

# The Mound Builders

By THOMAS P. CHRISTENSEN  
IOWA CITY

In that truly monumental work *The Discovery of America* (1892), its genial author, John Fiske writes:

There were times in the career of sundry Indian tribes when circumstances induced them to erect mounds as sites for communal houses or council houses, medicine lodges or burial places; somewhat as there was a period in the history of our own forefathers in England when circumstances led them to build moated castles with drawbridges and portcullis; and there is no more occasion for assuming a mysterious race of Mound Builders in America than for assuming a mysterious race of Castle Builders in England.

At least John Fiske was right to this extent, that there was no mysterious *general race* of Mound Builders, distinct from the historic Indian tribes. All Indians, historic and prehistoric, belonged to the Mongoloid race of mankind.

To solve the Mound Builder problem, or at least to clarify it, we should — must — consider the leading Indian culture groups in both Americas. All these groups had a common economic basis, for they all raised corn. Most or all of them also used tobacco.

I think we may use the term Mound Builder generally for all groups north of Mexico that built mounds of any kind or shape, especially if they also raised corn. The Mound Builders par excellence were those who built mounds and other large earth works, whose artisans were artists as well, and who had made considerable advancement in social organization, numbers and astronomy.

Before proceeding farther, it may be well to ask and answer the question: How and when did the name Mound Builders enter American Indian terminology?

During the American Revolution, William Bartram, an American botanist and ornithologist, spent several years in the southeastern United States, studying what

was then called "natural history." Bartram brought back to his home in the North information, not only about the plants and animals of those regions, but also data about certain mysterious remains of ancient earthworks of which the contemporary Indians, as to their origin, did not know anything. Bartram conjectured that they must have been built by some vanished people vastly superior in culture to the historic Indians. Throwing an air of mystery about the subject, and writing in a fascinating style, he evolved a theory of the builders of these mounds which circulated widely in the literary world, and which has continued to hold sway in the popular mind ever since.

Bartram's book in which this theory of the Mound Builders is propounded, bore the lengthy title of *Travels Through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida, the Cherokee Country, the Extensive Territories of the Muscogulges (Muskhogeans) or Creek Confederacy and the Country of the Chactaws*. It was translated into Dutch, German, and French, and read by such literary worthies as the French Chateaubriand, and the English Coleridge and Wordsworth.

Bartram was not a vain theorizer, but a scientific student of life and nature. Besides his "Travels," he also wrote a minute and accurate description of the manners and customs of the contemporary Creeks and Cherokees. This was published in 1853, but most of the edition was destroyed by fire and a new edition did not appear until 1907.

Ironically enough, this description has furnished modern anthropologists with some of the support for the now current belief that the Mound Builders were ancestors of, at least, some of the historic Indians of the Mississippi Valley. Thus Bartram built up a theory of the Mound Builders by his captivating style, and also furnished ammunition for demolishing it, by his keen observation and painstaking labor.

The factual study of the American Indians, prehistoric and historic, gained an impetus in the early days

of the republic by the founding of the American Ethnological Society of which Albert Gallatin and Henry R. Schoolcraft were honored members. It was this society which brought out the first edition of Bartram's description of the Creeks and Cherokees.

#### ANCIENT MOUNDS STUDIED

In 1848, the Smithsonian Institution, as one of its first contributions to human knowledge, published Squier and Davis' *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley*. This is still a classic for the study of the Mound Builders. Then in 1879, the Bureau of American Ethnology was founded with Major J. W. Powell as president. Working with these organizations later anthropologists, ethnologists and archeologists have put the study of the American Indians on a broad scientific basis; and in the publications of these two organizations one may trace the growth of much of our knowledge of all the Indians in the United States, past and present.

One of the associates of Major Powell was Cyrus Thomas. In the nineteen eighties Thomas advanced reasons for believing that the Mound Builders had left descendants among the historic Indians. This view has been accepted by later students of the subject, who are now convinced that the Mound Builders and the historic Indians belonged to the same general Mongoloid race, and that they both contained representatives of the broad-headed (brachycephalic) and long-headed (dolichocephalic) types of man.

But, though the Mound Builders belonged to the same general race, they represented various tribes, culture groups, and language groups.

Obviously, the best evidence of what and whom the Mound Builders were, we have in the tens of thousands of mounds and the hundreds of thousands of artifacts which these mounds have yielded to local, state and national investigators.

#### GREATEST NUMBER IN MIDWEST

West of the Mississippi river there are numerous

low, round mounds. They contain no human remains, and their origin and purpose are uncertain. Undoubtedly many of them are just house sites. There are a number of them along the Iowa rivers. In northeastern Iowa, southeastern Minnesota, northwestern Illinois, and especially in southern Wisconsin, there are a large number of effigy mounds, representing such historic animals as elk, moose, panther, wolf, geese, ducks, eagles, swallows, hawks, pigeons, squirrels, foxes, coons, eels, turtles, snakes, and at least in one instance, what seems to be a mastodon, usually considered pre-Indian. The assumption that the mastodon was contemporary with the builders of the effigy mounds is supported by the fact that a large number of mastodon skeletons have been found in Wisconsin sloughs and lakelets. It has been suggested that the Winnebagoes, a tribe belonging to the Siouan language group, may have been the builders of the effigy mounds in this area.

Only a few effigy mounds have been located outside of the Wisconsin-Illinois-Iowa-Minnesota area — five in Ohio and two in Georgia. Two of the mounds in Ohio represent snakes, one of which is 1,330 feet long.

All through the Great Lakes country there are remains of stockades and other ancient earthworks. They are most numerous in the state of New York, where about three hundred have been located. These were probably built by the Iroquois and tribes of the Algonkian language group.

Many of the mounds in Kentucky and Tennessee enclose stone graves. The most advanced Mound Builders constructed various types of earthworks, the most imposing of which was the pyramid mound facing the four cardinal points. Some pyramid mounds have been located as far north and west as the Dakotas, but most are found along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers and in the Gulf states.

The present state of Ohio is very rich in remains of Indian earthworks. Here, according to H. J. Spinden,

have been located 5,396 prehistoric sites, 3,513 mounds proper, 587 enclosures and fortifications, 354 village sites, 39 cemeteries, 5 effigy mounds, 17 petroglyphs or pictured rocks, 35 rock shelters, and 190 quarries. The village enclosures contain mounds in various geometrical forms, and the enclosures themselves are connected with the rivers by lanes running between earthen walls, for the Mound Builders were both village folk and river people.

East of St. Louis in the state of Illinois rises to a height of nearly 90 feet the imposing Cahokia mound, a terraced pyramid. It is the most stupendous monument built by ancient men anywhere in North America. Its base covers an area of about 16 acres. It has been estimated that it would take 1,000 persons working five years to build it. Within a radius of two miles of this huge pile are 72 other but smaller mounds.

Other large groups of mounds resembling the Cahokia group are scattered along the banks of the Mississippi from St. Louis to New Orleans. Farther east on the banks of the river Etowah in Georgia stands an interesting group of seven mounds, the largest of which attains a height of 65 feet. Like other pyramidal mounds the top of this mound was reached by an inclined plane leading from one terrace to another. Cyrus Thomas believed that this mound had been visited by DeSoto in 1542. At that time, and indeed much later, some of the mounds were still used as foundations for temples and chiefs' houses. This was true of the Natchez Indians living near the modern city of Natchez. At the time of the first white contact here they had their temples and chiefs' houses on artificial mounds.

#### CONTENTS SHOW HANDICRAFT

Excavators have made a rich harvest of Mound Builders relics, consisting of pottery, personal ornaments, ceremonial objects, tools and weapons. The raw materials used in their manufacture consisted of

shells, bone, mica, copper, and in some instances brown hematite (an iron ore) and even gold.

Specimens of cloth preserved by contact with copper have come to light. This points to another phase of Mound Builder handicraft or to trade with the Southwest or Mexico. Gold objects that have been found in the mounds are believed to have come from Mexico.

Without agriculture the Mound Builder mode of life would not have been possible. The Mound Builders raised beans, tobacco, squash, melons, and above all, corn. In a crude way they also worked quarries, copper mines, mica mines, and salt mines. Indications of fish ponds have been found in Ohio. The Pueblo Indians had domesticated the turkey, but the Mound Builders probably had no other domesticated animal than the dog.

It is certain that the Mound Builders, at least those of the Ohio and Mississippi valleys, were skillful boatmen. Their mound forts attest their ability in siege warfare. Race courts and ceremonial mounds speak eloquently of a highly-developed social and religious life. Undoubtedly storytellers delighted young and old with tribal legends and stories of mythical powers and heroes. As would be expected, their young men played ball games with as much zest and zeal as college students today play football, and they pepped up their martial spirits with war songs before going on the warpath.

Next, we will proceed to answer the question: When did the principal groups of Mound Builders flourish? There is no real Mound Builder chronology. Recently, however, an effort to establish one has been made by Vernon C. Allison, a contributor to *The American Anthropologist*, (Vol. XXIX). Guided by such data as the growth rings of trees on the mounds, climate changes, fossil flora and fauna, he concluded that the mounds of the Ohio and Mississippi valleys had been constructed between 520 A.D. and 1500. In general this

is in harmony with modern anthropological opinion, even as that opinion may have been affected by the very recent physico-chemical methods of chronology.

There is no more certainty about the Whence in Mound Builder history than the When. But the Whence also has its theories and assumptions. It is an accepted theory — it is nothing more — that the Americas, in the main at least, were peopled by migrants from Asia. As the groups of migrants moved south, some of them wandered east across the plains and prairies. The builders of the effigy mounds, perhaps the Winnebagoes, may have reached their historic habitat that way. Did other Siouan tribes go farther east and south then or later? They must have, for at the time of the coming of the Europeans there were smaller Siouan tribes on the coasts of the Gulf of the Atlantic, while the main body of the tribes roamed over the prairies of the Northwest.

#### DEVELOPED SAME TRAITS IN SOUTH

The main bodies of migrants from Asia at last settled down to sedentary life in the valleys of the Southwest, Mexico, Central and South America, where they developed some of the most distinctive Mound Builder traits: pyramid building, pottery, cloth weaving, cultivation of tobacco and corn, above all the cultivation of corn. That the basic Mound Builder traits existed in these regions is unquestionable. But, did these cultural elements migrate into the Mississippi Valley, or did the migrating people carry the culture elements with them? Mound builder traits spread from South America to the Antilles and perhaps to Florida. Once established in the Southwest they spread eastward towards the Atlantic.

Paul Radin in *The Story of the American Indian*, as fascinating interpretation of ancient American Indian culture, contends that the early Mound Builders came by sea to the lower Mississippi valley. He considers it probable that the Natchez Indians may have been

the first group of Mound Builders in this area, and that their culture spread north and east.

Vernon C. Allison has advanced the theory that about 500 A.D. the Iroquois or a kindred people from the Southwest moved across the plains and combining with certain Cliff Dwellers in Missouri, who had been in that area over a thousand years, crossed the Mississippi river, fought and perhaps drove out the Mound Builders of the Ohio river valley. Still heading east they finally settled in New York, where they built the stockades of which there are remains today.

This invasion must have caused serious disruptions of the older occupants east of the Mississippi. Was this the time when the Mandans of the North Dakota were forced into their historic habitat? and was this the time when the Siouan people were split into a large northwestern group and several smaller eastern and southern groups, who lived on the coasts of the Atlantic and the Gulf at the coming of the Europeans?

#### MOVEMENTS OF INDIAN TRIBES

There was constant strain and stress, ebb and flow of populations. The Iroquoian people themselves were disrupted, for in 1607 the Tuscaroras and the Cherokees, both Iroquoian, were living in the South. It is known that the Cherokees were building mounds well into the historic period, as indeed other tribes did though not of the pyramid type.

Though these prehistoric migrations mentioned above only have a theoretical basis it is a basis which has valid assumptions. But, it is different with the basic elements of the Mound Builder culture. Definitely these elements are known to be of Mexican and South American origin. The recent researches of P. C. Mangelsdorf and R. G. Reeves (*American Anthropologist*, XXXXVII, XXXXIX) have shown that corn was first cultivated in northern South America. Beginning about 1500 B.C., it began to spread northward through Central America and Mexico, and perhaps also through the Antilles to the Gulf coast.



Without corn culture there would not have been groups large enough to build the immense pyramid mounds of the Mississippi Valley and elsewhere in North America. Corn culture made food more abundant and thereby larger groups possible in limited areas.

The art of pyramid building, too, as well as tobacco culture, appear to have originated in northern South America. There also pottery and cloth weaving reached a high stage of development, and also may have spread northward.

Of the five culture elements it is certain that the cultivation of tobacco and corn did spread northward. The other three may, at least to the extent of influencing similar culture farther north. Without the cultivation of corn, pre-Columbian America's cultures would not have been possible. Certainly Mound Builder culture would not have been possible without it, and we do know that all the Mound Builder groups raised corn and depended on this cereal as their main staff of life.

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## Confederate Soldier's Home Abolished

The Missouri home for Confederate veterans and their wives, located at Higginsville, has been closed, the institution having been abolished by the Missouri legislature.

Four remaining resident widows of veterans were transferred by the state division of welfare to the Lenoir Memorial Home near Columbia, a new private-owned home for aged persons, where the state paid the cost of their care. The old home from which they were removed, was converted to the use of overcrowded state schools for defective and epileptic children.

The last Confederate veteran to reside in the home, Uncle Johnny Graves, died in 1950 at the age of 108.

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## Ed. Pittman's Useful Life

A long and faithful service to the state and its people marked the life of Edward F. Pittman, whose death occurred February 2, 1952. He came to the position of superintendent of the newspaper division of the Iowa State Department of History and Archives, at Des Moines, under Curator Edgar R. Harlan, January 1, 1918. During all the years of his capable handling of the work of that division, which largely encompassed its period of growth, he most conscientiously, with ability and a high order of intelligence, served those who had need to avail themselves of this large storehouse of history containing the state's valuable newspaper files. He had become the dean of the historical building workers, and only a few others in the employ of the state in any capacity had enjoyed a similar length of service.

With sincere and competent understanding he assisted the writers and research workers of the historical profession, who now are expressing their great debt for his accurate arrangement, careful cataloging and efficient preservation of Iowa publications, and his always accommodating, cheerful and helpful administration of their use. Mr. Pittman possessed a marvelous memory and had the faculty of readily locating upon the printed pages of Iowa newspapers of the past the accounts of events and personages of note when the record of same was sought. This aptitude, skill and patience became most valuable, and will be missed by his associates and all who came to appreciate his talent and untiring labors.

Mr. Pittman was born June 15, 1871, in Peeksville, Missouri, the son of Stephen Bates and Nancy Jane Douglass Pittman. The family moved to a farm in Van Buren county, near Cantril, Iowa, when he was three years old, and there his youth was spent. He attended the Gem City Business college at Quincy,

Illinois, and taught in the rural schools. He was appointed deputy clerk of court of Van Buren county, and moved to Keosauqua in 1901, afterward being elected and served as clerk of court two terms, and resided at the county seat through 1909.

On October 12, 1896, he was married to Effie Mae Foster, who died May 30, 1903. He again was married December 20, 1905, to Mrs. Mertis Cupp Barker, who survives, together with two daughters, Mrs. J. R. Mounce of Clinton and Mrs. George N. Edwards of Des Moines; one son, Claude E. of Des Moines; one step-son, Rolla V. Barker, Red Feather Lakes, Colorado; two sisters, Mrs. Josie Harryman of Cantril and Mrs. Nora Glascock of Medford, Oregon; one brother, Clyde L. of Upland, California; eight grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. He was a member of the First Presbyterian church, Des Moines, and was buried at Cantril.

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## The Kasson Papers

Another of Prof. Edward Younger's delightful sketches of an epoch in the remarkable life of John Adam Kasson, long time legislator and politician in Iowa, graces the pages of this issue of the ANNALS. While the period covered in the present article leads up to Kasson's coming to Iowa from St. Louis, and the greater part of the material documented by Mr. Younger in its preparation is from other sources, in the writing of his articles he engaged in lengthy research of the Kasson Papers in the manuscript files of the Iowa Department of History and Archives in securing data. The Manuscript division of the department is a busy institution where writers and newspaper men secure from the extensive files of the Allison, Dodge, Cummins, Lacey, Perkins papers, as well as from the wealth of other manuscripts there found, information upon events and individuals prominent in Iowa history not available elsewhere, demonstrating the great value of this vast collection held in trust by the state of Iowa.

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