



Miamisburg Mound & the Adena Culture

May 27, 2025

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History of the Miamisburg Mound and the Adena Culture

This comprehensive report presents a detailed historical overview of the Miamisburg Mound, an extraordinary prehistoric earthwork, and the Adena culture, one of the earliest known Native American cultures in the Ohio River Valley. Drawing on archival material, historic newspapers, archaeological reports, and first-person accounts, this report addresses the origins, significance, excavations, and eventual preservation of this ancient site.

Overview of the Adena Culture

The Adena culture flourished in the Ohio River Valley between approximately 1000 BC and 400 AD. Named after a site near Chillicothe, Ohio, the Adena people were known for their distinctive burial mounds, conical earthworks, and elaborate ceremonial structures. They were among the first Native Americans to transition from a nomadic lifestyle to a more settled, agrarian existence. Adena communities cultivated native crops such as sunflowers, squash, and goosefoot, and their diet was supplemented with hunting, fishing, and foraging. Archaeological evidence suggests that the Adena lived in circular dwellings, used tools crafted from flint and bone, and practiced elaborate burial rituals involving log tombs, cremation, and mound construction. Artistic expression was evident in their pottery, stone tablets, and personal adornments made from copper, shell, and pearls. A unique trait of the Adena was head-binding in infancy, which produced a distinctive cranial deformation. Despite their sophistication, the Adena eventually disappeared around 400 AD, possibly assimilated by or transitioning into the Hopewell culture.

The Miamisburg Mound: Description and Significance

The Miamisburg Mound, situated approximately one mile southeast of downtown Miamisburg, is the largest conical earthwork of its kind in the world. Measuring 300 feet in diameter, 877 feet in circumference, and 65 feet in height (68 feet or more prior to excavations), the mound consists of an estimated 54,000 tons of earth. Believed to have been constructed by the Adena people over a period of many years, the mound served ceremonial, burial, and possibly signaling purposes.

Early settlers noted that the mound was surrounded by a cleared area and a nearby artificial lake or pond, filled with ducks on the surface and surrounded by huge Beech trees, which was likely created from the excavation of clay used in its construction. Tools, skeletal remains, and ceremonial features suggest the mound was used in complex rites. The mound was believed to align with other regional mounds, supporting theories of an ancient signaling network. The surrounding valley is thought to have hosted a vast fortified settlement with perhaps thousands of residents. Downtown Miamisburg itself is built over what was likely a large Adena earthen works fort. These walls varied in height from 3 feet to 10 feet and were as much as 50 feet wide at the base. The clay from these walls was later used to make the bricks in many of the early buildings.

Ownership History

The earliest known landowner of the Miamisburg Mound site was Jacob Lawres, who acquired 175 acres in 1806 using a Land Warrant, likely earned for military service in the Revolutionary War. In 1809, Lawres sold the property to Dr. John Treon, an amateur archaeologist and one of the town's founding figures. Dr. Treon preserved the mound for over a century within the Treon family. In 1920, Charles F. Kettering, a prominent Dayton inventor and philanthropist, purchased the land from Dewitt Ritzman. In 1923, Kettering donated 57 acres, including the mound, to the Ohio Archaeological and Historical Society, now the Ohio History Connection, ensuring its preservation as a public park.

Excavations and Findings

Multiple attempts were made to excavate the mound, beginning informally in 1814 by Jacob Gebhart on the northeast side about halfway up, but he abandoned his excavation due to ominous hollow sounds within the structure.

In 1869, a more structured excavation was organized by a committee of Miamisburg citizens. Dr. Shuler was appointed president, M.G. Bohn, treasurer, and A.H. Blossom, secretary. Other members included Capt. Tibbles, G.W. Rodger, G.S. Hoff, William Hoff, M. Welsh, A. Hoover, J.B. Miller, W.H. Bevenger, Adam Clay, J. Rison, G.E. Shuey, Dr. Shuler, and J.H. Grove. The committee was instructed to explore from the top by sinking a shaft, 5-½ feet in diameter and 66 feet deep. The required funds were deposited in the hands of the treasurer, and an agreement was reached with Dr. John Treon, owner of the Mound.

To begin the work, a barricade was erected to prevent the dirt from the shaft rolling down the side of the Mound. The first soil was light and easily displaced. At a depth of 8 feet below the surface a human skeleton was discovered in a sitting position facing east, covered with yellow clay, then a layer of ashes and charcoal, indicating a burial fire. Since the skeleton was on the edge of the shaft, it was left in place until the shaft was completed, at which time it was removed.

On July 29 a depth of 24 feet was achieved. Two short horizontal tunnels were dug into the side of the shaft. In the one dug 10 feet into the northwest side was found what appeared to be a decayed upright post 12 inches in diameter, the base resting on a large stone perhaps 4 feet in diameter. It was left in place. In the southeast shaft was found what appeared to be a vault-shaped altar, with 2 large stones on bottom, 3 foot by 1 ½ foot and two stones tilted together on top, like the roof of a house. Inside were bones, ashes, and a dark umber soil layer—interpreted as evidence of sacrifice. At one point, a dark patch of soft earth was found, and a rod was easily pushed in its full 5 foot length, giving rise to the rumor of a hidden vault or room. However, it was most likely a decayed log laying lengthwise, and there was no hidden room.

A second "vault" was found 36 feet from the top, surrounded by logs. A large crack was also discovered, and the earth beneath the crack was probed and found to be soft.

Upon reaching a depth of 45 feet, the decision was made to strengthen the walls in the vicinity of the crack to prevent an accident.

On August 6th the shaft reached a depth of 66 feet, which was estimated to be below the base of the mound. Three days later the site was visited by Ohio Governor Rutherford B. Hayes and Mr. Klippart, of the State Geological Survey Corps.

Throughout the vertical shaft were various layers of charred clay from burial fires, charcoal, ashes, vegetable matter, bones of small animals, and possible ceremonial altars. Although it is recorded that samples of these deposits were carefully preserved along with the human bones, which "are of unusual size" no record of these artifacts can be found today. It is also recorded the skeleton would be unearthed in the presence of a number of scientists and members of the State Geological Survey Corps. Again, there is no record of this skeleton. The shaft remained open for some time while important visitors examined the work. Eventually it was filled in, and efforts were made to restore the mound.

Miscellaneous Excavations

In 1839 a severe drought hit the area, and many wells in the vicinity ran dry. A man named Lewis, residing near the Mound, obtained permission from the landowner, Dr. John Treon, and dug into the top of it, under the impression that he could find water. After digging 10 or 12 feet, he only discovered a few bones, then abandoned his dig.

At some point, possibly in the 1920s, the caretaker of the mound or a nearby farmer removed part of the base, dug into the mound, and built a stone retaining wall with a wooden door for use as a root cellar.

Modern Preservation and Interaction

Following its donation by Charles Kettering, the Miamisburg Mound became a central feature of a public park. In 1935, during the Great Depression, the Ohio Relief Administration carried out improvements including stone structures, a rustic picnic shelter, and a 116-step stone staircase to the summit.

The view from the top was forever changed in 1948 when the Atomic Energy Commission purchased the farmland adjacent to the mound to build what quickly became known as the Mound Laboratory. The projects conducted there were for many years as mysterious as the mound itself. During the Cold War period signs were placed on the top of the mound restricting visitors from taking photos of the nuclear facility.

The mound was officially listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1970. In 2002, the Ohio History Connection removed invasive trees to prevent damage from the roots. The site remains a significant cultural landmark, drawing visitors interested in Native American history and pre-contact archaeology.

Conclusion

The Miamisburg Mound stands as a monumental legacy of the Adena people—early innovators in agriculture, ceremonial architecture, and community life. Although the precise functions and traditions of the Adena remain partially obscured by time, continued preservation and scholarly inquiry into sites like the Miamisburg Mound ensure that their story will endure. This report serves not only as a record of historical significance but as a call to honor and protect the remnants of Ohio's ancient civilizations.



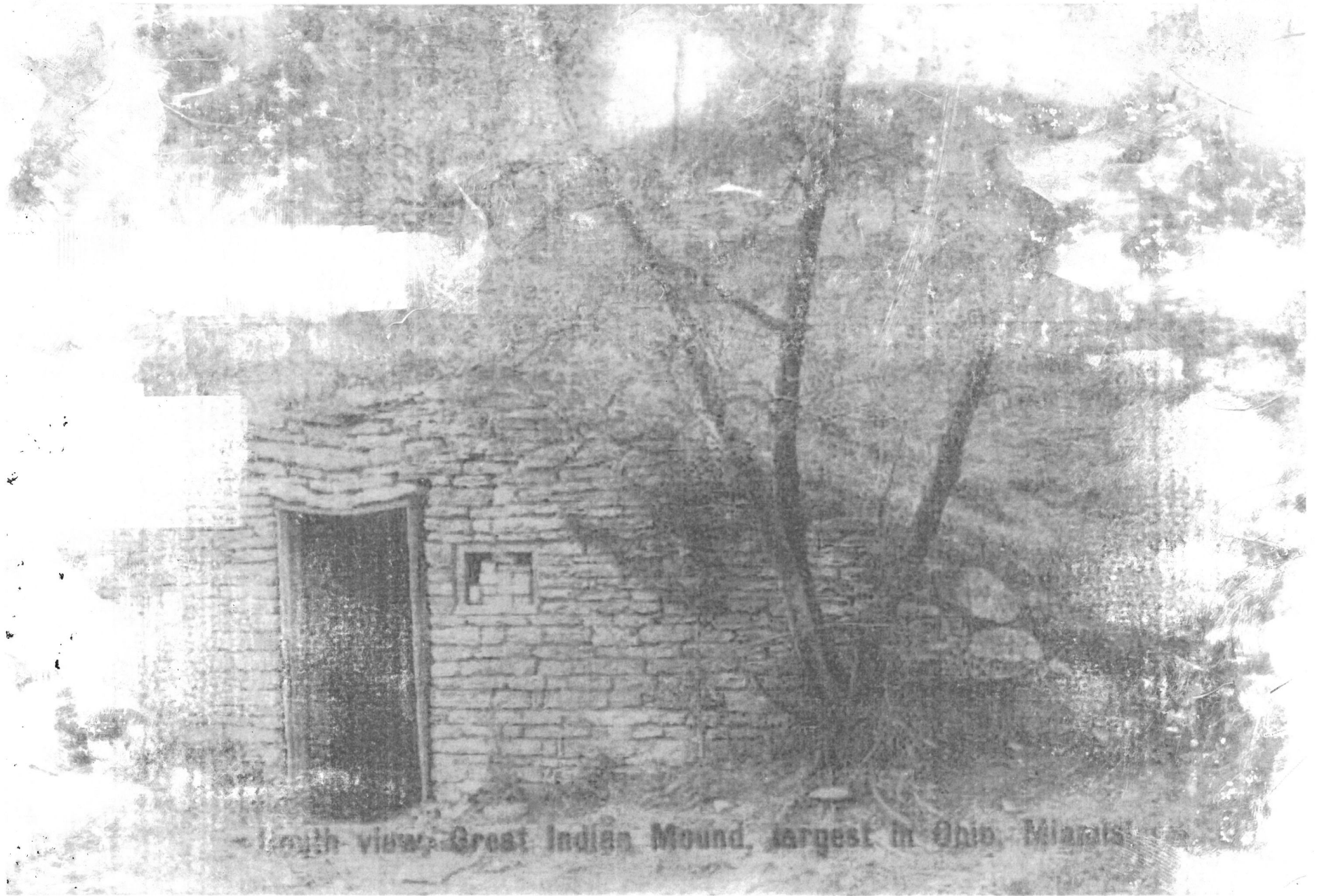
1906

The Old Indian Mound, Miamisburg, Ohio



54192-C

1940



North view, Great Indian Mound, largest in Ohio, Marietta

Circa 1920s?



prior to 2002



Sunset 1-21-2021

MIAMISBURG MOUND

Miamisburg Mound, the largest conical earthwork in Ohio, originally was sixty-eight feet high with a diameter of three hundred feet. One excavating attempt in 1869 reduced the height to its present sixty-five feet. The mound was then partially investigated by means of a vertical shaft which extended from the top to the base and connected with two horizontal tunnels. The exploration revealed one burial eight feet from the top containing a bark-covered skeleton and a vault twenty-eight feet lower that was surrounded by logs but without a burial. Along the sides of the vertical shaft were found various layers of ashes and stones, implying that the mound was built in several stages. The entire construction, however, has never been systematically excavated.

The conical shape, the types of burials, and the absence of associated earthworks indicate that the Miamisburg Mound was the work of Adena Indians, a prehistoric group that lived in the Ohio Valley between 1000 B.C. and 400 A.D. These peoples were the first in this area to domesticate plants for food, to settle in fairly permanent villages, and to make pottery. An important part of their way of life was the proper burial of the dead in graves that were covered with earth mounds, such as this one.

THE OHIO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Day They Opened the Miamisburg Mound

By Howard Burba

This article appeared in the Dayton Daily News, February 28, 1932

Any way you look at it, curiosity is a funny thing. In the first place it is something possessed by every human being, at some stage in life, and in the second place it's the one thing everyone denies having.

If it wasn't curiosity that brought Columbus over here, what was it? If it wasn't a curious desire to solve the secrets of the birds, what led the Wright brothers to invent the airplane? If it wasn't curiosity what was it that compelled Sir Isaac Newton to figure out why an apple, dislodged from a limb, fell toward the ground instead of toward the sky? We could go on asking questions like these for weeks upon end, and only discover that practically every known discovery was, at the outset, prompted by curiosity.

Some people may call it "scientific research," but that is just another name for curiosity. Today, as in other days long gone, men are searching out the story back of the peculiar earthworks scattered about our own state, artificial homes or temples or fortresses or for whatever they may have been erected by an ancient and long departed race. Curiosity is at the bottom of every shovelful of dirt they remove from one of these mounds; curiosity prompts every moment of study they devote to the bones and artifacts taken from those silent hills.

It was curiosity alone that brought about the opening of the mound at Miamisburg, shortly after the close of the Civil War, and while the operation failed to allay curiosity to the extent that subsequent generations haven't wondered about this peculiar earthwork, it did go a long way toward satisfying the curiosity Miami Valley residents of years gone by.

It would be time wasted to try to trace the origin of the Miamisburg mound, that high oval formation rising from a perfectly level field a mile and a quarter southeast of the town. One man's guess as to how it came to be there, when it was put there or the purpose it actually served is just as good as another's. From the moment it came to the attention of civilized man it was known to be the work of human hands. Nature did not place that peculiar formation where it is, in the center of a perfectly level spot and with no kindred hills near by. Nature never built along such lines. Written history cannot carry you back to the day the Miamisburg mound, as we now know it, was placed there, so the matter of fixing such dates is an impossibility.

But we can go far back into history and find that it has always been a source of curiosity, for history tells us the exact date on which the first organized attempt to

solve its secrets was made. The date was July 22, 1869. That has been a good while ago, and yet we are assured by the historian that it was not the first time excavations had been made there. Years before, possibly when the first known settlers of the Miami Valley saw it and wondered about it, they let curiosity get the better of them and attempted to learn just what, if anything, had been buried in this peculiar piece of ancient architecture.

Every now and then some fellow, unable to resist the temptation to pry into the past, would shoulder a pick and shovel and amuse himself by cutting into the earth that formed this historic link with an earlier race. None of these attempts was on a pretentious scale, however, so it is easy to imagine the interest that must have swept the valley when announcement was made back in 1869 that explorations on a gigantic scale were to be conducted. The occasion was considered of such importance as to warrant sending a reporter to the scene, and considering the fact that the staff of the leading local paper at that time could not have consisted of more than a couple of these valuable adjuncts, it stands to reason that the dispatching of a special writer to the scene was a genuine sacrifice on the editor's part. That the "news hound" did his work well and intelligently, however, is indicated from this report, taken from the files of a local paper dated July 24, 1869:

"We gave a brief item the other day of the exploration of the mammoth mound on the farm of Dr. John Treon near Miamisburg. It is the largest mound in the state, being 80 feet high and 480 feet in circumference at the base. Several attempts were made at different times during the last 50 years to explore it, but in every instance the workmen were frightened by the peculiar hollow sound their implements made, and desisted.

"At various times skeletons greatly exceeding those of the present generation were found in the mound. Recently a very general desire was expressed that the mound should be explored. Permission was obtained from Dr. Treon, a company was organized for the purpose, the necessary means contributed and the work commenced.

"Last Monday operations were begun by sinking a shaft from the top. Up to Thursday evening a depth of 33 feet had been obtained. At a distance of eight feet below the surface and directly west of the line of excavation the workmen came upon a human skeleton, entombed in a sitting posture and facing due east. Around the fleshless bones, embedded in the yellow clay, could be faintly traced the swelling outlines of the form in flesh, now mouldered into earth and only distinguishable by a slight difference in color.

"Upon a closer examination the workmen were able to define the original shape of the grave. It seems no excavation was made at the time of the interment, the corpse being simply placed in position, according to custom, upon

the level ground, and covered with clay soil to a depth of several feet, forming a long, arch shaped mound similar to those heaped over graves at the present day.

"Then followed a layer of ashes and charcoal, showing that fire was used in their peculiar ceremony of burial and tracing in distinct outlines the shape of the grave, the baked appearance of clay, indicating the fire to have been of considerable magnitude.

"Immediately above the skeleton, and between it and the baked surface of the grave, a peculiar fatty richness of the earth was apparent, doubtless enriched by the decayed substance of the body, seeming that one might almost wring grease from it. The bones protruding into the shaft were removed, leaving the balance until the conclusion of the investigation when they will be taken out entire. Deposits of vegetable matter, bones of small animals, wood, stone, charcoal and ashes were unearthed and carefully preserved with the human bones, which were of unusual size.

"At a depth of 24 feet the workmen came upon a triangular stone about two feet in length, planted perpendicularly, about eight inches in the earth, with the point upward. Around it at an angle of about 45 degrees and overlapping each other like shingles upon a roof, were placed stones averaging about a foot in diameter, all rough but of nearly uniform size, and similar to those now quarried in the hills about Dayton."

That is the first chapter of the story of the opening of the Miamisburg mound. The second, and final chapter at the time, came a few days later in a simple announcement that work had been halted at the mound since it was apparent that no more archaeological treasures were contained within it. The dirt was preplaced. Since that time occasional excavations by field workers of the Ohio Historical and Archaeological society have been conducted at the spot, but this mound has not been as prolific of relics as others opened in various parts of the state, notably the Seip group of mounds in the vicinity of Chillicothe.

Since the Miamisburg mound was found to be the largest in the state, in actual dimensions, and yet gave up the fewest number of skeletons and aboriginal ornaments and artifacts, puzzled the earlier archaeologists of the country. Even to this day they are not fully agreed as to whether or not the Miamisburg mound was used as a temple, a fortification or for the purpose of signaling.

The most generally accepted theory, however, is that it was constructed by the Mound Builders of early days for signaling purposes, and that the few burials that were made in it were incidental; that it was not a place of sacrifice nor yet a place of burial. Long study by the Prof. August Poerste, the best known authority on the topography and geology of the Miami Valley, and one of the foremost authorities on the subject in the world today, indicates that the mound at Miamisburg was but one of a chain that extended up and down the Miami Valley for a distance of

many miles. He has pointed out that there is every indication that aboriginal man used these mounts in this particular part of the country, if not indeed all over the states of Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee, for the purpose of communication. By building fires upon them it was possible for them to flash their messages over a great distance, since the fires were sufficiently elevated to form an unbroken chain of signal fires.

It has been pretty well determined that the high bluff south of Dayton, a part of which is now occupied by Calvary cemetery, was once used for this purpose. Since there apparently was not another elevation of similar height in the immediate vicinity of Miamisburg, it is concluded that the aborigines built their own there, and that it is the Miamisburg mound. It must be remembered, in considering this theory, that several hundred years have passed since the mound was constructed. Erosion over such a long period of time would serve to greatly reduce its height. Even today it is far higher than any similar mound yet discovered in the state, so it is easy to believe that, in its original state, and when it actually served as a place upon which signal fires were lighted, it was possibly twice its present height. That being the case, it would be an easy matter for a fire lighted on cemetery hill here to be plainly seen from the top of the Miamisburg mound.

If the Mound Builders had a system of smoke code messages, as it is reasonable to believe they did the same as the Indians, who came after them, then it was possible for them to communicate with each other on a clear day through this means. Below Miamisburg, and near the Cincinnati pike as one approaches Franklin, is another bluff similar to the one near Dayton. The belief of the archaeologist is that this, too, was a link in the chain, and that other high points on down along the river served the same purpose. We know beyond question that the Indians had a system of communication by which they kept in constant touch with each other, and that this system of communication served over a long distance. Since they followed the Mound Builders into this part of the state, it is easy to believe that their system of signals was borrowed from the race that preceded them, though they may have depended more upon fleet-footed runners to carry their messages than upon the fire and smoke signals employed by the earlier race.

The theory that the Miamisburg mound was intended by its builders for signaling purposes instead of a place of burial is borne out by the recent results of recent explorations in the Seip mounds near Chillicothe. Just a few years ago excavations into one of these mounds revealed the methods employed by the Mound builders in interring their dead, and there was not found in the Miamisburg mound anything to compare with it. At one place in one of the Seip group six skeletons were found grouped together in a specially constructed chamber of logs with a canopy of woven fabric. Pieces of this fabric are now in the museum at Ohio State University, and at the time I viewed them a few years ago they retained their original colors, showing that the Mound Builder was not a stranger

to the dyes of which the American Indian has always been so fond.

This burial chamber discovered in the Seip mound was at the time of the explorations found to be completely filled with earth, owing to a cave-in shortly after the completion of the primary mound over and around it. In size, in the variety of materials used in its construction and in the complicated nature of the structure, this chamber exceeded all other enclosures around burials in the entire mound. This fact, together with the richness and abundance of the artifacts which were placed with the burials, points to the fact that the individuals buried there were of extraordinary importance in the eyes of those who built the mounds.

The burial chamber, originally constructed perhaps to keep the earth from crushing the six skeletons, measured 12 feet east and west and 15 feet north and south. The height was indeterminable. The chamber had been constructed of logs placed above one another and secured in place by large stones, both outside and inside; most of the stones, however, were inside, placed thus to assist the logs in withstanding the pressure of the earth around the sides and from above. The original vault could not have been more than two feet in height. The canopy, perhaps intended as a ceremonial shroud, was secured in place by a hundred or more bone skewers, embedded peg-like through the fabric to their heads. One of them had been broken in penetrating the earth. These skewers or pegs were from six to 12 inches long and made of the leg bones of the deer.

In the Miamisburg mound excavations but a few artifacts were found. In the Seip group enough were taken out to fill several barrels, buried of course with the skeletons also unearthed. This, too, is taken to indicate that the mounds of the Paint creek valley were used for entirely different purposes than the one, and about the only one, known to the Miami Valley. In the burial mound where the six skeletons were found lying side by side — and many others were found buried singly at widely scattered points within the mound — the geologists found numerous ceremonial pipes. Two of them are in the effigy of birds, one a squatting owl and the other a bird with outspread wings resembling the whippoorwill. Others are in the effigy of animals. One portrays a dog eating a human head; one represents a wolf and another the head of a bear. Apparently they were intentionally placed in the mound as offerings of symbols of guardianship, subsequent to the sealing of the communal spulchre.

Around and beneath the skeletons and at the neck and head were many hundreds of pearl beads, ranging from seed pearls to very large and shapely specimens. Nothing like these were found in the Miamisburg mound, where the few burials that were made appear to have been incidental, as stated before, to the purpose for which the mound was intended.

If the Miamisburg mound was not intended for signaling and as a chain in one of the western hemisphere's first communication systems; if it really does hold far in

its interior and deep down near its base secrets that our archaeologists would give much to learn, then they probably will go many more years undiscovered. The mound is now on land owned by Charles F. Kettering, purchased by him with the avowed intention of preserving it as one of America's most interesting reminder of, possibly, her first inhabitants.

The mound has stood there for a good many hundred years; it should remain for hundreds of years to come. But curiosity has been a part of human nature for hundreds of years, too, and will be for hundreds of years in the future. Possibly it will assert itself as strenuously as it did away back in 1869. When it does, then history will again repeat itself, and men will go back to digging into the Miamisburg mound.

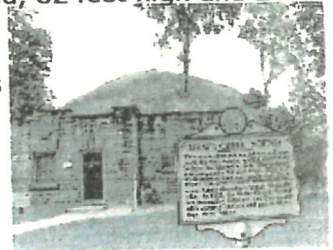
Mounds & Mound Builders

The Adena people were the first Native Americans to build ceremonial mounds. In other parts of the world, ceremonial burials had occurred much earlier. The Egyptian pyramids date to 2700 BCE; in England, stone chambers called barrows were used as early as 2000 BCE; between 1700 and 1400 BCE, keirgans were used in central Siberia; and the burial mounds of the Choo Dynasty in northern China date to 1000 BCE.

We know little about how or why the mounds were built. Historian Otis Rice suggests these early Americans "built mounds over the remains of chiefs, shamans, priests, and other honored dead." For their "common folk," the Adenas cremated the dead bodies, placing the remains in small log tombs on the surface of the ground. Virtually all of these graves have been destroyed by nature and later settlement. Therefore, the more substantial mounds are our only physical records of Adena burials.

Grave Creek Mound

The **Grave Creek Mound** in Moundsville (Marshall County) is the largest conical type burial mound in the United States, approached in size by only the Miamisburg, Ohio mound. The mound, 62 feet high and 240 feet in diameter, contains approximately 57,000 tons of dirt and originally stood nearly 70 feet high. The digging of so much earth left a sizeable moat or ditch surrounding the mound, no longer in existence. By testing the soil, archaeologists estimate the mound was built between 250 and 150 BCE by the Adena culture, which occupied the area from about 1000 BCE to 200 CE. The mound and two forts were the essential features of an Adena village in the shape of a triangle. "The mound construction probably began with the death of a very important person. There is no way to know who this person was -- great warrior, chieftain or religious leader. We know that 25-30 years later another important personage died and his remains were placed in an 8 by 12 foot vault on the top of the mound when it was approximately 35 feet high. The natives then covered this with dirt until the mound reached its maximum height."¹



The first person of European descent to discover the mound was early settler Joseph Tomlinson, who literally stumbled off the top while hunting in 1770. In 1838, descendants Jesse and Abelard Tomlinson, and Thomas Briggs gutted the mound, destroying much of the archaeological evidence provided by the scientific study of other mounds. Tunneling from the side and top, the two men discovered a burial chamber in the center containing two skeletons and large amount of jewelry and another room with one skeleton and jewelry. Tomlinson opened the center chamber as a museum, charging 25 cents admission. Five years later, Henry Rowe Schoolcraft mapped the area. In 1909, the state acquired possession of the mound, placing it under the care of West Virginia Penitentiary warden M. S. White. In 1975, Dr. E. Thomas Hemmings of the West Virginia Geological and Economic Survey conducted the first scientific excavation of the area, locating among other items the previous existence of a moat. During the last two hundred years, the top of the mound has been home to a saloon, dance platform, and artillery pieces during the Civil War. Today, the state operates the Grave Creek Mound State Park and Delf Norona Museum and Culture Center, featuring numerous Native American artifacts from the mound and region.²

ARCHOLOGIST

SCOTT SPEEDY

304.843.639

Criel Mound

The **Criel Mound** in South Charleston is the largest of approximately fifty conical type mounds of the Adena culture in an area west of Charleston extending to Institute. The precise age of the Criel Mound is