The banks of the Yahara River and its lakes inspired the creation of the most varied collection of Indian burial mounds in the region. Most have been destroyed but hundreds remain. Here Larry Johns, an expert on Dane County's mounds who traces his heritage to the Oneida tribe, approaches an effigy mound in Yahara Heights County Park.

People have been drawn to the Yahara lakes for 12,000 years.

It started almost as soon as the last glacier withdrew. On a low slope overlooking a broad expanse of glacial meltwater, small bands of nomads met up year after year, exchanging knowledge and materials they gathered in their exploration of a strange new land.

After the glacial lake receded, that same patch of high ground stood over a bend in the Yahara River. It remained a rendezvous point and later became a Native American settlement, like dozens of others that formed near the banks of the Yahara and its lakes.

A horse grazes near Native American burial mounds on the 70-foot-high Dividing Ridge between Lakes Monona and Wingra in Madison. Between about 1880 and 1928 the 22 mounds, and the ridge they stood on, were quarried and used for road construction and to fill wetlands.

Nearly 3,000 years ago native people began to adorn the water's edge with hundreds of earthen burial mounds. They were sculpted in more shapes and forms around the Yahara than in any other dense concentration of earthworks in the mound-building region.

Fewer than 200 years ago the beauty of the lakes helped establish Madison as the state's capital and the home of its flagship university.

The water has in many, many ways defined one of Wisconsin's fastest growing regions ever since.

Former ridge site

When white settlers arrived in the 1800s, a half-mile-long natural ridge stood 70-feet-high near Monona Bay. Its spine was ornamented with 22 effigy mounds. By 1928 it was gone. Its sand and gravel were used to fill in wetlands and build roads. Soil from the mounds was used in gardens.

70-foot-high, half-mile-long natural ridge

Drake St.

Monona Bay

22 effigy mounds
(locations are approximate)

St. Mary's Hospital

Wingra Creek

Lake Wingra

Arboretum Dr.

Fish Hatchery Rd.

S. Park St.

W. Olin Ave.

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