

High Cliff Effigy Mounds

Just north of the campground at High Cliff State Park, one can find amazing souvenirs of Pre-American history. These wonders are the effigy mounds built by nomadic woodland tribes somewhere between 1000 A.D. and 1500 A.D. These dates have been determined by carbon dating charcoal remnants from the fires of the effigy mound builders.

The woodland tribes that built these mounds are thought to be Siouan origin which was later replaced by Dakota, Winnebago, Menominee, Salk, Fox and other tribes. The lakes and rivers were probably what attracted the mound builders to the woods of this area. They provided food and transportation in almost any direction.

The effigy mounds will always be a mystery to this civilized world. Some mounds were used for funeral purposes which have been found holding from one to many bodies. Other mounds remained empty, it is believed for ceremonial purposes. Of the mounds that were used for burial, three types of remains have been found. "Bundle" remains are those of people who died in winter, when the tribe was south. Their bodies were wrapped in animal skins and set on high wooded pallets. The



flesh decomposed, leaving mostly the bones to be carried north in spring. "Flexed" remains are of the people who died when travelling to, or already in, the area. These are the remains of the entire body. "Cremated" remains have also been found in some mounds.

The construction of the effigy mounds was the duty of everyone in the tribe. The forest duff (leaves, branches, etc.) was removed in the exact shape and size of the mound to be built. The bodies were then placed in the desired position, usually the head or heart portions of the mound shape. Sometimes, belongings and artifacts were placed with the bodies. The tribe then covered the remains with soil that was scraped from the forest with sharp stones or sticks that were sharpened on stones and hardened by the heat of fire. The soil was then carried to the mound in baskets made of leather, black ash, or basswood, and piled between two and four feet high into the shape of the mound.

The shapes of the effigy mounds are divided into two categories: animal and geometric. Geometric shapes include conical (round mounds that are slightly pointed at the center), and lineal mounds, which are long and narrow. The animal shapes were taken from the animals that shared the forest with the mound builders. These shapes include panthers, buffalo, bears, turtles, lizards, and waterfowl. It is believed that the shape of the mounds signified the status of the family of the deceased.

History

High Cliff State Park

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Animal shapes are thought to signify a better status than geometric and the buffalo shape was, most likely, reserved for families of the chief.

Out of the original 30 effigy mounds in High Cliff, only nine remain. These can be found on the Indian Mound Trail in the upper section of the park. This trail has signs posted along it describing the animal life, vegetation, speculation on the ways of life of the former inhabitants of the High Cliff area, and the mounds themselves. When following this trail through the woods, one takes a turn and finds themselves in the midst of the mounds. The first mound is a spectacular panther mound that reaches 285 feet in length. High Cliff boasts three other panther mounds, two conical mounds, one lineal mound, and, along a smaller path, two buffalo mounds.

None of the mounds at High Cliff have been found to hold any remains or artifacts, but a number of mounds near Quinney and Brothertown have been located that did contain human remains. However, whether or not there was anything placed in the mounds, they were all sacred to their builders. They still hold a religious value to some, and extreme historical value to all people. So, please be careful not to walk on or disturb these ancient treasures.

Mysterious Series of Mounds:

Why did they build them?

Archaeologists speculate that people from the late Woodland period (1,000 to 1,500 years ago) built these mounds over many years, perhaps even hundreds of years. Current thinking suggests that the whole grouping of mounds had a broad meaning such as to indicate the territory of a family band, to mark important astronomical events or to communicate to a clan or ancestor. Some suggest they represented a ritual to honor the earth. In addition, each individual mound likely had its own spiritual meaning. This panther is thought to represent a water spirit. The panther is the most common and largest shape in this grouping of mounds.

The mounds on this trail are all that remain of the 27 mounds that once existed between here and the lookout tower. The mounds were destroyed by the quarry operation and other developments before the park's creation in 1957.

