the mounds at Toolesboro, there have been many other groups of people associated with the site. Originally, a nearby earthwork referred to as "the old fort" was considered to be a part of the Toolesboro Hopewell mound group. It is possible, however, that this enclosure was actually constructed approximately one thousand years later by a different Native American culture, known as the Oneota, who lived in the same area.

Also in the vicinity of the Toolesboro mounds are the McKinney and Poison Ivy sites, which are Oneota sites as well. Local tradition places the 1673 "discovery" of Iowa by Marquette and Joliet in the shadows of the Toolesboro mounds. The Poison Ivy site supposedly corresponds with the description in Marquette's journal of a village close to their landing site. Recently, however, the validity of this belief has come under question.

## **Early Excavations**

The beginning of the nineteenth century marks the start of the European-American settlement of the land around the mounds. While clearing out earth for root cellars and foundations for their farmsteads, as well as plowing fields that contained mounds, the early farmers began the destruction of the mounds. They removed the artifacts and human remains from the mounds without documenting where items came from or sketching the internal structure of the mounds.

This practice was continued by the early archaeologists from the Davenport Academy of Natural Sciences using crude excavation techniques, causing the loss of artifacts as well as the opportunity to study the mounds further. Some of the mounds have since been restored, that is, the pits caused by excavations or construction have been filled in or the mounds themselves rebuilt.

## **A National Historic Landmark**

The family of George H. Mosier donated the land containing the mounds to State of Iowa in 1963. Since then additional adjoining plots have been purchased to make a state preserve. In 1966, the Toolesboro mounds were designated as a National Historic Landmark. The Educational Center with the museum was constructed in 1969. Since the site became a National Historic Landmark, the State Historical Society of Iowa has managed and maintained the mounds and the museum.

No further excavations are being planned for the Toolesboro mounds. This is for two main reasons. First, it is important to remember that the mounds are sacred burial sites, analogous to modern cemeteries. Many people today would find it offensive if their relatives' graves were excavated in order to learn more about how their relatives lived. While it is difficult to trace the modern descendants of the Hopewell, further excavations of the burial mounds are nonetheless considered disrespectful.

Second, archaeology can be a destructive science. Opening the mounds destroys the possibility of future study. Artifacts that are removed from a site can never be replaced in the exact context and position in which they were originally deposited. Currently, archaeologists prefer to use non-intrusive methods to explore ancient sites such as the Toolesboro mounds. Non-intrusive methods include: aerial photography focusing on the features or contours of the land, surface surveys looking for signs of past occupation (such as artifacts), and remote sensing of the ground, which works similar to an x-ray.