

THE EFFIGY TREE PROJECT

The Effigy Tree is a wood sculpture created on location in Hudson Park by Ho Chunk sculptor Harry Whitehorse in 1991. Hudson Park, on the shore of Lake Monona, is the site of three effigy mounds representing a bear, a lynx, and a panther or water spirit. These are all that remains of an extensive cluster of mounds that once extended from the Yahara River to Olbrich Park and included giant birds, one with a wingspan of over 550 feet.

Effigy mounds were constructed between 700 and 1200 A.D. and are believed to be the creation of the ancient ancestors of the Ho Chunk Nation. They are unique to the upper Midwest, with the vast majority of sites in Wisconsin and a significant number of these clustered around lakes in Madison. Dane County alone once had over 1000 mounds, 80 per cent of which have been destroyed. Not just burial sites, the mounds are ceremonial landscapes that recreate the world view of the builders and were constructed to maintain balance and harmony with the sacred character of the natural world. In addition to being both rare and spectacular archeological treasures, "for contemporary Native Americans, mounds are physical links to the ancestors and the land, and they are an important symbol of cultural continuity and persistence in the face of change and competing cultural values." *

The original Effigy Tree sculpture was created as the result of a community effort to transform the remains of a hackberry tree that was struck by lightning. It consists of figures of a wolf, a bear and cub, a lynx, a thunderbird and an eagle, all important symbols in Ho Chunk culture. At the top is, in the words of Harry Whitehorse "the very Indian face which looks out over this lake, a tribute to those who consecrated this ground and built its mounds so many, many generations ago. For the dedication of the sculpture in May, 1991, Whitehorse wrote "as we stand here on this hilltop today as others did so long before us, I am one proud and hope-full man -- linking centuries of similar men from this planet's past and her unknowable future with the work of my hands."

For 16 years, the original sculpture has been a much loved neighborhood landmark and a focal point for increasing community awareness of the precious remaining effigy mounds. Situated on the popular Lake Monona Bike Path, the Effigy Tree introduces the mounds to the many passers by who walk or ride along the lake. Deterioration of the sculpture forced its removal from the site in 2007. Using new materials, Harry Whitehorse has restored the sculpture to its original form. The Effigy Tree Project is a neighborhood collaboration to preserve the sculpture by casting it in bronze and returning it to its Hudson Park site. Casting the sculpture in a permanent material reminds us of the permanence of our connection to the mounds and our obligation as stewards of these irreplaceable ancient sculptural landforms.

Planning and fund raising for this project began in January, 2008. A core group of about 10 neighbors is leading this effort. This group is supported by many more neighborhood volunteers who have identified themselves as available for fund raising, site preparation and maintenance, and other tasks in support of the project. The estimated date for completion of the project is fall 2009. Thereafter, the sculpture and its site will require annual maintenance, and a maintenance endowment is included in the project budget. The original Effigy Tree and the site surrounding it have been supported and cared for by the Atwood community for 16 years, and the same commitment will apply to the restored sculpture.

* Robert A. Birmingham and Leslie E. Eisenberg, *Indian Mounds of Wisconsin*, University of Wisconsin Press. This book is an excellent resource for those interested in Indian mounds.

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