Ohio has a great history; it also has a great mystery. There was a time geologists report when most of Ohio was submerged under fields of frozen water and then it was that the original “ice man” had it all his own way. Later nature repented and there was a great “melt” and the hills peeped forth and the valleys grew green, and the streams rippled and ran their ways through the glad earth. After the ice man, probably a long way after him, came the mysterious mound builder. Ohio must have been his favorite field for it is dotted over, as is no other state in the Union, with thousands of his relics, many massive and magnificent, well preserved monuments of his existence and primitive life. He left no written record, but he made his indelible mark in graves, village sites, earthen and stone structures of civil, religious and military significance, “silent witnesses of a busy but unfathomable antiquity” that unmistakably indicate an ambitious and strenuous life. A college senior decided to write his graduating thesis on the mound builders. He wrote a professor asking him who built the mounds and when they were made. The professor replied “the mounds were built by the mound builders and they were built in a prehistoric age.” And the honest professor told about all that is known concerning the mounds and their makers. The origin of this strange people is lost in obscurity. Scholars can not agree as to their whence or whither. They may have descended from some ancient race of Europe or Asia. They may have emigrated from Mexico or South America. Possibly like Topsy they just “grew up” in the United States and those in Ohio were the original “Buckeyes.” We do not know. One thing seems pretty certain, they existed and passed away before the race of Indians, of which we have knowledge, inhabited this country. Some claim that the Mound Builders were the remote ancestors of the Indians whom the European discoverers found on this continent. But the Indians seem to have been as ignorant of the Mound Builders as we are.

The Mound Builders were scattered over various parts of the United States, but especially inhabited the Mississippi and the Ohio Valleys. They followed the great water courses. The picturesque and fertile valleys of the Muskingum, Scioto and Little Miami were chosen fields for the location of these people. In over twelve thousand places in the present limits of our state, are found proofs of their
habitation, and these various evidences reveal that they were agricultural, piscatorial, military and religious in their nature and customs. They were cunning and showed sagacity and foresight, not only in the selection of places for habitation, but in their method of construction, design and purpose of their structures. They had architectural and engineering talent. In this they surpassed the Indian. The testimony of the Mound Builders’ civilization is found mainly in the following forms: (1) Village sites, (2) Burial grounds, (3) Walled enclosures, (4) Symbolical or religious mounds, (5) Single mounds, mostly sepulchral monuments.

The village sites disclose their settlements in the shape of hearths or fireplaces, ash pits and refuse heaps, implements of their hunting, fishing and agricultural pursuits, pieces of pottery, pipes, bone utensils and various articles used in housekeeping, bones of animals and birds. These village sites are found all over the state, but mainly in the southern part, the most extensive being those known as the Baum Village in Ross County, and the one at Madisonville, Hamilton County. The burial grounds of cemeteries are usually near the village sites. The bodies of these prehistoric people are found from six to twelve feet beneath the surface, often buried with implements and ornaments, particularly in case the dead was some “distinguished citizen,” though the great chiefs were generally interred in mounds erected for that purpose. The walled enclosures are exceedingly numerous; of all sizes and shapes, and are built in the lowlands and on the elevations and hilltops. The greatest of these in Ohio and the United States is known as Fort Ancient, near Lebanon, Warren County. It is built on the left bank of the Little Miami. Its walls are from five to twenty feet high, twelve to twenty feet wide at the base, and broad enough on the top to drive a coach and span upon. The walls are over three miles in extent, and enclose one hundred acres of level space. Many archeologists and amateur authors have written about this wonderful structure; its purpose is not absolutely known; it may have been either a walled town, a military fort, or an enclosure for religious or for civil ceremonies. Some think it was the capital city of the Mound Builders. A cemetery was found within its walls. The walls are of earth with here and there layers of stone at the base and occasionally stone walls on the top. Models of this fort are in museums of England, France and Germany. Near Bourneville, in Ross County, is an enclosure called Stone Fort. It is on the peak of Spruce Hill which is some four hundred feet high. The encircling wall is built entirely of stone, mostly bowlders and cobblestones. This wall is two and a quarter miles in length and embraces the entire summit of the hill including an area of one hundred and forty acres. Fort Hill, near Hillsboro, Highland County, is another supposed fortification which caps the crest of a hill five hundred feet above Brush Creek. The wall in this case is composed of mingled earth and stone, is a mile and a half in length, varying from six to ten feet in height and an average, at the base, of some thirty-five feet. It shuts in nearly fifty acres. These hilltop embankments would indicate that the Builders were a warlike people and resorted to these places in times of attack. They may have been of different tribes, like the later Indians, fighting each other. If these structures were forts and there were wars, what a sight it must have been—hundreds of half-clad warriors with spears and clubs and bows and arrows, battling from the walls to keep back the bands of the on-surgeing enemy as they slowly strove to creep up the hill sides and dislodge the inmates. There was no cannon roar, no whizzing of bullets, no shrieking shells; there were no battering-rams as with the Trojans and Romans, and whatever
became of the warriors on either side the walls of their fort still stand, like the Pyramids on the bank of the Nile, silent sentinels of the untold victories and defeats of hundreds of years ago. Probably the noble old castles on the Rhine could relate no more thrilling or romantic tales than might these deserted and secret-keeping fortresses of the Ohio Mound Builders.

The symbolical or religious mounds are the most curious and perplexing of all. They represent animals, like the great alligator at Granville, Licking County. This figure, that of an animal, probably an alligator, some claim an opossum [sic], is one hundred and fifty feet long and a hundred in width, with head, body, legs and tail of raised or built up earth several feet in height. It is on a hill-side and can be seen a long way off. But the greatest of these in Ohio or in the country anywhere, is the famous Serpent Mound, near Peebles, Adams County. This serpent lies upon a cliff of land that rises almost perpendicularly from the bank of Brush Creek to the height of a hundred feet. The serpent can therefore be viewed from a great distance in the valley beneath. The snake is made of earth, in some places aided by inserted stones. The head is seventy feet long and from his mouth to the tip of his tail it is nearly twelve hundred feet.

At the largest part of the body he is some six feet high and twelve feet across the base. His serpentine form tapers off naturally like any properly grown snake. He lies in folds like a whip when you shake the handle, except at the tail, which is coiled in a circle. One can walk on his back from head to end. His great mouth is wide open and swallowing a large oval circular mound like an immense egg. Just beyond the egg is another earthen structure like a frog, flattened out, his hind legs kicking toward the snake’s jaws; it may not be a frog, but it seems to be a queer creature of some kind. Altogether the Serpent Mound is “the greatest show on earth,” or in earth, that the Mound Builders ever put up. It is supposed to have some religious meaning or use, perhaps was the object or means of worship. Many ancient nations worshipped animals, and in this the Mound Builders appear to have been like the old Egyptians. Perhaps the people who built the Serpent Mound or their ancestors came from Egypt where in olden times the serpent was held in sacred reverence.

This article contains the unabridged and unaltered text of and images from “The Mound Builders” from Ohio History Sketches, published in 1903 by F.B. Pearson and J. D. Harlor, Press of Fred. J. Heer, Columbus, Ohio; with new title graphic by Dan C. Rinnert. New material Copyright 2011 by Canville Communications.

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Scattered over the state are single conical or round shaped mounds of all sizes, from that of a shock of corn to that of a great haystack. The largest is that at Miamisburg, Montgomery County, a conical shaped pile of earth, seventy five feet high and with a base diameter of two hundred and fifty feet. These single mounds were mainly burial monuments and often contain the great dead of their people. The famous Adena Mound at Chillicothe contained in its center a large chamber or room in which lay skeletons adorned with rich ornaments; about the ankles, wrists and fingers of some were found rings of beaten copper and in a few instances necklaces of beads and about the skull of one was a bead crown. Pieces of fine cloth were also discovered, the remains doubtless of royal robes. It must have been the sepulchre of a king, chief or hero and his family.

Lastly there are combinations or series of mounds like the collection near Chillicothe, called the Mound City or, better, the group near Newark, which presents the most elaborate and complicated of all the works of the Mound Builders. These remains are near the forks of the Licking River and consist of an extensive number of square, circular, octagonal, and polygonal enclosures with mounds, ditches and connecting avenues. These earthen works all together cover about four square miles of area. Their purpose has never been determined and probably never will be. Like the Sphinx, they tell no tales. They keep still and excite the interest and amazement of all visitors. It may have been a temple, a village and a fort in combination. These works exhibit great constructive thought, vast industry and almost incomprehensible labor. Indeed the time and manual effort the mounds in Ohio represent is the one great wonder of all students. The Mound Builders certainly would not have done so much and done it so well and so artistically, so to speak, without some great purpose and definite design. It has been estimated that the “earthly productions” of these peculiar people, now standing in Ohio, contain thirty million cubic yards of earth or stone work, and that it would require a thousand men, each man working three hundred days in a year and carrying one wagon load of dirt or stone a day, a century to complete these artificial formations. Whether these structures were built during or near the same period we cannot tell. There are many mounds in Ohio, it must be remembered, that were built by the Indians. Of those this article does not treat.

That the Mound Builders’ works are very ancient is proved in many ways. By the testimony of the primitive articles and implements found in the mounds and graves; by the testimony of the creeks and rivers in the changes of their courses since the mounds were built and by great trees that have grown upon these mounds, some of them being six hundred years old and probably second or third growths, scholars conclude these great works are at least hundreds of years old and perhaps many thousands. It is plausibly
guessed that these people belonged to the Stone Age, for their implements are almost entirely of that material. They had not learned the value and use of iron or metal articles. As a people they were numerous, active, ingenious, industrious and religious. From their skeletons we do not learn that they differed greatly in size or strength from the modern races.

The study of the skulls of these Mound Builders yields uncertain results. They of course were a primitive people. But it is difficult, if not impossible, to classify them and assign their place in the great division of races. Anthropologists and ethnologists, like the proverbial doctors, disagree about all this. Some scholars have tried to distinguish the skills found in different sections of the state and decide that one kind or tribe lived in one locality and another branch in a different section. Thus some interesting authors claim the skulls found in Northern Ohio are narrow and long, they call them the “long heads;” the skulls in Southern Ohio, on the contrary are short and thick, they are called the “short heads.” The long heads have receding brows. The short heads have high foreheads. The short heads were therefore the brainier of the two. The short heads were the most ingenious and industrious and made the best implements and greatest earth works. The long heads were the most numerous. By the long heads, therefore, it would seem is meant the “lunk-heads” and by the short heads the “smart-heads” are designated. It is claimed the indications are that there was war between these north and south Mound Builders and that naturally the bright ones were victorious over the dull ones. But this is largely skull speculation and fanciful imagination.

The burials of these people disclose that they had their great chiefs of “big men” and the extent and understood organizations and subordination in their character of their “builders” certainly prove that they had a social system; that there were “bosses” in those prehistoric days who directed and controlled the workmen. They may not have been troubled with the question of combined capital, but they surely wrestled with the great question of labor.

Peace be to the ashes of the Mound Builders. The Indian beheld the monuments of his mysterious predecessors apparently in awe and reverence.

“Oh, Mound: consecrated before
The White man’s foot e’er trod on shore
To battle’s strife and valour’s grave,
Spare: oh, spare, the buried brave.

“A thousand winters passed away,
And yet demolished not the clay,
Which on yon hillock held in trust
The quiet of the warrior’s dust.

“The Indian came and went again;
He hunted through the lengthened plain;
And from the mound he oft beheld
The present silent battlefield.

“But did the Indian e’er presume,
To violate that ancient tomb?
Ah, no: he had the soldier’s grace
Which spares the soldier’s resting place.”

At the time of this article’s publication in 1905, the Honorable E.O. Randall was Secretary of the Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society and Professor of Law, Ohio State University, and Supreme Court Reporter.