

Albany Mounds State Historic Site
History Corner 2017 Black Hawk State Historic Site newsletter
by Ferrel Anderson 2017

Albany Indian Mounds is owned by the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency and managed by Black Hawk State Historic Site with help from the Friends of the Albany Indian Mounds Foundation, who maintain the site and have established a walking trail through the mound area and prairie. To access the Mounds, you take IL-84 N to So. Park Ave. in Albany. Turn onto So. Cherry St. and go to the end to reach them.

The Friends have produced a brochure that explains the history of the site. Here is some of their information.

“The Albany Mounds area has been inhabited for at least 10,000 years. Artifacts from nearly all local prehistoric American Indian cultures have been found here. The area is best known for the group of American Indians who lived here about 2000 years ago; members of the Hopewell culture who constructed the burial mounds from which the site derives its name.”

“The Albany site was particularly well-suited to the Hopewell. They preferred to build their villages at the base of bluffs located along the floodplains of major rivers. They built their villages near backwater lakes and slough. The Meredosia Slough is adjacent to the Albany site. During Hopewell times the slough served as flood drainage for the Mississippi and Rock Rivers. It provided an abundant source of food and water. The nearby Mississippi facilitated transportation. Upland forests and many types of prairie were located adjacent to the river and slough. Forests and their margins provided a rich source of food and fuel for the Hopewell who lived here.”

“The Albany mound builders lived here during the Middle Woodland time period. They were a part of the Hopewell culture which flourished during the Middle Woodland times. The Hopewell culture, which lasted from 200 B.C. to 300 A.D., covered the eastern third of America, from Kansas to New York and from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico.

Hopewell was not an Indian tribe. It was not a nation nor a dominant political group. Rather, the term Hopewell refers to a period of time in American Indian prehistory marked by trade, communications, and a sharing of ideas throughout this large geographic region.

Burial mounds are consistently found at Hopewell sites. Certain mortuary practices and rituals were shared between groups on a large regional basis. It is the presence of certain trade goods, certain distinct mortuary traditions, and certain decorative motifs, styles, and symbols that label an area Hopewell.”

“More than 96 mounds were originally located at the Albany site, making it one of the largest mound groups in Illinois as well as in the nation. Today less than 50 remain.”

Albany Mounds – Part 2 by Ferrel Anderson

The reason for the exceptionally large number of mounds and the comparably large associated habitation area at the Albany site has been a matter of debate within the archaeological community since its discovery by the Davenport Academy of Natural Sciences in the late nineteenth century. Academy members asked George Davenport Jr., Col Davenport's son who played as a child with Sauk children at Saukenuk, to consult with the Sauks about the mounds. They replied that even though they had a village at the site, they knew nothing about the mounds or their purpose! Subsequently, the Academy excavated or sponsored excavations at the site, and found that the mounds were burial sites in which the manner of internment, the architecture of the mounds with central burial tombs, and the associated funerary artifacts were similar to those of mounds found throughout the Ohio and upper Mississippi river valleys. The funerary items found with the burials

in the central tombs consisting of platform smoking pipes, copper pan pipes, mica mirrors, large marine shell containers, pottery, a meteoric iron knife blade and other diagnostic artifacts that were similar to those found at a site in Ohio named the Paint Creek Works that was owned by a Colonel Hopewell. Since that time, the culture that constructed the mounds has been called the Hopewell Culture. The Academy excavations, completed in 1908, did not answer the question about the importance of the site.

Ironically, the answer to this question was found at two remote sites: in Sterling, Illinois and in the Tremper mound in Ohio.

Archaeologists had believed that the unique platform, or monitor pipe (named so because of its shape like that of the monitor iron clad ship of civil war fame), found in great numbers at Hopewell sites were made of a kaolin mineral found in Ohio called Ohio pipestone. This theory was set upside down by the discovery that the pipes found in the upper Mississippi River valley and in a large cache of pipes found in the Tremper mound in Ohio were made of a mineral named Bertherine, which is found only in shale deposits around Sterling, Illinois! All of this was made possible by a new non-destructive technique that could positively identify the pipe materials, and the discovery of the bertherine mineral in geologic deposits and large quantities in the form of raw material and finished artifacts in local archaeological sites in the Sterling area. The final piece in the puzzle was the discovery of large quantities of Bertherine (named Rock River Pipestone) in the form of cobbles, debutage and pipe preforms in the village site at Albany Mounds.

Thus the Albany Mounds site was important because it was the center or hub of the Rock River Pipestone industry that was so important to the Hopewell people, a people who were inveterate traders of exotic raw materials and finished articles such as platform pipes. It appears that the Albany residents were miners and craftsmen who supplied finished pipes to the larger Hopewell community in the upper Mississippi and Ohio River systems. So why was the hub located at Albany? Because it was located on the largest trade route in the Midwest – the Mississippi River, and could be reached easily by a water portage between the Rock River and the Mississippi River through the Meredosia slough.

Part 3 by Ferrel Anderson

The location of the Hopewell pipestone industry with its large village site and ninety six burial mounds at Albany is a loss to the archaeology of the Hopewell at the mouth of the Rock River – no Meredosia Slough and the easiest access to the Mississippi River trade route would have been the Rock River mouth. Even so, the archaeology of the Hopewell at the mouth of the Rock is impressive, as it is at the mouth of other major tributaries such as Pine Creek, and the Iowa, Galena and upper Iowa Rivers. Many Hopewell mounds were located on the bluff that hosts the Black Hawk Watch Tower and present day Black Hawk State Historic Site. In fact, one of these still exists in the front yard of one of our members. We know that these mounds were constructed by the Hopewell from what was found in them by nineteenth century antiquarians from the Davenport Academy of Natural Sciences. They found platform “monitor” smoking pipes, large containers made from giant marine shells from the Caribbean sea, and a large ceremonial spear point made of Knife River Flint that is found only in western North Dakota. Unfortunately these antiquarians were interested only in recovering artifacts and left essentially no record of the construction of the mounds, the burials, and other artifacts that no doubt were found in them. It is an unfortunate fact

that of the 400 burial mounds recorded in Rock Island County alone, none has been scientifically excavated. Perhaps only about forty still exist, and most of them have been looted.

Across the Mississippi River from the Rock River mouth, the Cook Mound Group was excavated by the Academy. These mounds were located at the original mouth of Black Hawk Creek near the present causeway to Credit Island. This seven mounds were rich in the number and quality of grave goods, and the mound construction and burials were described in adequate detail. The grave goods included pottery vessels, plain and effigy monitor pipes, many copper celts (un-grooved axe heads), obsidian projectile points and other artifacts. The burials were interred in stone lined and covered tombs situated on the original ground surface and in the center of each mound. All of these traits are classical Hopewellian for the upper Mississippi River valley, but the richness of them, in comparison to the Albany Mounds, begs the question of why?

Hopewell mound sites and their associated villages are located in the Mississippi River valley at about 30 mile intervals. It is estimated that the population density is similar to that of rural Iowa and Illinois today, but was concentrated in these villages. Albany is one of three Hopewellian industry and trade centers located outside of Ohio, where the most impressive Hopewell sites and ceremonial centers are located. There are three sites are associated with important materials: Albany has Rock River pipestone; Twenhoffel in Illinois near the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers has Dhongolla chert; and the Mann Site located on the Ohio River in Indiana has hornstone chert. These exotic and cherished pipestones and cherts were the main ones found within the Hopewell settlement area of the Midwest, as opposed to the other exotic materials, such as copper from the Lake Superior region, marine shells from the Gulf of Mexico, mica from Georgia, Knife river flint from North Dakota and obsidian from Wyoming. Even so, these exotic materials seem to have been dispersed from the three main Hopewell trade centers, and somehow ended up in the vast burial mounds located in the large geometrical earth works in Ohio. One explanation is that the Hopewell practiced one religion and made pilgrimages to the Ohio ceremonial centers.

The annual settlement pattern of the Hopewell is similar to that of the Sauk and Fox tribes. Their main villages are found in the Mississippi River valley in late spring, summer and early fall, but in the winter they dispersed to regions along the tributary streams to trap and process animal furs, mine lead, and collect other commodities to trade for needed material from the Europeans and Americans. The same pattern is inferred for the Hopewell from archaeological evidence in the form of burial practices and small, apparently, specialized camps and diagnostic artifacts found in the hinter regions, such as in rock shelters and caves at Maquoketa, Iowa. The burial practice which is common at Albany Mounds was called bundle burials. The bones of people who died in the hinterlands were placed on scaffolds, the bodies deteriorated and the main bones, such as the skull and long bones were collected the following year, placed in a bundle, probably in a bag, and carried back to the cemetery for interment in a mound. The Historic tribes and the Hopewell shared a common settlement pattern based on trade even though they are separated by 2,000 years.