

Indian Burial Mounds: Sacred Resting Place



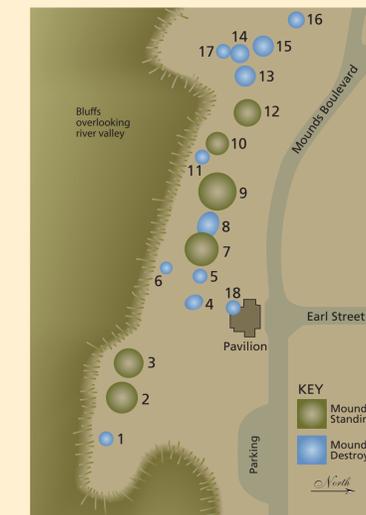
High bluffs along the Mississippi River have long served as burial sites for American Indians. The Mounds Park area in St. Paul has been used as a burial site by at least two American Indian cultures. "Hopewell" peoples are thought to have constructed the earliest mounds between 1500 and 2000 years ago. More recently, Dakota Indians, with different burial customs, also brought their dead to this place. While only six mounds now remain evident, at least 37 mounds once stood nearby.

Hopewell Culture and Mounds

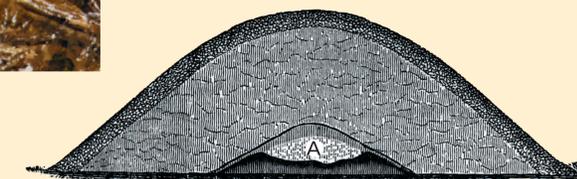
The name "Hopewell" is used to refer to an extensive network of Indian groups once centered in eastern North America. It is not known what the people called themselves. This network apparently flourished for 700 years or more. As many as forty offshoots have been attributed to Hopewell peoples, including the Dakota.

Large geometric earthworks and conical mounds are associated with the Hopewell. They are also recognized for their skilled artisans, who fashioned copper implements, masks and figurines, as well as fine pottery and stone tools. Such work was traded widely and was sometimes placed into mounds along with the ashes of the deceased.

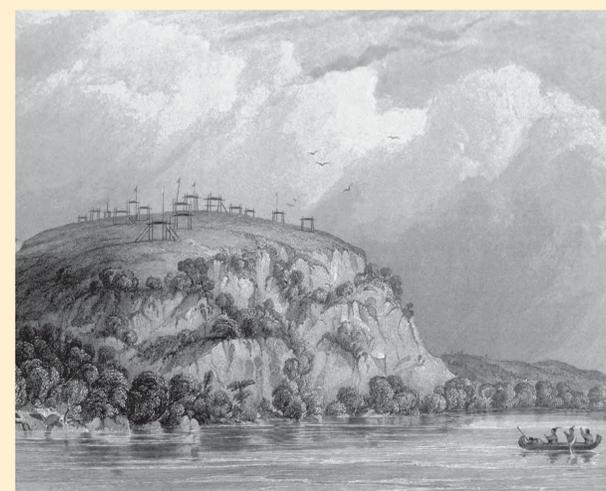
While there was great diversity in Hopewell burial mound-building customs, a distinct internal structure has generally been noted. At the center was a low, circular clay platform. In the concave top of the platform were ashes and cremated human remains, along with pottery, spear points and various implements. The platform was covered by earth, which in turn was covered with alternating layers of sand and earth. The entire mound was capped with a thick layer of gravel and pebbles.



Graphic above: Group of eighteen mounds surveyed in 1862 at site of Indian Mounds Park. Six of these mounds remain standing today. Additional mounds were located at nearby Dayton's Bluff.



Graphic above: Cross section showing construction of typical Hopewell mound. "A" = artifacts and cremated remains. By Squier and Davis, 1847, Smithsonian Institution.



Drawing above: "Dakota Burial Ground, on plateau near the mouth of the Minnesota River" by Seth Eastman. Courtesy of Edward E. Ayer Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago.

Dakota Burial and Passage

The Dakota wrapped their dead in a robe or blanket and placed them on burial scaffolds. The scaffolds allowed for a continuation of life through birds' consumption of the flesh. It also prepared the bones for later burial. After one year the bones were bundled in a buffalo skin and placed into a mound. With the bones might be placed other objects that had value and utility in the person's life – a knife, pipe, bow and arrow, sack of food, shells, or even a horse or canoe. At the Mounds Park site, Dakota may have inserted burial bundles into mounds constructed by Hopewell, or they used mounds they themselves constructed.

By traditional Dakota belief, there is no real death, but rather a journey, and continuation of life. A journey of three days is made to a female "gatekeeper" or "the old one," to whom one's life must be made accountable in order to pass on. After one year, there is a remembrance feast and give-a-way based on the preferences of the deceased. While long term religious persecution severely impacted the Dakota and their customs, many traditions associated with burial are still observed.

Burial mounds are places to be respected for the spirits of those that have passed. It is unlawful to disturb these areas.

Watercolor drawing above: "Indian Burial Ground," by Seth Eastman. The site depicted here was seven miles above Fort Snelling along the Minnesota River. It served three villages of Mdwakanton Dakota. Courtesy W. Duncan MacMillan.



Location of Indian Burial Mounds near the Mississippi River

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