

Towner Mound: Creating Content and Sparking Curiosity for the Portage County Parks



A 1930s postcard of Towner Mound overlooking Lake Pippin

Towner Mound, also known as the Lake Pippin Mound, is a Hopewell Indian burial mound located on Lake Pippin in Kent, Ohio. Hopewell is a term that is used to define people that shared certain characteristics during a specific time period. These characteristics are extravagant burial ceremonialism, certain types of crafts and arts, and long distance trade networks. Burial mounds are probably the most distinguishing mark of Hopewell culture.

The prehistory, before the arrival of Europeans, of North America is generally divided into periods and traditions. In eastern North America, there are four prominent periods and traditions- Paleo-Indian, Archaic, Woodland, and Late Prehistoric. The Woodland period began 3,000 years ago and continued until about 1,000 years ago. It is also divided into periods, Early Woodland, Middle Woodland,

and Late Woodland. The Hopewell were especially prominent during the Middle Woodland period, around 2,000 years ago.

The Ohio Hopewell is most extravagant and prominent at what is called “the Hopewell core.” The core is centered around Chillicothe, Ohio but Hopewell influence extends as far south as Louisiana and as far north as New York. The Hopewell core is marked with extravagant mortuary ceremonialism, most obviously through burial mounds and earthwork enclosures, and material culture. Common artifacts include platform effigy pipes, metal panpipes, breastplates, copper earspools, pottery, mica cutouts, canine teeth of grizzly bears inlaid with freshwater pearls, conch shells, ritual knives made of obsidian, bladelets, and Snyder’s Point projectile points.

Included below are some of these diagnostic Hopewell artifacts.



Classic Hopewell Point
Courtesy of Ohio Memory Project



Hawk Effigy Platform Pipe
Courtesy of Ohio Memory Project



Courtesy of Ohio Memory Project

Hopewell Pottery

However, because Towner Mound is so far north of this core area it is considered to be part of the Hopewell “periphery.” Sites in the periphery are usually smaller with

less of the characteristic artifacts than what is found in the core area. Hopewell traits occur across a very broad region, and these traits do not appear evenly at all sites outside of the core area. In areas outside of the Hopewell core, the funerary customs and material culture associated with Hopewell were added to the local culture and did not replace other aspects of the local culture. Hopewell periphery sites generally have less diagnostic Hopewell artifacts than sites in the Hopewell core, but all Hopewell sites have bladelets made out of Flint Ridge flint.

Included below are artifacts from the Esch Mounds site and the Heckelman site, periphery Hopewell sites in northern Ohio



Cluster Projectile Point from Esch Mounds
Courtesy of Ohio Memory Project



Lowe Hopewell projectile points from the Heckelman site
Courtesy of the Kent State Archaeology Collections



Hopewell bladelet, made of Flint Ridge flint from Esch Mounds.
Courtesy of Ohio Memory Project



Hopewell bladelets, made of Flint Rige flint, from the Heckelman site
Courtesy of Kent State Archaeology Collection

Towner Mound is named after George Towner, who discovered it on his land in 1931. Towner found an oddly shaped piece of stone, which upon further investigation he realized was a stone celt. Towner dug a little deeper and discovered additional artifacts, including some copper beads, flake knives, and flint projectile

points. He immediately stopped digging when he saw the remains of a cremation burial and contacted the Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, now the Ohio History Connection.

The Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society sent their curator at the time, Dr. Emerson Greenman, to excavate Towner Mound in 1932. The mound contained at least seven burials, maybe up to eleven burials. Reports of the excavation are confusing because of the time period in which it was dug. The excavation occurred during the Great Depression. Because so many people were out of work, there was an estimated 2000 people watching the excavation during its final days. The mass amounts of people caused a large amount of confusion about what was in the mound and possibly allowed for looting as the excavation was underway.

Dr. Greenman describes seven burials in his field notes of the excavation, with at least one additional burial being very well described in primary newspaper sources. Many of the burials were cremations with few or no associated artifacts. Most of the skeletal remains were poorly preserved because the mound was built out of gravel, which allowed water to enter into the mound and erode it. However, out of a possible eleven burials, two were in surprisingly good condition.

One of these burials was nicknamed the “Indian Princess”. The Indian Princess was a nearly complete skeleton in a flexed position. This burial has associated artifacts, a rectangular slate gorget and a piece of mica. A flexed position means that the skeleton was placed in a fetal position on its side during burial. This type of burial is relatively uncommon for Hopewell core sites in southern Ohio but seems to be a more common burial style in northern and northeastern Ohio sites from the Hopewell periphery. Another aspect of this burial that is uncommon for Hopewell sites in the south is that the burial was under layers of interlocking flat stones. These kinds of burials are called “rock tombs” and are a very common feature in northern periphery burials.

After the excavation in 1932, George Towner built a cement block enclosure that was covered with a sheet of glass in order to display the skeleton that he referred to as the “Indian Princess.” Towner reportedly charged the public 25 cents to view the skeleton. Unfortunately, looters took advantage of the display and stole the teeth and other pieces of the skeleton. To protect the remains from any further looting, Towner covered the remains with tar paper and reburied his exhibit.

The other very complete burial in Towner Mound was nicknamed the “Warrior Youth” by Dr. Emerson Greenman. This burial was not described in Dr. Greenman’s notes, but only in newspaper articles. This burial was also a rock tomb style burial. The only skeletal remains of this burial were a skull and shoulder bones, but the

skull was in good enough shape that the teeth could be used to date the age of the individual. This individual was determined to be between fifteen and twenty years old. There were also a large amount of associated artifacts with the individual, indicating that they were probably of higher status than the burials without associated artifacts.

Towner Mound is lacking many diagnostic Hopewell artifacts that would be expected to be found in Hopewell core sites. Artifacts found at Towner Mound include mica sheets, chunks of graphite, over a dozen flint bladelets made of Flint Ridge flint, ground stone tools, projectile points made of Upper Mercer flint, a large amount of tubular copper beads, flint flake knives, and slate gorgets. Even lacking some items, it is clear that this site belongs to the Hopewell culture because of the bladelets recovered in the excavation.

However, between the original excavation and today, many of the artifacts from Towner Mound have disappeared. After the excavation, Dr. Greenman was supposed to take some of the artifacts back to the Ohio Historical and Archaeological Society, but this never happened. Towner was planning on making a small museum out of the railroad switching station on the property, but this also did not happen. Today, what remains of the artifacts from Towner Mound are on display at the Portage County Historical Society.



Slate gorgets

Courtesy of Portage County Historical Society



Mica

Sheet, possibly stained with red ochre
Courtesy of Portage County Historical Society

Dr. Greenman's 1932 excavation was not the only time that Towner Mound was dug. In 1972, Dr. Orrin Shane at Kent State University used Towner Mound as an archaeological field school for students. Dr. Shane was unable to find Dr. Greenman's field notes which led him to believe that a lot less of the mound was excavated than it truly was. There was no new material found during this excavation, but the students did re-discover the Indian Princess that Towner had covered to protect it.

The notes also mentioned that much of the artifacts from the mound were on display at the Portage County Historical Society or were privately owned by George Towner. However, the only artifacts currently at the Portage County Historical Society are the gorgets and mica that are pictured above. What happened to the remaining artifacts and the skeletal remains from the mound is a mystery.



Towner Mound viewed from the north during the 1972 excavation. Photo on file at Kent State University Archaeology Collection.



Towner Mound viewed from the east, facing Lake Pippin, during the 1972 excavation. Photo on file at Kent State University Archaeology Collection.

Towner Mound is an excellent example of a northern Ohio Hopewell site. This site is not just important for Portage County, but it can add greatly to the understanding of periphery Hopewell sites as a whole. There are not nearly as many well known northern Ohio Hopewell sites as there are southern Ohio sites within the Hopewell core. Towner Mound is similar to other known northern Ohio Hopewell sites, including Esch Mounds and the Pumpkin Site, in terms of material culture and burial types.