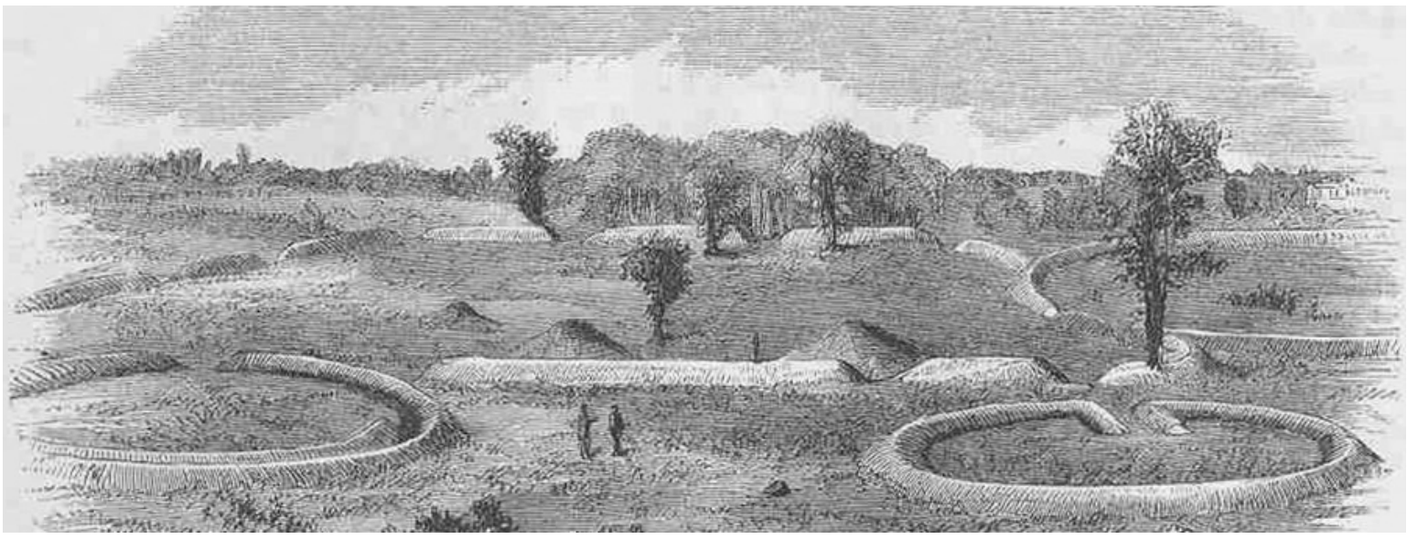
Hopewell Culture

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Hopewell Culture
National Historical Park

Hopeton Earthworks



Introduction

Two thousand years ago, American Indians of the Hopewell culture gathered in the Scioto River and Paint Creek valleys to build enormous geometic earthworks. For the next half millennia, the Hopewell culture flourished in the area creating spectacular earthen architecture and finely crafted objects. The Hopeton Earthworks complex includes a 20-acre circle, a 20-acre square, at least two small circles and parallel walls.

Ceremonial Gatherings

Archeologists currently interpret earthworks such as the Hopeton Earthworks as ceremonial centers and gathering places for American Indians of the Hopewell culture. Unlike most Hopewell earthworks, the Hopeton Earthworks contain no burials and was most likely used for religious and social ceremonial purposes, probably in conjunction with the Mound City site located about a mile to the west, across the Scioto River.

There is no evidence that people lived within this enclosure. In fact, the American Indians of the Hopewell culture did not live in villages. No more than three Hopewell homes have ever been discovered in one place. They may have lived in single extended family units scattered along the waterways of the great forest. Yet, even with this small-scale social organization, these American Indians created immense earthen architecture that required complicated engineering. The Hopeton site is one of at least two dozen enormous earthworks in the Scioto River and Paint Creek drainage of Ross County.

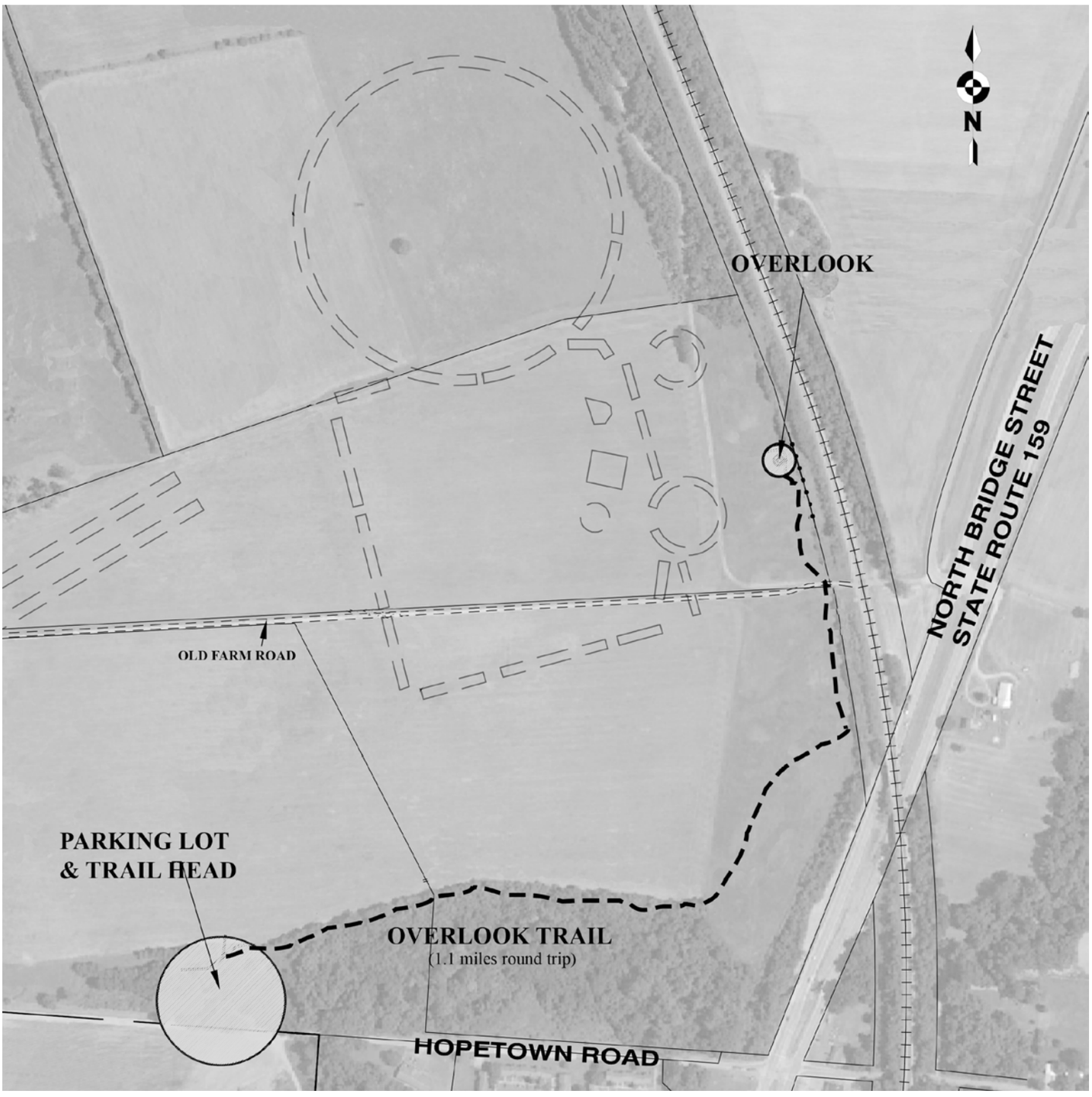
Grand and Purposeful Construction

The Hopeton Earthworks complex was constructed on a grand scale. The walls of the square were 12 feet high and 50 feet wide. The Great Circle's diameter was 1,050 feet, with walls five feet high. The parallel walls ran for at least 2,400 feet and were 150 feet apart from each other.

The construction of the earthworks was purposeful. For instance, the parallel walls were constructed to align with the sunset on the winter solstice. In addition, the American Indians that built the walls of the enclosure carefully selected the type of soil they used. Red clay soil was used on the exterior of the walls and yellow clay soil was used on the interior walls. Even more remarkable the Great Circle's diameter of 1,050 feet was repeated at four other earthworks sites: Circleville, High Bank, Newark, and Seal.

Intensive Archeology

Hopeton Earthworks was one of the first places in North America where the principles of scientific archeology were applied, and National Park Service archeologists continue this research today. A carefully measured map was first published in 1809. In 2012, archeologists used laser technology (LiDAR) to produce an elevation map of the earthwork surface accurate to ±3 inches. Archeologists recently used global positioning systems (GPS) to map the precise location of almost 14,000 individual artifacts. This mapping effort also provided distribution information, showing Hopewell artifacts widley scattered outside the earthworks, with very few inside the enclosures. This is further evidence that these spaces were set aside for sacred purposes. Most reccently, an international team used state-of-the-art magnetic survey methods to detect buried archeological features across the entire Hopeton landscape. One remarkable discovery was evidence that a row of monumental wooden posts spaced at 20 foot intervals once marked the outline of the Great Circle, forming a gigantic "woodhenge."



Slow Demise

Unfortunately, this fabulous earthwork complex fell victim to the same fate that claimed nearly all of the many renowned earthwork complexes of southern Ohio. Two centuries of plowing gradually leveled the sloping earthen embankment walls leaving them barely visible today.

The famous team of pioneering archeologists Ephraim Squier and Edwin Davis surveyed and mapped this site in 1846. Even then they noted that the Great Circle "has been much reduced of late years by the plough." With the advent of mechanized agriculture in the 20th century, the rate of erosion increased rapidly.

This site was also threathened by the gravel quarry that can be seen to the west. Fortunately, Congress authorized the National Park Service to aquire the Hopeton site in 1980 and provided funds for purchase of the site in 1988.

Respecting a Shared National Heritage

Archeological resources are nonrenewable and irreplaceable. In the 19th and 20th centuries, archeological sites suffered greatly from looting and damaging excavation methods. It was also common practice to excavate burial sites and place artifacts and human remains on display, with little regard for American Indian beliefs. Over time, archeological methods and respect for indigenous cultures have evolved, moving towards a greater emphasis on preservation and cultural understanding.

Today, archeological investigations are conducted in consultation with Indian tribes and focus on non-burial areas in an effort to gain a more complete understanding of the Hopewell culture. Laws now protect archeological sites from unauthorized ground disturbance or artifact collecting on public properties, such as park lands. As a unit of the National Park Service, Hopeton Earthworks has been placed in the public trust so that this generation and future generations can appreciate this priceless national treasure.