Mound City Group

National Monument
Ohio

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

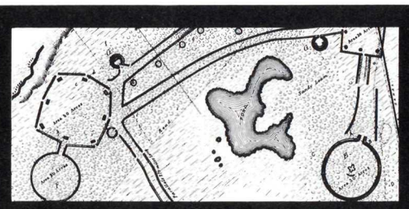
Hopewell cremation ceremony from a painting by Louis S. Glanzman

A 2000 Year Old Cemetery

Mound City was not a city; it was a village and burial site for people living along the Scioto River during the first two centuries A.D. Early explorers and settlers noted the numerous mound and earthwork sites in Ohio and speculated on their origin and use. The seeming mystery of the mounds was heightened by the fact that the Shawnee and other tribes did not construct them and had no knowledge of who had built them and when. Arguments raged over the age and significance of these ancient sites. President William Henry Harrison suggested that they must be several hundred years old, at least, because of the mature forest growth in place on the mounds. Popular speculation held that the mounds had been built by a "lost race" of mysterious origin which had died out or vanished before the historic tribes came on the scene. The fledgling Smithsonian Institution was thrust into the middle of the controversy with its 1848 publication of *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley*, based on studies of various sites by Ephraim G. Squier, a Chillicothe newspaper editor, and Edwin H. Davis, a Chillicothe physician. These men named the place Mound City, because of its unique concentration of mounds: 23 in 5.26 hectares (13 acres). Declining to dignify more far-fetched lost race theories by attacking them directly, Squier and Davis instead suggested a strong connection between the prehistoric cultures of Mexico and those of the Mississippi Valley. The lost race notion was laid to rest decades later after further extensive excavations demonstrated that the mounds were built by early American Indians. We now call the overall culture of these peoples Hopewell, after the 1891 excavation at the farm of Mordecai Hopewell, west of Chillicothe, Ohio. We do not know what name these peoples gave themselves. During the exploration and mapping of prehistoric sites which led to their 1848 book, Squier and Davis numbered and partially excavated several of the mounds at Mound City, amassing a large collection of pipes and other artifacts. During World War I, Mound City was covered by part of a training facility, Camp Sherman, and many of the mounds were destroyed. Excavation and restoration work was conducted by the Ohio State Historical Society in 1920-21, and the site was declared a National Monument in 1923. Additional excavations were conducted in the mid-1960s, and future work will include non-destructive investigations by remote sensing techniques.

Newark Earthworks
Several different types of structures were built during the Hopewell period: village, defensive, burial, and some evidently used for other purposes, involving religious ceremonies, and perhaps games or commercial or political transactions.

Historic tribes often gathered for feasts, ceremonies, and contests of skill, while individuals conducted their own private business on the periphery.



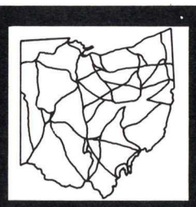
The largest prehistoric earthworks may have been formal meeting places used this way.

Earthworks like Newark were built to grand proportions, reflecting the importance of the activities held within them. The original Newark earthwork complex once covered 10.2 square kilometers (four square miles), including several large compounds connected by causeways; it is only one of about 100 Hopewell earthwork complexes once found in Ohio.

Other prehistoric sites you can visit include Seip Mound, Serpent Mound, Fort Ancient, Miamisburg Mound, Flint Ridge and Tarlton Cross Mound.

Prehistoric Trails
Long-standing patterns of trade between peoples and regions existed in the Midwest for several thousand years before the Hopewell era, and continued long afterwards.

During the Hopewell era, a large part of the trade apparently moved overland. Many of these Ohio trails were in use during Hopewell times and earlier, connecting with other trails spanning the continent.



Many modern Ohio roads began as Indian trails. This map of Ohio trails is redrawn from Frank N. Wilcox, *Ohio Indian Trails.*

The Hopewell World

Consider the following modern events: The President of the United States visits a foreign country; he gives and receives gifts of state to establish or renew ties to the country and to its leaders. As a result of his visit, new contacts between officials, businessmen, and private citizens in each country are made, and commerce between the two countries flourishes.

Some artifacts of the types you see in the museum at Mound City may have been used in this way, to establish trade and diplomatic ties between distant peoples. As more research is done, it becomes more apparent that the term Hopewellian describes a broad, interregional network of contacts between different Indian groups during a period of seven hundred years or more, from 200 B.C. to A.D. 500. The territory we now call southern Ohio was the principal center of this network, extending from Michigan to southern Florida and from Kansas to the east coast.

As we now know them, the Hopewell era peoples included skilled artisans; they fished and hunted, gathered wild foods, and grew a few crops. They lived along river valleys, in permanent or semi-permanent villages near the mounds and earthworks they built.

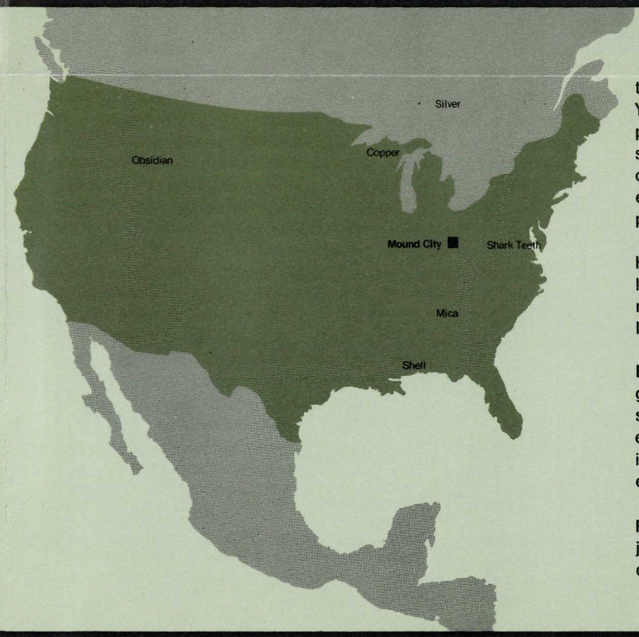
Compared to our technologically-oriented culture, the peoples of the Hopewell era had simple tools. The poles used in building, for example, were cut and prepared with chipped or pecked stone axes and hunters used stone for knives and projectile points.

Some plants such as squash, gourd, and corn were cultivated in garden plots, but most of the food was provided by hunting wild game, fishing, and collecting wild foods such as nuts, seeds, berries, and roots. The hunting and gathering pattern of life was already several thousand years old by the time Mound City was built, but burial customs indicate that by about 1000 B.C. in the eastern woodlands society had begun to change.

We know remarkably little about the structure of society among the many peoples of the Hopewell era, still less about the details of their social interactions. Like medieval Europe or aboriginal Hawaii, individuals and families were ranked in relation to each other, as distinctions of cremation, extended or flexed burial, and types and amounts of grave goods show.

The significance of burial mounds such as those of Mound City was that they established and perpetuated a system of rank distinctions, serving as a visible reminder and demonstration of the power of individuals and families. The labor required to create the mounds and earthworks was a cumulative group investment in maintaining their social order, with planning and work continuing over a period of weeks and months, or even years.

These peoples created and sustained a visible social order with emblems of status made of exotic materials. Besides the copper brought from near the Great Lakes were chunks of obsidian (volcanic glass) from a site in Yellowstone National Park, shark teeth perhaps brought from the Chesapeake Bay, mica from the Smokies, seashells from the Gulf Coast, and silver from Ontario. At regional centers, craftsmen fashioned these and other raw materials into fine objects, which were then distributed to leaders of distant peoples. Food also may have been traded, following the patterns of trade already established.



Hopewell objects represent the widespread Hopewellian system of religious beliefs. However, distinctive cultures flourished, since there was no single dominant person or group capable of controlling more than a local territory.

By about A.D. 500, give or take a few decades in different areas, the great Hopewell enterprise had come to an end. Perhaps this was due to social changes, a breakdown in old patterns of trade, or warfare. Whatever the cause, within a few hundred years a fully agricultural and politically more structured society archeologists call Mississippian had emerged in the Mississippi River Valley and along some of its tributaries.

From today's perspective, it seems that the Hopewell era peoples enjoyed a long period of relative prosperity and stability, for the evidence demonstrates that warfare was far more common after 700 A.D.

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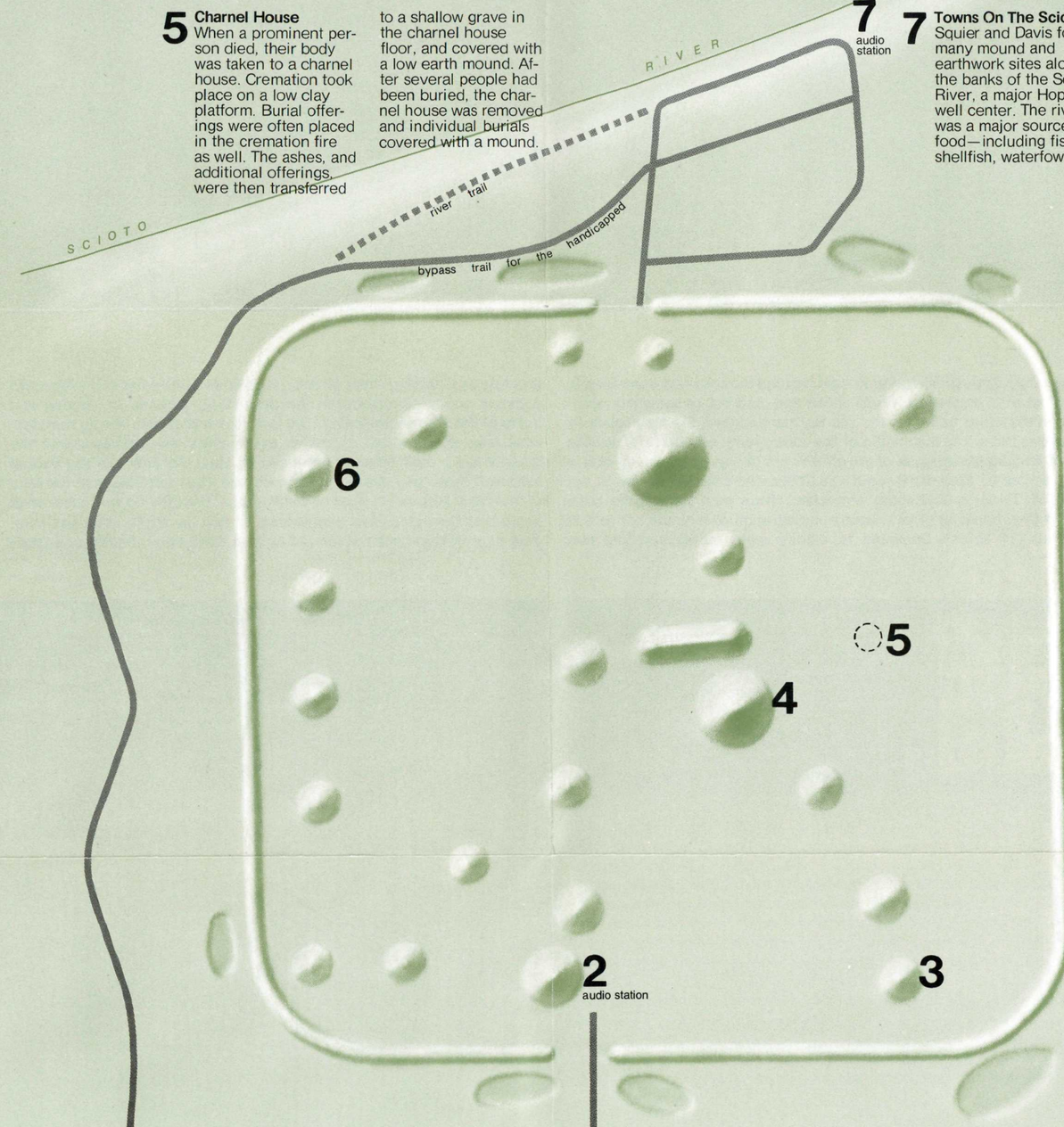
Exploring Mound City

As you walk through the grounds, remember that Mound City primarily represents the burial aspect of the Hopewell era. The people who built Mound City and other Hopewell earthworks did not spend their whole lives concentrating on death, but led active, varied lives. For example, some of their workshops have been excavated at nearby Seip Mound, within the earthwork complex. Future work may reveal similar activities at Mound City or nearby. You should begin your visit at the visitor center, located at the bottom center of the map.

About Your Visit
Mound City is located on State Route 104, 3.2 kilometers (2 miles) north of the U.S. 35 intersection and 4.8 kilometers (3 miles) north of Chillicothe, Ohio. The Visitor Center is open every day except December 25 and January 1. Hours are 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Memorial Day through Labor Day, and 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. the rest of the year. The grounds are always open during daylight hours. Food and lodging are available in Chillicothe, and state park and commercial camping facilities are nearby; ask the staff for information.

Mound City has a small picnic area. Camping, campfires, and portable stoves are prohibited. For your safety, watch for squirrel holes and uneven ground; be very cautious along the Scioto River trail as it can be slippery. Keep children under control near the water's edge. Teachers and other group leaders should call or write the superintendent well in advance of a group visit; this will enable the staff to provide orientation and other information to your group. Write to: Superintendent, Mound City Group National Monument, Route 1, Box 1, Chillicothe, OH 45601, or call (614) 774-1125.

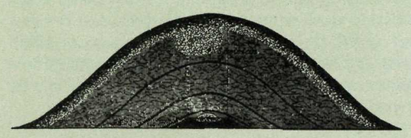


6 Inside A Mound

This mound, the first one excavated by Squier and Davis, revealed a definite internal structure. At the center was a low, circular clay platform which they called an altar. In the concave top of the altar were ashes and cremated human remains, sheets of mica, pottery fragments, and copper discs; this in turn had been covered with a low earth mound. On top of this were 7 alternating layers of sand and earth, covered by a layer of gravel and pebbles 31 cm (1 ft.) thick. The other mounds show equal care in construction, but vary in detail and in the number of layers.

The mounds vary considerably in the number of burials and the kinds of artifacts they contain. One mound within the complex contained a quantity of fossil mammoth or mastodon bones, and another contained finely crafted pottery vessels decorated with images of ducks and eagles; others contained various ornaments of copper and shell, stone pipes, and other goods. The types of burials followed the lines of status within the society. The mounds at Mound City may be monuments to leading craftsmen, or to successful traders. The intrusive burial in the top of this mound is only one of many that occurred widely after the mounds were built, and after the demise of the Hopewell system, reflecting a period of social change.

Detail of clay altar.



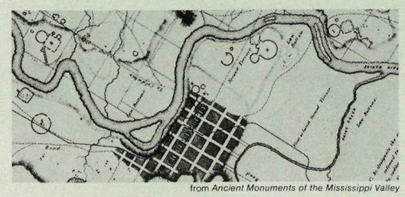
Squier and Davis' drawing of the internal structure of the mound (left) shows the clay "altar" (above), burial, alternating layers of earth and sand, a later burial in the top, and the final covering of gravel and pebbles.

5 Charnel House

When a prominent person died, their body was taken to a charnel house. Cremation took place on a low clay platform. Burial offerings were often placed in the cremation fire as well. The ashes, and additional offerings, were then transferred to a shallow grave in the charnel house floor, and covered with a low earth mound. After several people had been buried, the charnel house was removed and individual burials covered with a mound.

7 Towns On The Scioto?

Squier and Davis found many mound and earthwork sites along the banks of the Scioto River, a major Hopewell center. The river was a major source of food—including fish, shellfish, waterfowl—and water. Spring floods scoured the banks, providing a natural clearing for a garden plot on which to cultivate corn and other food plants. The size, location, and number of towns or villages are not fully known.



from *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley*

4 Death Mask Mound

This is the largest and one of the oldest of the 23 mounds contained in the 5.26 hectares (13 acres) of Mound City. Thirteen individuals were buried here, accompanied by falcon effigies made of copper, and fragments of human skull that had been cut and drilled, perhaps to form part of a "death mask" used in ceremonies.

Excavation of this mound, the only one undisturbed by the building of Camp Sherman, revealed an original subterranean charnel house replaced by a surface charnel house. After the second one was demolished, earth was heaped to form the mound.

2 Mica Grave Mound

The artifacts shown here all came from this mound, first excavated in 1921. Among others recovered here—and now on exhibit in the Visitor Center—were decorated elk and bear teeth, copper ornaments, large obsidian points, and a cache of 5,000 shell beads. Two copper headdresses were found, one with three pairs of copper antlers, the other representing a bear, with hinged ears and legs attached with rivets. A section of the mound has been removed to show an elaborate multiple burial. All four individuals were cremated, as were the other original burials of Mound City.

Among the ashes were obsidian tools, raven and toad effigy pipes, a copper headpiece in human shape, and other grave goods. There are sixteen other cremations known from this mound: a later intrusive burial in the side of the mound was discovered in 1963, when the mound was reexcavated. The effigy pipes, headdresses, and other artifacts were used in ceremonies, and may also have been badges of rank or status.

Since historic Indians are known to have had clans named after animals, the raven and other animal effigies may have been symbols of lineages, clans or other social group.

Some archeologists suggest that Hopewell society, at least in the Scioto area, was divided into a system of ranked lineages, much like the ruling families of Hawaii in the early 1800s. Each of the main burial centers such as Mound City and Seip would have been used by one or more of the lineages to bury the most prominent individuals.

3 Mound Of The Pipes

"In the number and value of its relics," Squier and Davis reported, "this mound far exceeds any hitherto explored....Intermixed with much ashes, were found not far from *two hundred* pipes, carved in stone ...The bowls of the pipes are carved in miniature figures of animals, birds, reptiles, etc. All of them are executed with strict fidelity to nature, and with exquisite skill."

The collection of pipes from this mound was later sold to an English collector and is now in the British Museum. The exhibit in the visitor center has replicas of these, along with original items from other mounds. The Mound of the Pipes may be a monument to a master pipe carver. As you contemplate the pipes in the exhibit, remember that smoke was thought by the Indians to be a form of communication with the spirit world.

From the perspective of the archeologist, one of the most intriguing and challenging aspects of the Hopewell era is the great diversity in the way people were buried. There are cremated, flexed and extended burials and a variety of types and amounts of grave goods.

It is not yet possible to say what all these burial differences mean in terms of the structure of life in the Hopewell era. One feature emerging from work at Seip and several other sites, but by no means common, is a differentiation into three groups of burials within a large mound. This may reflect functionally distinct groups within society, such as those among the historic Shawnee, with one group providing the chiefs, another in charge of certain ceremonies, and so on. Mound City, Seip, Hopewell, and other burial sites *probably* began as villages, and slowly evolved into burial centers.

Beginning Your Visit
The visitor center has educational exhibits and books and other items may be purchased here. A staff member is on duty to answer questions. An observation deck on the roof provides a view of Mound City and a taped introductory message. The trails begin here.

The plan of Mound City reflects creativity as the earthwork is formed in the shape of a typical Hopewell house, with entrances at both ends.

1 Visitor Center
audio station

Perhaps the placement of the mounds was meant to create a landscape in miniature, in imitation of the landforms to the east. As you view the site from the roof, try to visualize the past as it would have been lived, from the Hopewell era to the Shawnee, and the soldiers of Camp Sherman.