THE MIAMISBURG MOUND STATE MEMORIAL

The Miamisburg Mound is best known but least understood major prehistoric Mound Builder feature in Ohio. It is the largest conical shaped earthwork of its kind in the United States and possible the world. Originally, it measured 68 or more feet in height. As a result of at least one attempt to excavate it, the height of the Miamisburg Mound has been reduced possibly several feet. This article attempts to put into focus the many accounts from the writings and evidence reported by various archaeologists, scientists, and anthropologists to better understand the peoples called Mound Builders and what the significance of the Great Mound in Miamisburg meant to those that built it. Discoveries continue to emerge; some confirming previous evidence along with new discoveries that call into question previous assumptions about the Mound Builders, who they were, when, and what cultural activities they practiced.

We do know that the Adena were the descendants of the archaic people, nomads, who lived in this area nearly 10,000 thousand years ago. About 1,400 B.C. a culture type later named the Adena appeared, spreading over Ohio, and parts of Pennsylvania, Indiana, West Virginia and Kentucky. Classified as the American Early Woodland Culture, they would live here for the next 2,000 years. Compare that to the United States: Our country has only been here for about 250 years.

Portrait of Governor Thomas Worthington (1773—1827)

It is important to understand that the Adena culture is not the name of a Native American Indian tribe. Few facts are known about these peoples. They left behind no written language evidence in carvings, the least of which is what they might have called themselves. Instead, Adena is a term of archaeological convenience that encompasses similarities in artifact style, architecture, and other cultural practices that distinguish Adena culture from earlier and later cultures here.

The name was first coined from the name of the estate of Governor Thomas Worthington in Chillicothe, Ohio, Adena, as it was called, was the 2000-acre estate of Thomas Worthington (1773-1827), sixth governor of Ohio and one of the state's first United States Senators.

A large mound on this property was called the Adena Mound. Since this mound site exemplified all the significant features of the culture, it became the "type site" and the name of the site was applied to the entire culture.

By 100 B.C., some of the Adena groups had begun to build larger earthworks and expanding trading into exotic raw materials. These groups melded into the Hopewell culture, but many people continued to follow the old ways and in some regions, such as southwestern Ohio, the distinct Adena culture persisted well into the 1st the century A.D.

Again, they were the first people in this region to settle down in small villages, cultivate crops, use pottery vessels, acquire exotic raw materials, such as copper and marine shell, to make ornaments and jewelry, and bury their honored dead in conical (or cone shaped) earthen mounds. They also built what looked like small "loaf" shaped mounds. It is soon apparent that separate geographic cultures were emerging, all grouped under the general name of Mound Builders.

In addition to hunting game, animals and fish, the Adena gathered wild foods, such as fruit, nuts, roots, and other edible plant foods They also began growing a variety of plants in their gardens, including squash, sunflower, sumpweed, goosefoot, knotweed, and maygrass. This set of native plants often is referred to as the Eastern Agricultural Complex. The Ohio and Mississippi Valleys were one of only seven regions in the world where people turned local plants into the basis of a food-producing economy. The consequences of this change in how people made a living would be far-reaching.

Squash is considered to be one of the first domesticated plants in the Eastern Woodlands, having been found about 7,000 years ago, though possibly not domesticated until about 3,000 years ago. The squash was raised for edible seeds and to produce small containers (gourds), not for the thick flesh that is associated with modern varieties of squash.

Squash *Sunflower* *Sumpweed* *Goosefoot* *Maygrass*

Other plants include little barley, goosefoot or lambsquarter, erect knotwood, maygrass, sumpweed or marsh elder, and sunflower. These plants are often divided into "oily" or "starchy" categories. Sunflower and sumpweed have edible seeds rich in oil. Erect knotweed and goosefoot, a leafy vegetable, are starches, as are maygrass and little barley are grasses that yield grains that may be ground to make flour.

It appears that the Adena were perhaps the most advanced of cultures in eastern United States at this time, beginning about 3,000 years ago. It is not currently believed that they built earthen enclosures, or animal shaped mounds as did the Hopewell who flourished here later until the 4th century A.D. The most significant mound effigy currently attributed to the Hopewell people is the Serpent Mound on Brush Creek in Adams County, Ohio. New carbon dating of core samples taken at Serpent mound suggest its construction was in a much earlier time period and possibly Adena. Likewise Sun Watch Indian Village is documented as built by the Fort Ancient group, a reconstructed Fort Ancient Native American village next to the Great Miami River in Dayton, another example of the later blending of Adena cultural types. Over the centuries after the mounds were originally built later Indian cultures sometimes buried their dead in the existing mounds, perhaps in reverence of their ancestors. They were called the "Intrusive Mound Builders".

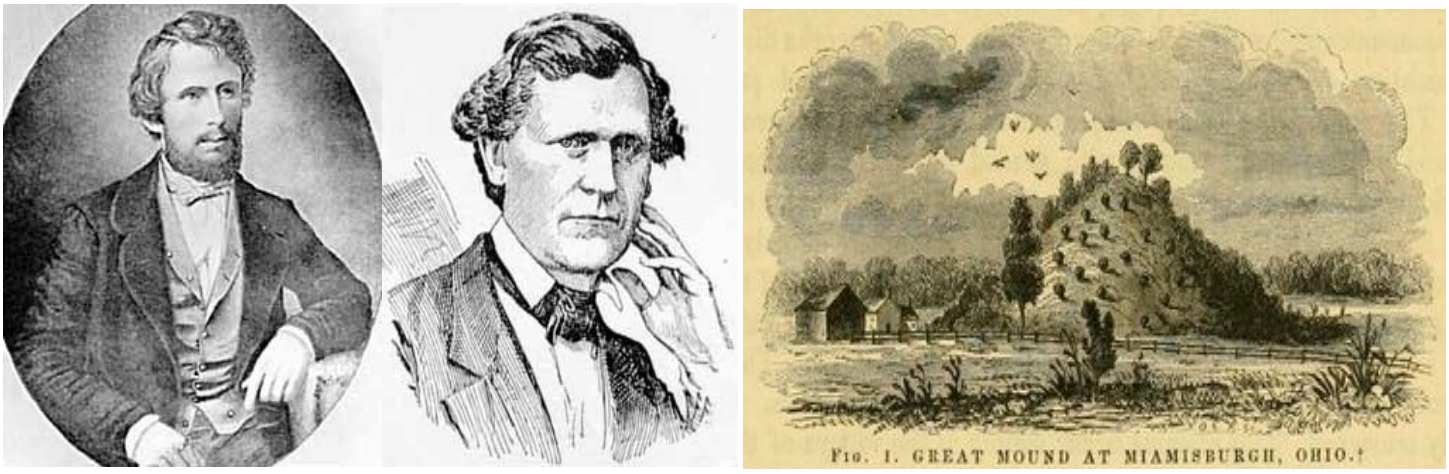
As we know from excavations, most mounds were definitely burial mounds. Some say they were built as signal mounds. It is difficult to believe that the Adena would build a mound for signaling knowing it would take 200 years, perhaps even 500 years before it would be finished!

It is generally accepted that only important people were buried in a mound. Even so, burial rituals varied greatly. The deceased might be buried laying on their backs, sitting up, or cremated, buried with and without objects, and might be placed inside or outside a mound. Not all people were buried in mounds since those structures do not contain a representative cross-sample of genders or age groups. Those who were privileged enough to be buried in mounds were individuals who held social status in life, perhaps as a shaman, a revered warrior, a respected artisan, community leader, or the family of a leader. Grave offerings included with a burial likewise reflect high social status within the community. Although some Adena mounds, such as the Miamisburg Mound, are very large, these constructions were built slowly in many individual burial events over a long period of time by few people. During the almost two thousand years of existence, the Adena created some great mounds, building them with just crude stone tools and backbreaking labor.

The purpose of the Great Mound in Miamisburg was that it was part of a ritual burial site. It probably also became a territorial marker. When an important person died, he was covered with earth and clay, then a huge pile of wood was heaped over the grave, and burned to ashes. Then it was covered with another layer of dirt. A very important chief or medicine man might be buried within a heavy wood enclosure, with more logs over the top. After the fire burned out, more dirt was piled on top. An area perhaps eight or ten feet in diameter was prepared on top, for the next burial. Often stone implements, beads, and other items that had special meaning were buried with him. It's interesting that no gold and silver have ever been found in an Adena burial.

A common question is: How long did it take them to build the Great Mound? We must consider that they didn't just start, and keep working until it was finished. We believe that the Great Mound was built probably over many hundreds of years, as burials of those who were important were buried at the same location. Perhaps that spot was a sacred burial ground, and all important burials were made there, each one above an earlier burial. We must also consider that they did not work during the harsh winters. And remember, they had no steel pick and shovel, and no wheelbarrows. Dirt and clay were dug with great difficulty, and then baskets were used to carry the earth to the site of the burial. It was hot, back-breaking work, even more so when the mound became larger, and the earth had to be carried up through steps to the top.

Another question is: Why do we call it the "Great Mound?" The first scientists to examine and measure the mound were Edwin Davis and Ephriam Squier in 1847. Squier, a newspaper editor and politician, turned his attention to archaeology and collaborated with Edwin Davis, a specialist on the Ohio mounds, and assisted him in his research. In 1851, the two men published their findings in *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley*. This was the first book ever published by the Smithsonian Institution.



Artists renderings of Ephriam Squier and Edwin Davis. The Great Mound rendering as it appears in the Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley published by the Smithsonian in 1851.

They surveyed and found it to be exactly 68 feet high, 852 feet in circumference at the base. containing 311,352 cubic feet of earth. These two men were the ones who first called it the "Great Mound", because that is what it was as is. Not only was it extremely high for a mound; but it was a perfect cone shape, which was quite rare.

When pioneers first settled in the Miami River Valley, there was simply no logical explanation for the Great Mound. Many tried to come up with an answer as to why in those early years. It became famous, and many early pioneers and other travelers went out of their way to see it. They were quite impressed, and naturally curious. There were many theories as to why and how it came to be there.

The Indians at the time, about 1790, were not given to talking much. They simply told settlers that "the mound is ancient," as if that settled that! Settlers around Miamisburg did not call it an Indian mound, because the Indians of the time said they didn't build it. They had no idea it was built by a prehistoric culture 2,000 years earlier. Busy with their own work, they just referred to it as "Round Knob". As word of the Great Mound spread it became well known. Many early artists came to Miamisburg to capture its image on paper or canvas. Later, many came to take photographs of the unusual Great Mound. For years it was considered the most beautiful conical mound in the country.

The first settler to own the land upon which the Great Mound was situated was a pioneer named John Lawras. On December 5th, 1806, he filed a claim at the Land Office in Cincinnati. His claim totaled 174.92 acres. It would seem Mr. Lawras had little interest in the Great Mound. He would receive a Land Patent (deed); however it would be almost 25 years before he received it. Handwritten paperwork in the capital at that time, New York City, was extremely slow. The Land Patent was signed by President Thomas Jefferson. John Lawras worked the land for several years. However, being on top of a bluff, erosion has stripped off much of the top soil leaving limestone outcroppings near the surface.

Then came a young physician, 19 year-old Dr. John Treon. Dr. Treon, took great interest in the strange mound. He was convinced that the mound was of considerable historic value, and that its archaeological value was priceless.

He purchased the land on which the mound was located because he felt that it must be preserved for future generations. He vowed that it would remain safely in the Treon family. We owe Dr. Treon thanks for being so concerned about the mound. Dr. Treon was, as you may suspect, an amateur archaeologist, and the Great Mound did indeed remain in the Treon family for nearly 100 years.

Dr. John Treon was born March 25, 1791 in Hamburg, a hamlet in Heidelberg Township, Burks County, Pennsylvania. He died at the age of 96 on May 16, 1887 in Miamisburg

In the early years, no one had counted all of the Adena mounds. Back in 1900, the Ohio History Connection (OHC) ordered such a survey in Ohio. Over ten thousand significant mounds were counted just in our state alone. It is unfortunate, but progress meant most of these Ohio mounds would be lost to civilization. Towns, cities and roads were built, factories constructed and of course, farmers were busy plowing their fields. Less than nine hundred Ohio mounds still remain to this day.

Next came Charles F. Kettering, a quite exceptional man. A Dayton inventor and industrialist, "Boss" Kettering had invented the first practical electric self-starter for automobiles. He organized his own company, The Dayton Electric Company, and after his company was purchased by General Motors, the name was shortened to Delco. Charles Kettering had always been interested in Ohio history, and

often visited the Great Mound, which he thought was quite wonderful. In 1920, he purchased the mound from the heirs of the Treon family. Like Dr. Treon, Kettering's intention was to make the Great Mound into a beautiful park or State memorial to benefit future generations.

In the years after Kettering bought the land, there was a neighbor, Edward J. Miller, who lived on his farm on the south side of the mound. For many years Ed Miller cut the grass on the mound, by hand, with a scythe, and cleaned up the litter left by the many visitors. Ed Miller loved the stately bearing of the mound. He never expected or asked to be paid for his efforts. Charles Kettering finally found time to begin working on his goal, to turn the mound and land he had purchased into a beautiful park.

In 1929, Mr. Kettering presented the Great Mound and the 37-acre park surrounding it to the OHC of Columbus, Ohio. Our faithful Mr. Miller donated two and a half acres form his own farm as park land. It's interesting that the original Land Patent (deed) signed by Thomas Jefferson, was on display at the dedication. It is owned by the Board of Trustees of the OHC. Since then the Land Patent seems to have been misplaced.

Over the past years, the Great Mound became a very popular tourist attraction. In the late 1930s, the Civilian Conservation Corps (Roosevelt's C.C.C.) had improved the park, building a large shelter house, with two fireplaces. There were convenient rest rooms, and for the thirsty, they provided cold well water at a do-it-yourself pump, complete with a tin cup. An entrance way, entrance drive way and parking lot were completed, and a great many trees were planted in the park.

The Great Mound was improved over the next eight years. Trails to the top had left gullies, and they were filled in. Most importantly, 116 steps to the top were built out of cut stone. On the summit 68 feet high, they placed flagstones, making an attractive circular lookout sixteen feet in diameter.

The flagstones on the mound top are historic and are made up from an old flagstone sidewalk on Main Street in Miamisburg, near the corner of Main and Central Avenue. Sidewalks in old Miamisburg were either wood, gravel or flagstones. Some believe the flagstones had been quarried locally west of the Great Miami River. The stones on the mound had been in storage for some forty years. Log railings next to the steps added a beautiful touch, and half way up, there was a rest stop with seating. A rustic log railing was built around the top, about thirty inches high, giving visitors an unobstructed view in every direction. Benches were provided for those out of breath from the climb.

In the early 1990s the rustic log railings up the Mound, and around the summit on top, built back in 1938 by the C.C.C., were becoming rotted and in need of replacement, as they were sixty years old. Work was started, to replace all of the rustic log railings, and most of the railings were removed in anticipation of replacement.

At this point a sudden financial recession gripped the country, and the OHC was forced to suspend most operations. By January 2008, the recession had become a serious problem. The State of Ohio, which is the major supporter of the Ohio History Connection, cut their funding. All work on the Great Mound had to stop.

It appears that the recession very possibly will continue for several years. In order to remain solvent, the Ohio History Connection is embarked on an extensive program of divesting themselves of over one hundred state parks, historic sites and memorials. These sites are being awarded to various cities, historical societies and groups who agree to maintain them as caretakers. The OHC, however still retains ownership of the sites. Miamisburg is one such city that agreed to assume maintenance and any financial costs associated with the upkeep of the Great Mound until the OHC in Columbus is again financially solvent.

This Great Mound photo from the 1940s shows the log railings once present. The Great Mound sentinel location is atop the eastern ridge of the Great Miami River Valley in Miamisburg. It is visible for miles around which probably made it a territorial marker for the Woodland inhabitants.

Erosion, potholes, gophers and groundhogs take their toll over time and require vigilance to repair. It is also our hope that once again the original C.C.C. log railings can be put back in place as is in the case of so many state parks throughout the country. It takes funding and we hope the Ohio History Connection, the City of Miamisburg and the citizens of Miamisburg and Montgomery County will continue to recognize the uniqueness of the Great Mound and preserve it in as pristine condition as possible for future generations. It has been here a couple of a thousand years as a testament to the existence of and bold reminder of the once great people who came before us. As the early pioneers exploring in the mid 1700s found, this place in Ohio was and is a good place to put down roots..

The Great Mound Park is easily accessible from I-75; simply take exit 44 west on Ohio 725 where it will merge with Central Avenue to downtown; turn south on Main Street, then east on Mound Avenue. Visitors can climb the stone steps that are built into the side of the mound. Reservations for the shelters can be made by calling the Department of Parks and Recreation, City of Miamisburg at 937-866-4532. A fee for large groups may be required.

Additional information concerning the Great Mound and its history can be had by contacting the Miamisburg Historical Society at 937-859-5000 or by visiting the Society's Resource and Research Center at 4 South Main Street in the Market Square Building. They are open on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons from 1 pm-4 pm. You can't miss the Market Square Building. It's the town square where another Miamisburg historic landmark exists– the Porter Hamburger Wagon, a long time favorite of visitors since the 1920s.

And when driving south on Main Street enjoy the German heritage still present in the homes and the many restaurants and Victorian structures along the way including the Society's Heritage Village. The Village has the Gebhart Tavern Museum and the Kercher Pioneer Home (both original log structures) open to the public on Sunday afternoons from 2 pm—5 pm.

Note: The Dayton History Connection started out as the Ohio Archaeological and Historical Society. The name was later changed to the Ohio Historical Society, then to the Ohio History Connection. For convenience sake all three were referred to as the OHC.

Written by Miamisburg Historical Society member Larry Suttman and edited by Gary Petticrew, Curator, July, 2015.