



Effigy Mounds

IN MADISON

by Jeanne Engle

Long before white settlers made their way to Madison, Native Americans were living on the shores of the four lakes. The earliest Indigenous people, ancestors of today's Native American tribes, most likely arrived around 11,000 BC, shortly after the glacier that covered much of Wisconsin receded. Little is secularly known about the culture of these earliest native settlers since not many artifacts have been found where they lived.

Evidence of activities of later native inhabitants has been discovered in ancient campsites, villages, cemeteries, and earthen structures. The most impressive records are mounds built over a period of about 1,600 years for burial of the dead and other ceremonial purposes. Mound building began

around 500 BC in Wisconsin and in the Four Lakes region. Robert Birmingham, former Wisconsin state archaeologist, breaks down the chronology of the mound builders into three stages in his book *Spirits of Earth: The Effigy Mound Landscape of Madison and the Four Lakes*: Early Woodland (500 BC to AD 100), Middle Woodland (AD 100 to 500), and Late Woodland (AD 500 to 1250). The mounds built by the Early Woodland people were primarily high round mounds over pit graves containing several individuals. During the Middle Woodland period, round or conical mounds were built to a large size and in groups or clusters that were also quite large. Along with bodies of the dead, tools, such as knives, pipes, and chipped stone blades, were buried in the mounds.

Mounds built by Early and Middle Woodland people can be found all over the eastern half of the United States and the Great Plains; however, effigy mounds, those sculpted in the shape of animals, are mostly found in the southern two-thirds of Wisconsin. Effigy mound building reached a peak during the Late Woodland era. Amy Rosebrough, staff archaeologist with the Wisconsin Historical Society (WHS), has found records of at least 3,100 effigy mound sites in Wisconsin, each with many different types of mounds. The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) notes, "Because of the especially dense concentration of effigy mounds in the state, Wisconsin is considered to be the center of what is referred to as effigy mound culture." Madison and the Four Lakes region have one



of the largest concentrations of these exceptional creations. Birmingham reports that more than 1,200 mounds were built on or near the shores of the Madison area lakes in 160 locations. Regardless of early attempts to protect the effigy mounds, as many as 80 percent have been demolished by agricultural practices and urban development.

In the 1850s, Increase Lapham, a surveyor from Ohio who is regarded as Wisconsin's first natural scientist, visited the Four Lakes region. He documented many effigy mounds that are no longer extant. Lapham published *Antiquities of Wisconsin* in 1855. Charles E. Brown, first director of the Wisconsin State Historical Museum (from 1908 to 1944) and founder of the Wisconsin Archeological Society (WAS) in 1903, was also instrumental in mapping effigy mounds throughout Wisconsin. As stated in his obituary, Brown was known throughout the country for his work in Wisconsin folklore, history, archaeology, and Native American lore. He was a member of numerous groups devoted to the study of natural science and archaeology. He worked to preserve the effigy mounds around Madison and promoted Madison as Mound City.

Brown was able to get a law passed by the state's legislature to protect archaeological sites on public lands

from vandalism and looting in 1911. At that time, the legislature also allocated funds for the WAS to locate and map mounds in the state. During a two-year period, volunteers traversed the state mapping and documenting hundreds of new mound groups. Many of the markers that WAS placed at mounds on public lands during that decade survive to this day.

In the late 1970s, mound research and preservation had a resurgence with the celebration of the nation's bicentennial. The WHS was given funding and the responsibility to inventory the state for historic buildings, historic sites, and archaeological sites worthy of preservation under the auspices of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. In the 1980s, Madison started a program of designating mounds as city landmarks, and in Dane County, through the parks department, mounds were identified the following decade. Since 1985, mounds in Wisconsin have been protected by law as designated burial sites.

What do the effigy mounds represent? According to the National Park Service, "Clues can be found in American Indian legends and mythology and, to a lesser extent, scientific research. The stories and legends of the Native Americans


whose ancestors built the mounds describe [them] as ceremonial and sacred sites. ... Some archaeologists believe they were built to mark celestial events or seasonal observances. Other speculate they were constructed as territorial markers or as boundaries between groups."

The majority of the effigy mounds in Wisconsin are connected to the Ho-Chunk Nation. The Ho-Chunk are living in the same places where the mounds were built, and the forms of the mounds—clan animals and spirits—are very familiar to the Ho-Chunk people. Traditional Ho-Chunk beliefs correspond with the effigy mound forms. Late Woodland settlements dotted the shores of Lake Mendota. Birmingham writes, "Everything about this large lake suggests it was the center of the Four Lakes effigy mound society and its most important ceremonial area."


Two large mound groups, added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1974, on the northwest shore of Lake Mendota are located on the grounds of the Mendota Mental Health Institute (MMHI), 301 Troy Drive, Madison. In honor of these mounds, MMHI uses an eagle as its logo to represent the largest of the mounds.



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Mendota Mental Health Institute uses an eagle as its logo to represent the largest of the two mounds located on their grounds.



One group of mounds, the Mendota State Hospital Group, includes some of the finest and largest effigy mounds preserved anywhere. One large bird has a wingspan of more than 600 feet; two others are smaller. Two panthers can be seen, one of which has an unusual curved tail. A deer effigy was constructed with four legs rather than the traditional two. Two bears and several conical mounds are also present.

The second grouping, known as Farwell's Point Group, offers an incredible panoramic view of Lake Mendota on a point 70 feet above the lake. The group is made up of conical mounds (the tallest is 10 feet high), parts of two panthers, a bird, and an undefined effigy. Some of the mounds are believed to have been built during the Middle Woodland period, while the effigy mounds were built later during the Late Woodland period.

The campus of the MMHI is on state grounds and is open to the public. Anyone wanting to view the mounds should give a courtesy call to the