

Mounds in Michigan

The Hopewell people are gone, but 17 of their burial mounds still lie in a forest outside Grand Rapids. This group is called the Norton Mounds. Until the mid-nineteenth century, another group called the Converse Mounds sat where downtown Grand Rapids is today. But in the mid-1850s, farmers, construction workers, and curious people dug into the Converse Mounds. The mounds soon disappeared and the city was built where they had stood.

People who were concerned about the mounds' history collected many artifacts and human bones from the scattered mound dirt. They made maps of the mounds' locations, drew pictures of the artifacts and donated the artifacts to museums.



Until the twentieth century, historians did not know what to call the people who had created the mysterious mounds. Then archaeologists recognized that artifacts and burial styles from the Converse and Norton mounds, and other Michigan mound sites, were similar to large mound sites in Ohio and Illinois. They named the mound-building people and their culture "Hopewell," after M. C. Hopewell, an Ohio farmer with mounds on his land.

Archaeologists were glad to have the marvelous Hopewell artifacts, but they wanted to know how the Hopewell chose the items they buried with people. In the middle and late 1960s, excavations took place at Hopewell mounds in the Muskegon River valley and at the Norton Mounds. Scientists studied how the artifacts were placed in graves and what kind of person was buried with each item. Weapon points were found only with men, but objects such as pots, copper beads, and pieces of mica were found with men, women, and children.

Today, Native Americans want their ancestors' burial places to remain untouched, so archaeologists usually do not excavate mounds or burials. However, if a burial site is being destroyed or damaged by erosion or construction, sometimes archaeologists can get a special permit to excavate and save the information and artifacts that are threatened.



These projectile points and the pot shards (above) were found at the Norton Mounds in Grand Rapids.

