

The Toolesboro Indian Mounds

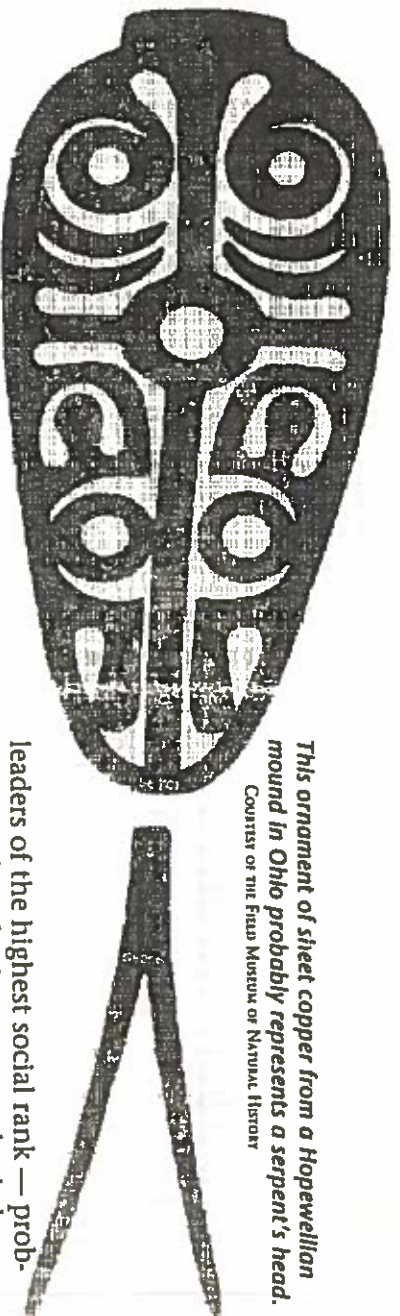
The Toolesboro site consists of seven existing burial mounds constructed by the Hopewell people between 100 B.C. and A.D. 200 on a bluff overlooking the Iowa River near where it joins the Mississippi River.

Only two of the seven mounds are visible from the Toolesboro Educational Center. The others are located in the woods, separated from the Center by a wire fence. Near the Center, Mound 2 is the largest of the remaining mounds. Possibly the largest mound in Iowa dating from the Hopewell tradition (*see box below*), it measures about 100 feet wide and eight feet high.

No village site at Toolesboro has been located, perhaps because the shifting path of the Iowa River has obliterated possible village sites over the last 2,000 years. Later groups of people, including the Oneota, have been associated with the site.

The Hopewell Tradition

The "Hopewell tradition" refers to a set of burial practices shared among certain Native American groups, from 200 B.C. to A.D. 450. Archaeologists began calling this the "Hopewell tradition" after an excavation of an earthwork on the Ohio farm of Mordecai Hopewell. "Hopewell" is not the name of these people called themselves (none of their written language survives to tell us what term they used). The Hopewell tradition can be compared to Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, or any other world religion: it's a widespread system of beliefs and worship marked by minor differences, such as language, on the local and personal level.



This ornament of sheet copper from a Hopewellian mound in Ohio probably represents a serpent's head.
COURTESY OF THE FIELD MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

Mound structure

The Hopewell had various ways of interring their dead within the large, cone-shaped, earthen mounds. Some individuals were placed lying down; others were propped up in a sitting position against the side of the tomb. Some individuals were cremated; others were placed in structures called charnel houses — where decomposition began — before they were buried.

Typically, mound construction began with the laying of a sand or clay floor, or a platform in the center, upon which the body and personal objects were placed. Over this, layers of earth, clay, sand, and gravel were piled up to make a mound. Other Hopewell mounds were built up around tombs made of logs or large stone slabs. Many mounds contain several burials in different layers.

Hopewell customs & practices

The Hopewell lived in villages located along river flood plains. They usually built their mounds on nearby high bluffs. The large clusters of mounds, such as those at Toolesboro, probably served as regional ceremonial centers. That the Hopewell had an extensive trade network is indicated by the discovery of such artifacts as Great Lakes copper, Appalachian mica, Rocky Mountain obsidian, Gulf of Mexico pearls and marine shells, and Chesapeake Bay shark teeth.

The Hopewell tradition was marked by a high degree of social hierarchy. Only

leaders of the highest social rank — probably chiefs and priests — were buried within the mounds. When leaders died, they were buried with exotic ceremonial objects that symbolized their power.

Where did the Hopewell go?

Some time after A.D. 500, the Hopewellian tradition of mound building disappears from the archaeological record. Scholars have posited two possible reasons for this disappearance:

- the Hopewell might have moved south and merged with a group representing a later tradition of mound building; or
- they might have been absorbed by other local, non-Hopewellian groups.

Early excavations

European-American settlement of the land around the mounds began in the early 19th century. While clearing land for crops and buildings, early farmers began the destruction of the mounds. Unaware of the significance of their finds, they removed artifacts and human remains without documenting the items or the internal structure of the mounds.

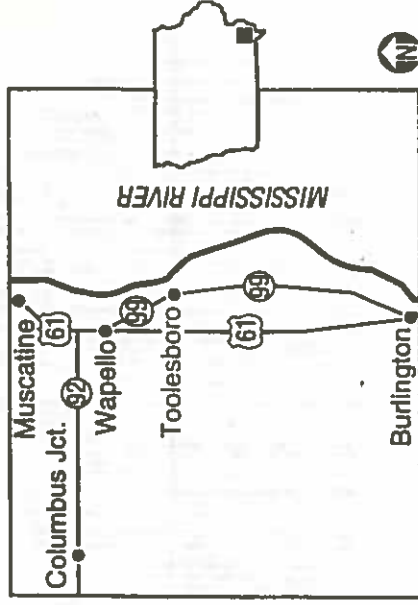
Early archaeologists from the Davenport Academy of Natural Sciences continued this practice. Using crude excavation techniques, they damaged artifacts and hindered further study of the mounds. They uncovered copper tools, stone pipes and tools, shell and pearl beads, and mica sheets. The mounds contained some burials, though the human remains still available for analysis are few and poorly preserved.

Toolesboro Mounds: A National Historic Landmark

The family of George H. Mosier donated the land containing the mounds to the State of Iowa in 1963. The state later purchased additional adjoining plots and made the site a State Preserve. The Toolesboro mounds were designated a National Historic Landmark in 1966, when the State Historical Society of Iowa began to manage and maintain the site. The Educational Center was built in 1969.

No further excavations are planned for the Toolesboro mounds. Because the mounds are sacred burial sites to Native Americans, any further excavations of the mounds would be disrespectful. Also, the government has passed laws making it illegal to remove artifacts and human remains from Native American burial mounds.

In addition, archaeology can be a destructive science. Artifacts removed from a site can never be replaced in the position and context in which they were originally deposited. Today's archaeologists prefer exploring ancient sites by nonintrusive methods, such as aerial photography, surface surveys, and "remote sensing" of the ground, a procedure somewhat like an x-ray.



Toolesboro Mounds National Historic Landmark

ADDRESS
Toolesboro Indian Mounds National Historic Landmark is located on IA 99 in Toolesboro, Iowa, Louisa County. For more information



LOUISA COUNTY
CONSERVATION

12635 County Road G56, Suite 101
Wapello, Iowa 52653
LouisaCountyConservation.org

HOURS

Noon to 4 p.m. daily, **Wed - Sun**
Memorial Day weekend-Labor Day weekend;
Noon to 4 p.m., Saturday
Labor Day-Oct. 31

FREE ADMISSION

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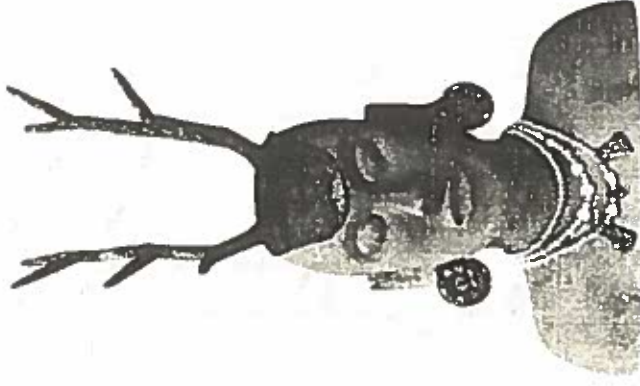
Steven Blaski, SHSI

Design/Edit:

COVER PHOTO: This model of a Hopewell displays items uncovered from an Ohio mound: a pearl necklace, a copper antler headdress, and copper ear ornaments.
COURTESY OF FIELD MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY, CHICAGO.

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The State Historical Society of Iowa owns and maintains the Toolesboro Indian Mounds and museum. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the mounds are designated as a National Historic Landmark and a State Preserve.



Louisa County, Iowa