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Partners in preservation: citizens ally to protect ancestral Indian mounds

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John Broihahn says the guiding principle of his agency is to "do no harm." That's an axiom most would recognize as the physician's motto, but Broihahn isn't a medical doctor. Through the Division of Historic Preservation, he serves as state archeologist, and his comment refers to Wisconsin's commitment to Indian mound management. Broihahn and his colleagues are not alone: the desire to preserve ancestral land forms has brought state, local and tribal governments together with concerned citizens all around the state.



A rabbit or deer effigy mound near Lake Mendota in Madison, c. 1914. Photo: Wisconsin Historical Society.

While mounds can be found throughout North America, Wisconsin claims the largest concentration—once numbering between 15,000-20,000, based on cataloguing efforts that date back to the 19th century. In the Madison area alone, well over 1,000 existed. However, experts estimate that 80 percent of the state's mounds have been destroyed by agriculture, urban growth and road building. Looters looking for artifacts have also defaced many of the mounds.

Despite this dramatic loss in number, Indian mounds continue to appear across the state, in areas both urban and rural, often near rivers and lakes and on high ground. Researchers generally believe Native people began building earthen structures in the region at least 2500 years ago, and for reasons unknown to modern science, stopped building them around 1200 A.D. Their form varies—from cone-shaped mounds to flat-topped platforms to elaborate effigies of mammals, reptiles and birds that sometimes span hundreds of feet.

State law now prohibits any disturbance of the mounds, but early excavations revealed that many contain human remains. "While they don't necessarily look like Forest Lawn, they really are cemeteries—as well as being important religious, cultural and educational sites," says Broihahn. As such, he maintains, mounds need to be protected and valued in the same way any burial site would be.

Jay Toth agrees. He's the tribal archeologist of the [Ho-Chunk Nation](#), and he has worked hard to protect and restore ancestral mounds. For Indians and non-Indians alike, "mound stewardship is an inherited moral obligation, both ethically and on religious grounds," Toth says. "It is said that one can determine the quality of a society by the way they care for

their dead." To fulfill their responsibility, the Ho-Chunk Nation has played an instrumental role in developing mound preservation standards, which the Department of Natural Resources has since adopted. They continue to work with state, county and local governments to ensure the integrity of restoration processes.



A mound at Kingsley Bend, near Wisconsin Dells.

Near Wisconsin Dells on Highway 16, Toth leads an effort to restore the Kingsley Bend mound group. The Department of Transportation returned a forty-acre tract of land containing these mounds to the Ho-Chunk Nation earlier this year, after the DOT said it could no longer afford to care for the property. Even before the deed transfer, a coalition of tribal and state agencies began working to clear the Kingsley Bend

site of more than 100 trees planted decades ago by the DOT. The intent is to restore the site to its original appearance, with a view of the mounds from the nearby Wisconsin River.

In spite of the damage Western expansion wreaked on Wisconsin's mounds, records show that some early settlers and surveyors did work zealously to protect them. "Calls for preservation really originated when Europeans first settled Wisconsin," says State Archeologist Broihahn. He says Madison residents owe their thanks to the efforts of conservation activists like Charles E. Brown, founder of the [Wisconsin Archeological Society](#) and former director of the [Wisconsin Historical Museum](#). Brown, who reportedly called Madison "mound city," saved numerous area mounds from the tractor blade during his 36-year museum tenure in the early 20th century. Broihahn says the number of preserved mounds in Madison, while drastically lower than the original quantity, makes Madison unique.

Today, neighborhood activists continue the work of Brown and his contemporaries. On the north shore of Lake Monona in East Madison, for example, two small parks serve as shelter to three urban effigy mounds. "Let the Great Spirits Soar," a Harry Whitehorse sculpture fashioned from a lightning-damaged hackberry, sets these mounds apart. Neighbors organized to commission the sculpture, also called the "Effigy Tree," from the Ho-Chunk artist and Madison resident in 1991—and when weather and time rendered significant damage to the piece, neighbors organized again to save it.



Detail of Whitehorse's sculpture, "Let the Great Spirits Soar." Photo: David Medaris.

Ann Brickson, who lives near the mounds, volunteers her time to the sculpture restoration effort known as the Effigy Tree Foundation. She says that, for the neighborhood, this project means more than just saving the art. "We always knew that the Tree had a place in people's hearts. Living here, we often found messages and

talismans left at the base of the sculpture," she says. "But once we started talking about [restoration], we learned so much more about the nature of the mounds. And we've learned a great deal about how much they mean to the neighborhood, and about what they mean to the Ho-Chunk Nation." The Foundation works closely with the artist and the Ho-Chunk Nation, who trace their lineage back to the effigy mound builders.

Brickson says the sculpture draws the attention of passersby, which helps serve "as a reminder of our responsibility as citizens of Dane County to become stewards of the mounds." Neighbors voiced a strong preference for casting the piece in bronze, rather than the less expensive option of having the artist repair the sculpture and then move it to an indoor site. "Permanent material reminds us of our permanent obligation," Brickson says.



Whitehorse's sculpture has been temporarily removed from Madison's Elmside Park for conservation.

The Effigy Tree has been removed from the park and repaired by Harry Whitehorse. When the Foundation reaches its fundraising goal, the sculpture will be shipped to an art foundry for bronze casting. Along with the Ho-Chunk Nation, the Foundation has already begun planning for a celebration to mark the sculpture's return, tentatively slated for 2009. They look forward to the rededication as a way of

bringing together communities—at the same site that scientists imagine to have been a spiritual and cultural hub for mound-building societies so many centuries ago.

To learn more about mound preservation:

Former State Archeologist Bob Birmingham and Burial Sites Program Coordinator Leslie Eisenberg have written a straightforward, comprehensive book called *Indian Mounds of Wisconsin*. First published in 2000, this historic overview includes maps, photographs and annotated lists of mound sites around the state.

The Wisconsin Historical Society has also published materials for students. Two works that address Wisconsin mounds are *Digging and Discovery* (2006), a book on archaeology for fourth graders, and *Water Panthers, Bears and Thunderbirds* (2003), a book that helps students explore effigy mounds. Both are available at the Society's Web site at <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/archaeology/learn/>.

The Lakeshore Nature Preserve at the University of Wisconsin-Madison has an excellent Web site, with an [interactive map](#) that allows users to locate and learn about campus mounds. The map also features the area's topography and vegetation, and it has an animation tool that shows an aerial view of the evolution of the site over time.

To get involved with preservation efforts:

John Broihahn says the Division of Historic Preservation gets a few calls

every year from residents who believe they may have an Indian mound on their property. To report a possible site, call the Burial Sites Preservation Program at 608-264-6493 or 800-342-7834 (in Wisconsin only). The state will check its database, visit the site and, if warranted, authenticate the claim. Catalogued properties are eligible to receive a tax exemption.

Nearly halfway to its funding goal, the Effigy Tree Foundation has received grant money from the Madison Community Foundation and donations from neighbors, and they anticipate a City of Madison Neighborhood grant, says Ann Brickson. In addition to the foundry costs, the group will need to raise funds for transporting the heavy sculpture and to pay for the natural stone base preferred by the artist. Those interested in contributing to the effort should send a check to: Goodman Atwood Community Center, 2425 Atwood Avenue, Madison, Wis. 53704. (Please note in the memo line of your check that you wish to donate to the Effigy Tree.)

If you have comments or questions, please contact us at portalwisconsin@wpt.org.

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