

Indian Mounds

Mounds built by prehistoric Indians are one of the most visible remains left to us from the past, but many have been destroyed in the past 200 years. There were probably thousands of mounds throughout Arkansas when the Europeans first came. Those left today are a testimony to the religious and political beliefs of Indians over several thousands of years.

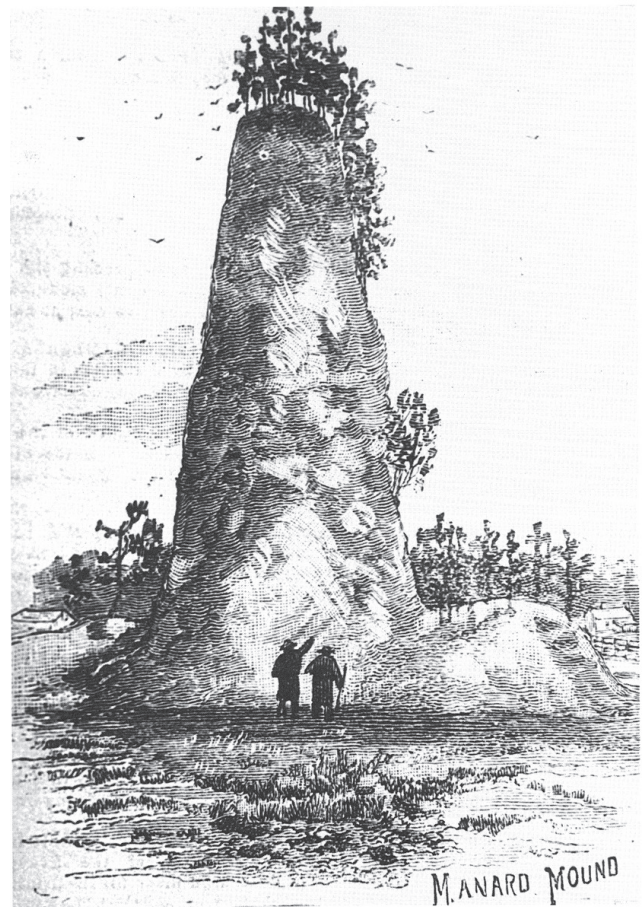
At one time, it was thought that mounds were not built by the Indians, but must have been constructed by intruders, perhaps from Central America, or even by a different race of people—hence, the term “moundbuilders,” meaning a group of people different from the American Indians. It is now solidly proven that it was indeed native American Indians who built the mounds, not a mysterious race.

Mounds in Arkansas are the result of many different kinds of activity. Some mounds were built to cover the tombs of the honored dead; some accumulated from burial practices which involved placing an individual on the surface of the ground, covering him or her over, and using the same place for a community burial area; and some mounds were deliberately built as a platform for the chief’s house or for the religious structure of the village. These latter mounds, called temple mounds, are often large because they are the result of successive layers of platforms, each one making the mound higher and higher.

Mounds built for burial, or those resulting from successive burials, usually have a conical shape and were built by Indians in Arkansas between approximately 650 B.C. and A.D. 1000. After that time most, but not all, Indian groups buried their dead in cemeteries as we do today. Moreover, not all Indian groups in Arkansas during this 1500-year time period buried their dead in mounds.

With the advent of corn agriculture, large villages, and complex social and religious organizations, came the idea of having the chief’s house and/or the

religious structure on top of a mound of earth, raising it above the village. These mounds were usually pyramid shaped (four-sided) with a flat top and are sometimes called temple mounds. Often the wood and thatch structures were ritually burned as part of periodic renewal ceremonies. Archeology shows that the burnt structures were then rebuilt in the same



A fanciful 19th century drawing of the Menard Mound in southeastern Arkansas, made during a time when Americans still entertained a romantic belief in a mysterious race of “moundbuilders.” This idea was long ago proven to be false. American Indians built the mounds during several cultural periods.



precise location, and more layers of dirt were added to make the mound still higher. What we see today may be the result of several such stages of mound construction which may have occurred over several generations. There are seldom burials or many artifacts of any kind in these temple mounds.

In some parts of Arkansas, particularly in southwest Arkansas, after A.D. 1000 the Indians sometimes covered over burned houses with earth (essentially they buried the structure) so that what we see on the ground today is a low earthen “house mound.”

It is incorrect to talk about “the mound builders” as a distinct “race” of people or as one type of culture. Mounds were built for many different reasons by different groups of American Indians over several thousands of years.



An artist's view of a late prehistoric American Indian (Caddo) village scene. There is a conical type burial mound in the background and a flat-topped temple mound with a structure on top of it in the foreground. Painting by Ed Martin.

For Further Reading (Advanced Level)

Mainfort, Robert C., Jr., and Richard Walling

1996 (editors) *Mounds, Embankments, and Ceremonialism in the Midsouth*. Research Series No. 46. Arkansas Archeological Survey, Fayetteville.

Rolinson, Martha Ann

1982 (editor) *Emerging Patterns of Plum Bayou Culture*. Research Series No. 18. Arkansas Archeological Survey, Fayetteville.

1998 *Toltec Mounds and Plum Bayou Culture: Mound D Excavations*. Research Series No. 54. Arkansas Archeological Survey, Fayetteville.

Sherrod, P. Clay, and Martha Ann Rolinson

1987 *Surveyors of the Ancient Mississippi Valley*. Research Series No. 28. Arkansas Archeological Survey, Fayetteville.

