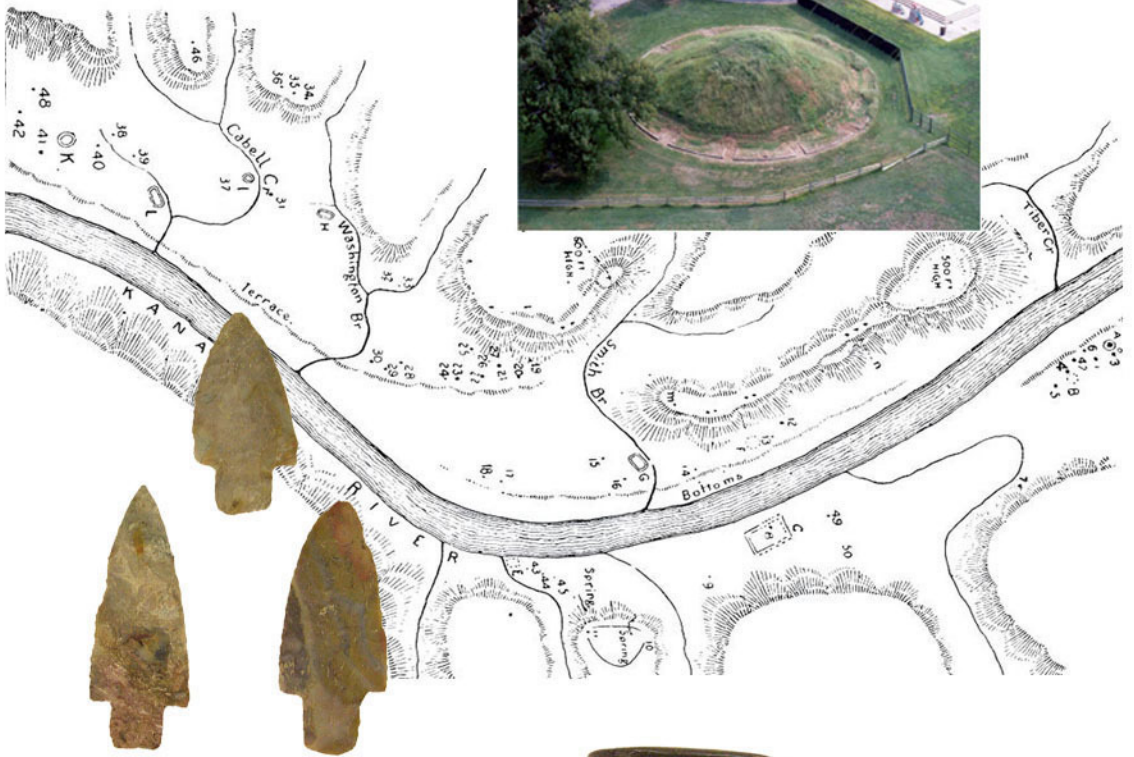


One Hundred and Twenty Years Later: A Look at the West Virginia Archaeological Collections from the Mound Explorations of the Bureau of American Ethnology

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One Hundred and Twenty Years Later: A Look at the Kanawha Valley Mound Complex

Introduction

Sometime between 1000 B.C. and A.D. 1000, during what archaeologists call the Woodland Period, the Kanawha Valley between Charleston and Institute, West Virginia, was home to a large group of people who buried their dead in earthen mounds. The mounds ranged from in size 35 to 200 ft in diameter and 3 to 35 ft in height.

The Kanawha Valley mounds have been historically attributed to the Adena "culture," but there is evidence that they also participated in the Hopewell interaction sphere to some extent, and that the mounds were used as burial places for perhaps hundreds of years.

The Mound Explorations of the Bureau of American Ethnology

In the 1880s, the Bureau of American Ethnology of the Smithsonian Institution

conducted extensive excavations of hundreds of mounds and earthworks in the Ohio River Valley. The explorations were supervised by Cyrus Thomas, and in West Virginia, were conducted by Col. P.W. Norris. The results of the explorations were published in 1894 as *Report on the Mound Explorations of the Bureau of Ethnology*.

Before that time, European immigrants to the region were convinced that the hundreds of mounds and earthworks that covered the landscape must have been created by an earlier, superior people and not the ancestors of the Native Americans they encountered here. There were debates for many years about the identities of the mysterious architects. The mound explorations helped prove that the ancestors of living Native Americans had built the structures and also marked the beginning of modern archaeology in the Americas.

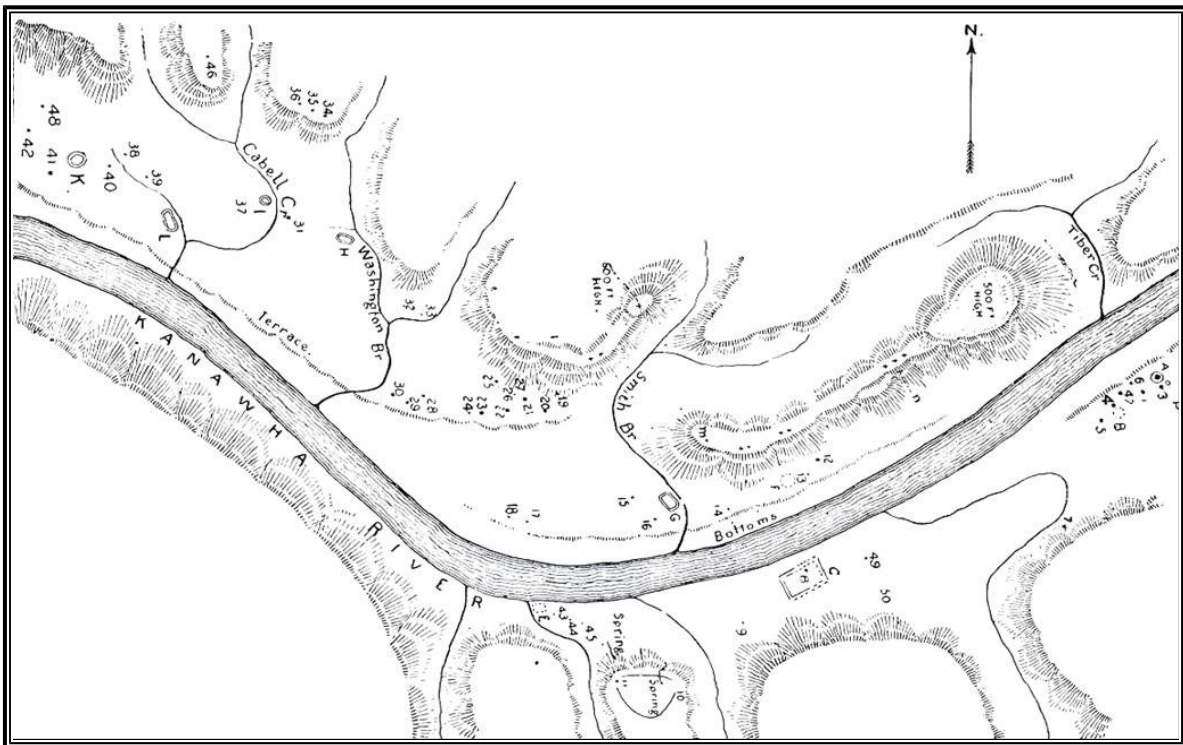


Figure 1. Map showing locations of mounds and earthworks in Kanawha Valley (Thomas 1985 [1894]).

The explorations in West Virginia were mainly on the Kanawha River and its tributaries. This was the first systematic investigation of these structures. The large mound complex between Charleston and Dunbar was dubbed the “Ancient Kanawha City” by Thomas (1985 [1894]). He reported 50 earthen mounds, extensive earthworks and enclosures and several “graded ways” connecting the mounds. All were located on upper terraces of the Kanawha River (Thomas 1985 [1894]:414). Today, after years of farming and development, only a handful of the earthen mounds remain. None of the earthworks are known to exist today.

The artifacts that were collected during the mound explorations have been curated at the Smithsonian Institution for over 100 years. Last spring, I received a grant from the WV Humanities Council to photograph the artifacts from the mounds. The artifacts in this report are currently housed at the Smithsonian Museum Support Center in Suitland, Maryland.

Mound No. 1 – The Creel Mound

Mound No. 1 on Thomas’ map (Figure 1) and perhaps the most well known and largest remaining mound in the Kanawha Valley is the

Creel Mound, also known as the South Charleston Mound. The mound is located in the city of South Charleston along Route 60. At the time of the Smithsonian excavation, the mound was on property owned by the Creel heirs who gave permission to Col. Norris to excavate as long as their representative could be present and all the “gold, diamonds and silver” found would be theirs (Norris n.d.).

The excavation of the Creel mound began in 1883. At that time, the top of the mound had been leveled to accommodate a judge’s stand for a race track that circled the mound. The remaining mound stood 33 ft high and 520 ft in circumference. A 12-ft shaft was sunk through the center of the mound to the original surface of the ground. At a depth of 3 ft, human bone was found, thought to be the remains of a skeleton reportedly dug up with the construction of the judge’s stand. At 4 ft, two burials were encountered in a matrix of mixed clay and ash. The individuals were lying extended on their backs with their heads to the south and their feet toward the center of the mound. Found with these individuals were two celts, two stone hoes, one projectile point, and two stone disks (Thomas 1985 [1894]:416).



Figure 2. Aerial view of the Creel (South Charleston) Mound. Photograph courtesy of the Huntington

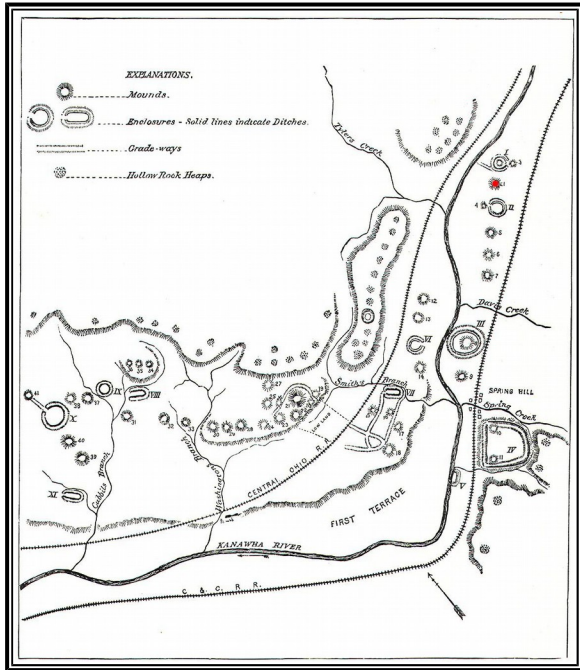


Figure 3. Map showing location of Mound No. 1, the Creel Mound in red (Krebs and Teets 1914).

At 24 ft, the soil changed, and there were decayed fragments of logs up to 12 inches in diameter. At 31 ft from the top, a human skeleton lay with head to the north and fragments of copper thought by Thomas to have been a headdress. The shaft was enlarged to 16 ft, and the base of the mound uncovered revealing a surface covered by elm bark. On top

of the bark was a layer of fine white ashes. The individual had been placed upon this prepared surface and covered with similar bark. Ten more burials were found at this depth, five arranged on each side in a semicircle, with heads outward and feet toward, but not touching, the individual in the center. Each burial on the east side had what appeared to be an unused projectile point. One of these five individuals also had what Thomas called a "fish dart," three "arrowheads," and mussel shells. Six shell beads and a "lance head" were found with the individual in the center (Thomas 1985 [1894]:417).

From the wood fragments and circular holes, thought to represent post molds, found on the natural surface, Col. Norris concluded that these 11 individuals had probably been buried in a timber-walled structure approximately 16 ft in diameter (Thomas 1985 [1894]:417).

Near the center of the mound was a clay vault approximately 4 ft high and 5 ft in diameter. The vault had been dug into the natural surface and contained rotted wood, bark, and bones, some of them human. There were two holes 16 inches in diameter and 4 ft deep at the bottom of the vault. They were lined with bluish clay and partly filled with water. Similar pairs of holes were found besides the heads of each of the 10 surrounding individuals (Thomas 1985 [1894]:417).

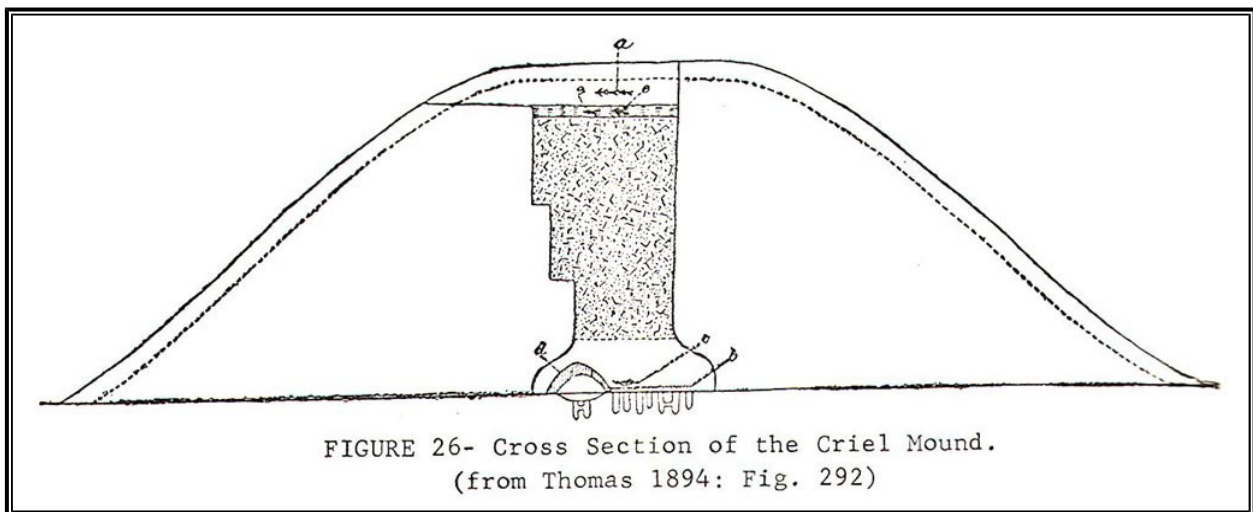


FIGURE 26- Cross Section of the Creel Mound.
(from Thomas 1894: Fig. 292)

Figure 4. Drawing of cross-section of Creel Mound (Thomas 1894).

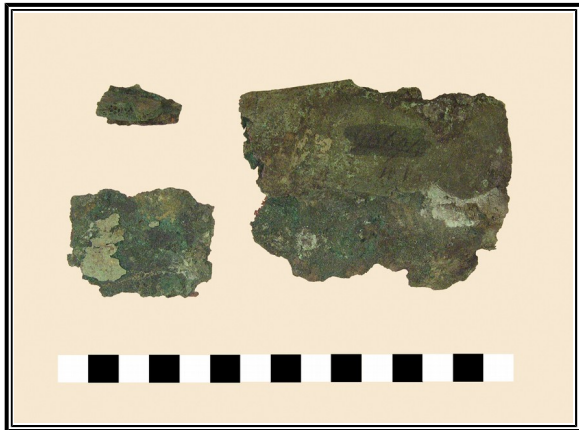


Figure 5. Copper fragments from Creel Mound.



Figure 6. Olivella shell beads from the Creel Mound.



Figure 7. Bifaces from the Creel Mound.



Figure 8. Wood fragments from structure at base of Creel Mound.

Mound No. 8 – The Wilson Mound

Mound No. 8 on Thomas' map, also known as the Wilson Mound, is still standing. The mound was originally within Enclosure C (Figure 10). According to Thomas (1985 [1894]:418), the square enclosure was 5-6 ft high and enclosed approximately 20 acres with a ditch inside the walls.

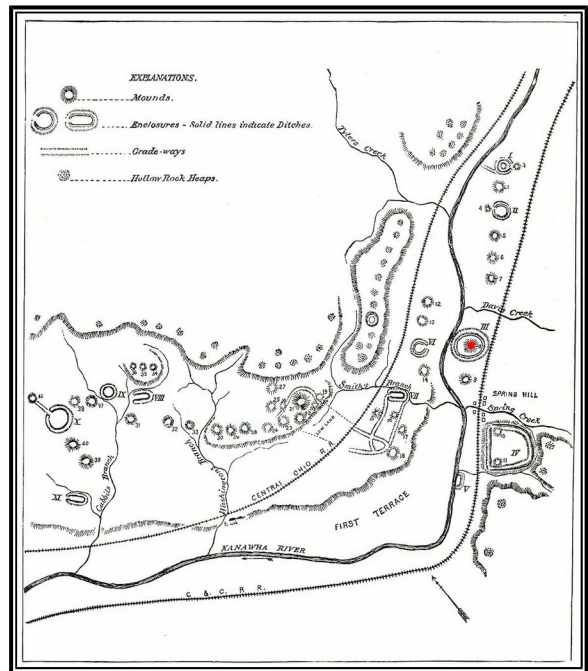


Figure 9. Map showing Mound No. 8, the Wilson Mound in red (Krebs and Teets 1914).

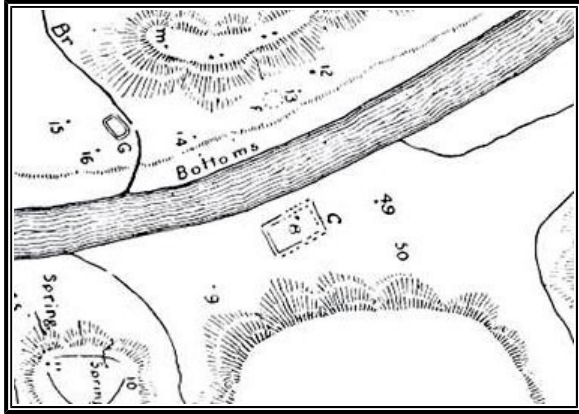


Figure 10. Map showing Mound No. 8 within Enclosure C (Thomas 1894).

The mound had been opened by the Wilson family years before the Smithsonian explorations, and the enclosure had been leveled. Near the center of the mound, human bone and several celts and “lance heads” had been found. At the time of the Smithsonian excavations, the mound was being used as a cemetery (Thomas 1985 [1894]:418). The Wilson Mound has continued to be used as a cemetery until recently.



Figure 11. The Wilson Mound today.

Mound No. 21 - The Great Smith Mound

Across the Kanawha River in the city of Dunbar, a group of mounds were located on a high terrace that is now a residential neighborhood (Figure 12). In 1969, Hillis Youse, a member of the West Virginia Archeological Society, attempted to locate the remnants of this group of mounds. Using old deed books and maps and interviewing longtime residents of Dunbar, Youse (1969) was able to determine the locations of 12 of the mounds documented by the Smithsonian in the 1880s (Figures 13–15).

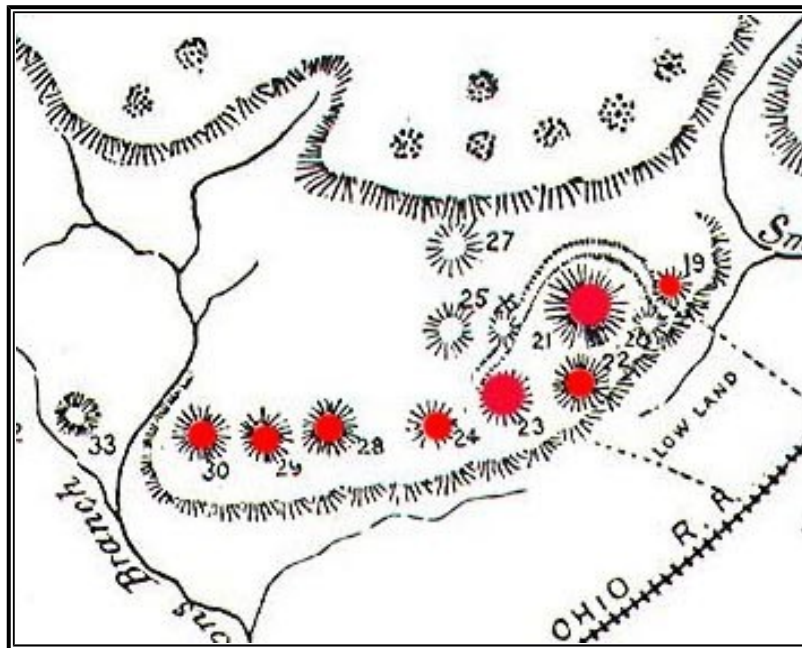


Figure 12. Map showing locations of Dunbar mounds 19-30 (Krebs and Teets 1914).

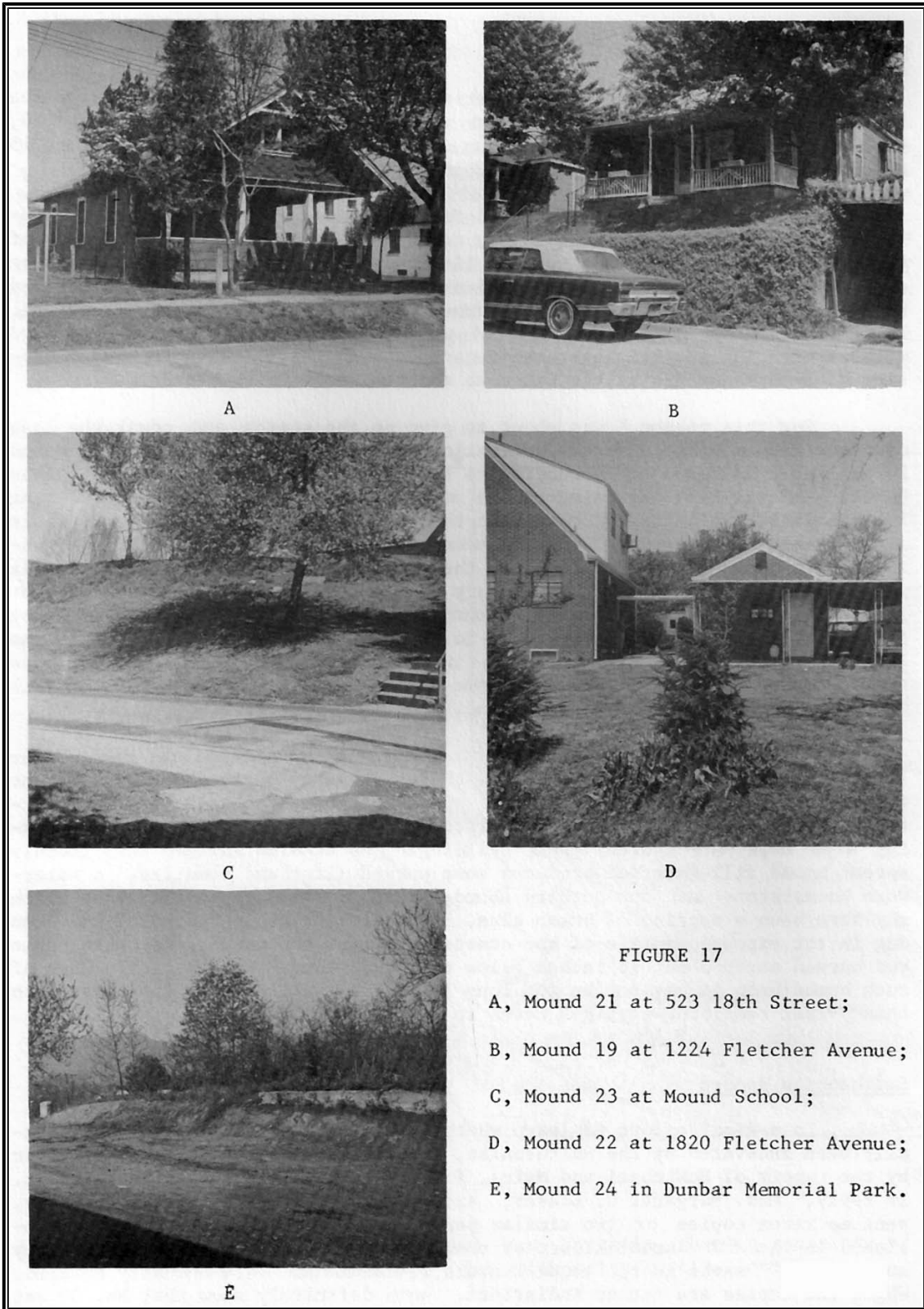


FIGURE 17

- A, Mound 21 at 523 18th Street;
- B, Mound 19 at 1224 Fletcher Avenue;
- C, Mound 23 at Mound School;
- D, Mound 22 at 1820 Fletcher Avenue;
- E, Mound 24 in Dunbar Memorial Park.

Figure 13. Photographs of Dunbar mound locations in 1969 (Youse 1969: Figure 17).

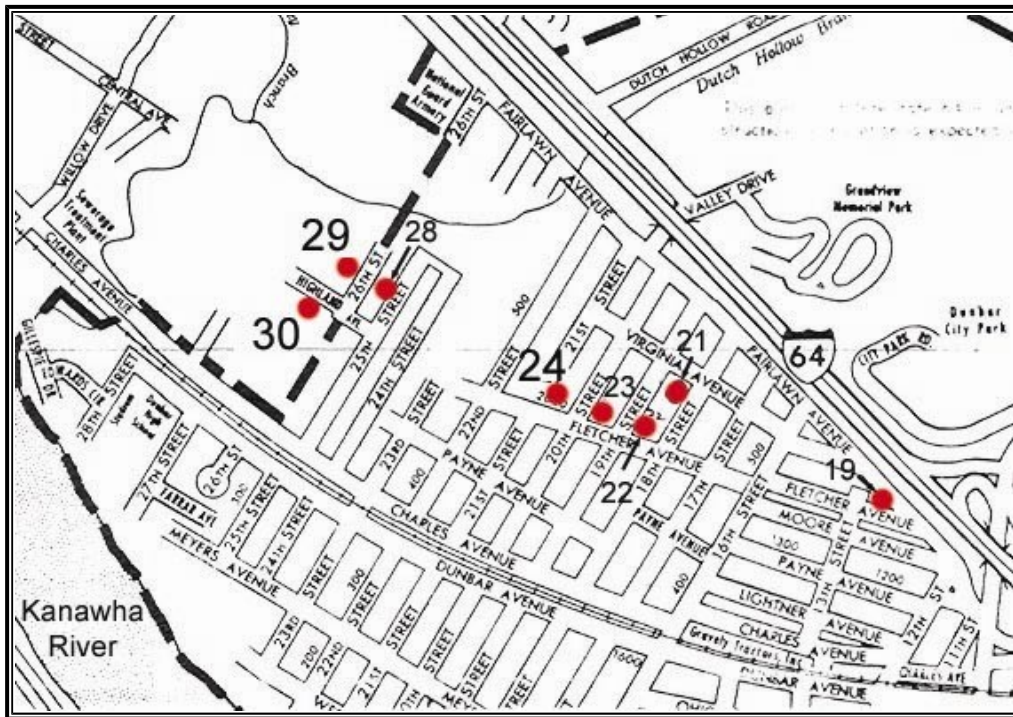


Figure 14. Map from Youse (1969) showing locations of Mounds 19-30 in residential area of Dunbar.

TABLE 1
SUMMARY OF CENTRAL DUNBAR AREA MOUND INFORMATION

Smithsonian Data No.	Diameter*	Height*	Location in Dunbar, West Virginia (Quotes from Smithsonian)	Site Numbers
19	60	5	1224 Fletcher Avenue	46 Ka 70
20	30	2½	"Short distance SW of Mound 19 and near Mound 21"	46 Ka 20
21	175	35	523 18th Street	46 Ka 21
22	100	15	1820 Fletcher Avenue	46 Ka 22
23	100c x	25	Fletcher Avenue at 20th Street on Mound School Yard	46 Ka 69 formerly 46 Ka 22
24	100	4	South corner of Dunbar Memorial Park, Fletcher Avenue	46 Ka 68
25	95	8	"Short distance NE of Mound 23"	46 Ka 20
26	35	4	"Near NW side of Mound 21"	46 Ka 20
27	84	6	"Short distance north of Mound 21"	46 Ka 20
28	96c	23	519-21 25th Street	46 Ka 67 formerly 46 Ka 21
29	40	4	Opposite 512 26th Street	46 Ka 66
30	96c	21	2605-7 Highland Avenue	46 Ka 65 formerly 46 Ka 20

*All dimensions are in feet. Diameters followed by c were derived from circumferences given by the Smithsonian.

Figure 15. Table 1 from Youse (1969) detailing locations of Dunbar mounds.

At the time of the Smithsonian excavations, many of the mounds were located on the 780-acre farm of Benjamin H. Smith (Youse 1969). The largest of the group, Mound No. 21, also known as the Great Smith Mound, was 175 ft in diameter and 35 ft high at the time of the excavations (Thomas 1985 [1894]:425).

In the top of the mound were the remains of an individual in a stone slab coffin thought to be a later, intrusive burial. A 12-ft diameter shaft was sunk through the top of the mound (Figure

16). At the depth of 6 ft a number of human bones were found that were described as a bundle burial (Thomas 1985 [1894]:425).

At 9 ft below the top of the mound another burial was found within the remains of a black walnut coffin. At 14 ft, a large individual was found in an upright position with his back against a hard clay wall. Around the skeleton were the remains of a bark wrapping. Two copper bracelets were on his left wrist (Thomas 1985 [1894]:426).

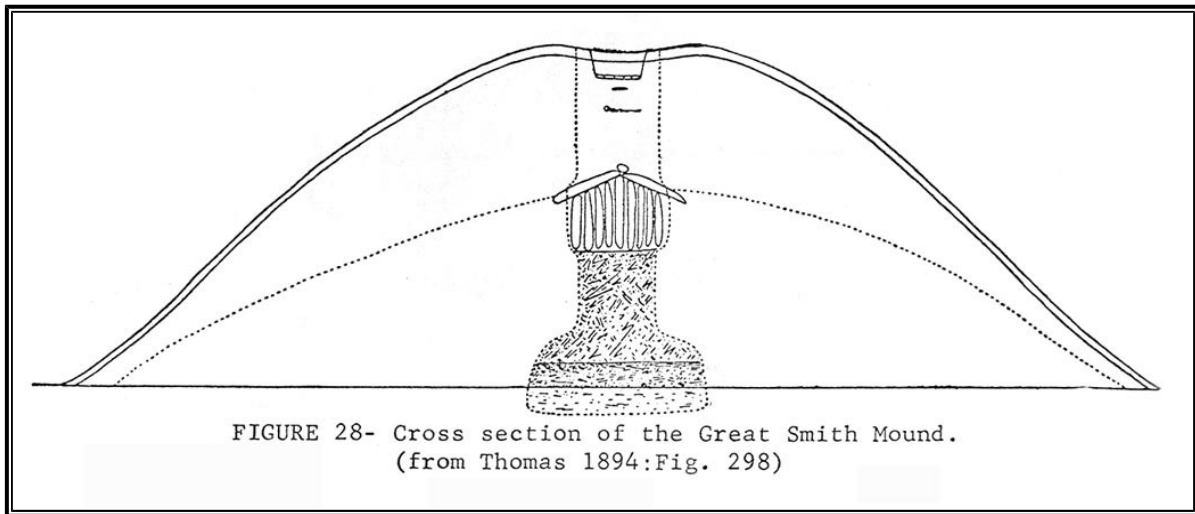


Figure 16. Drawing of cross-section of Mound No. 21 (Thomas 1985 [1894]:Figure 298,p.425).

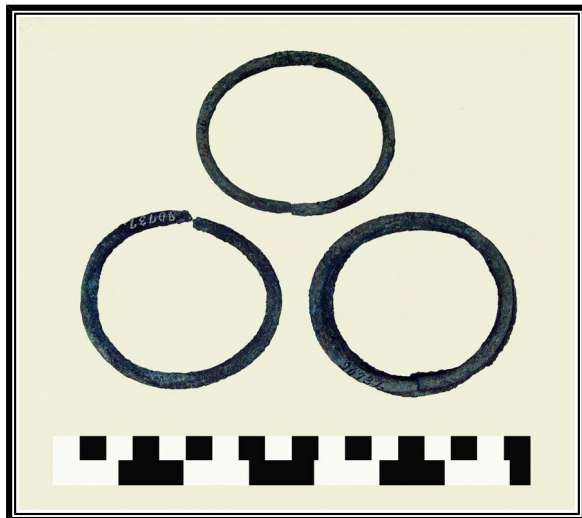


Figure 17. Copper bracelets from Mound No 21.



Figure 18. Copper gorget from Mound No. 21.

At this point, the excavators had entered the remains of a large wooden burial vault. The top had collapsed. Nineteen feet from the top of the mound they encountered the bottom of the vault where a very large individual was found in the remains of a bark coffin. According to Thomas (1985 [1894]:426), the skeleton measured 7 ½ ft long and 19 inches across the shoulders. There were six copper bracelets on each wrist and a copper gorget upon the chest. Several flint bifaces and hematite tools were found as well as a large number of small perforated marine shells and thirty-two shell beads. Upon the left shoulder of the individual were three large sheets of mica.

The log vault was nearly square and measured 13 by 12 ft inside. Also inside the vault were the remains of four adults, one in each corner placed in a leaning position against the sides of the vault. They had been wrapped in bark and were found with several bifaces described as “lance heads and fish darts” and a few shell beads (Thomas 1985 [1894]:427).



Figure 19. Marginella beads from Mound No. 21.

Mound No. 21 appears to have been constructed in several stages. Below the floor of the log vault there were several feet of mottled dark clay and below that a heavy layer of ashes, charcoal, and charred bones, some of them human. This is probably evidence of human cremations before the actual mound construction.



Figure 20. Mica from Mound No 21.

The large wooden burial vault with five burials probably represents the second stage of construction, that of the actual mound, and possibly the burial of an honored leader whose death initiated the mound building sequence. Other burials were placed above the wooden vault over time. And finally, perhaps many years later, it appears that a member of a later population was buried in the top of the mound.



Figure 21. Steatite platform pipe from Mound No. 21.



Figure 22. Slate gorget from Mound No. 21.



Figure 23. Early Woodland stemmed bifaces from Mound No. 21.



Figure 24. Assorted bifaces from Mound No. 21.



Figure 25. Stone celts from Mound No. 21.



Figure 26. Assorted bifaces from Mound No. 21.

Mound No. 23 - The Catacomb Mound

Mound No. 23 was also on the Smith Farm. It was called the Catacomb Mound because of a series of “circular oven-like” or “beehive shaped vaults” in a semicircle at the bottom of the mound. The vaults were dry and contained dust and vegetable remains that Col. Norris described as “maize in the ear” (Norris n.d.) and a few bone fragments.

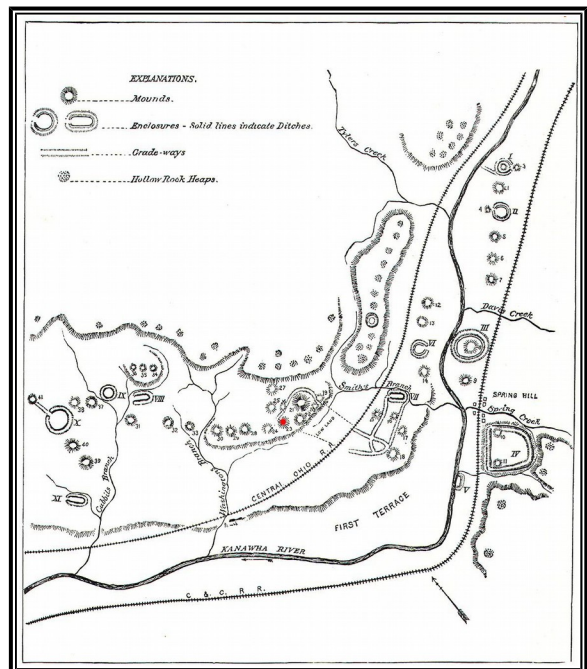


Figure 27. Map showing location of Mound No. 23 in red (Krebs and Teets 1914).



Figure 28. Circa 1920 photograph of Mound School with Mound No. 23 in background. Photo courtesy of Terence Williams.

The mound was located near the corner of Fletcher Avenue and 20th Street in Dunbar next to the Mound School (Youse 1969) (Figure 14). The mound has been leveled over the years by school construction. At the time of the Smithsonian excavations, the mound was 312 ft in circumference and 25 ft high (Thomas 1985 [1894]:428). A large central shaft was sunk from the top of the mound. At approximately 15 ft, the casts of timbers and poles were uncovered extending into the sides of the mound. The wood remains continued for about 10 ft. Thomas (1985 [1894]:428) described the remains as a circular wooden vault approximately 12 ft across and 8 to 10 ft high at the center. Two adult burials were found on the floor of the vault.



Figure 29. Photograph of Mound School today showing possible location of Mound No. 23.

The shaft was sunk another 4 ft revealing a pit sunken into the original ground surface and

the semicircle of vaults. The bottom of the central pit was covered with several inches of ash and charcoal suggesting it had held a fire. The excavations were halted at that time because of bad weather (Thomas 1985 [1894]:428).

When Col. Norris returned the next season, he dug trenches from the sides of the mound to the central shaft. One of the trenches 9 ft from the top of the mound uncovered human bone but no complete skeletons. One half of the mound was then removed and examined. The fill dirt contained many broken stone tools and several mussel shells thought to have been used as digging tools (Thomas 1985 [1894]:429).

The continuing excavations revealed several more individual burials, one of which was in a stone slab coffin. All of these burials were below the natural ground surface (Thomas 1985 [1894]:430).



Figure 30. Early Woodland bifaces from Mound No. 23.



Figure 31. Stone gorgets from Mound No. 23.



Figure 32. Mussel shell from Mound No. 23.



Figure 35. Cannel coal pendants from Mound No. 23.



Figure 33. Hematite weight from Mound No. 23.



Figure 36. Wood fragments from Mound No. 23.



Figure 34. Pottery sherds from Mound No. 23.

Young Mound (No. 30)

In 1967, members of the West Virginia Archeological Society were given permission to excavate a mound in Dunbar that would be destroyed during the construction of a house (Youse 1969). The mound, designated No. 30 by Col. Norris, had been opened by the Smithsonian during their investigations. At that time, the mound was 21 ft high and 300 ft in circumference. The top of the mound contained a stone grave with what was thought to be an intrusive burial (Thomas 1985 [1894]:431).

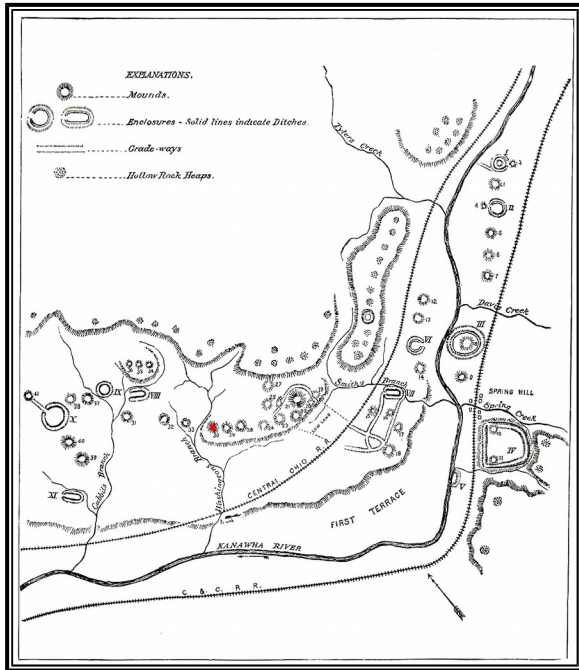


Figure 37. Map showing location of Mound No. 30 in red (Krebs and Teets 1914).

A 12-ft circular shaft was sunk into the top of the mound to the bottom revealing only decayed wood and bark fragments that Thomas (1985 [1894]:431) believed to be remnants of a wooden vault. The natural floor had been covered by bark and ashes. There was also a circle approximately 12 ft in diameter of vaults 3 ft wide by 3 ft high containing mud. The excavations were discontinued at that time because of water.

By 1967, the mound had been leveled to about 5 ft high and disturbed by pothunting. However, excavations by the WVAS members located the remains of a log tomb on the mound floor apparently missed by the earlier excavations. The structure was approximately 15 ft long (east-west) and 10.5 ft wide (north-south) with inside dimensions about 11 x 4 ft. The side logs were laid three or four abreast on the north end and six or more abreast on the south and two or three at each end. Two post molds 10 inches in diameter and 19 inches deep were found in two inside corners of the structure. Fragments of

wood resembling cedar were found in these post molds as well as some of the log molds (Youse 1969).

Few artifacts were found during in the excavations except pieces of broken flint, cannel coal, and hematite, a bone from a fawn, and a platform pipe made from blue-grey limestone (Figure 38). No human remains were found, although there was some evidence that any burials may have been cremations (Youse 1969).

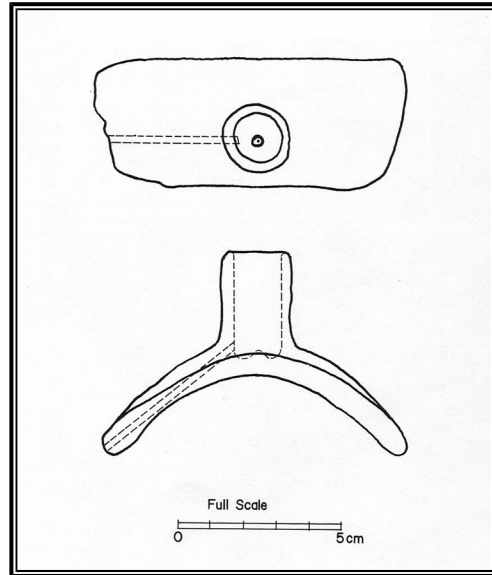


Figure 38. Drawing of platform pipe from Young Mound (Youse 1969: Figure 5).

Artifacts from the mound fill such as small pottery sherds and Armstrong-type artifacts suggest a late date of construction. The platform pipe is similar to one found in Ohio that has been dated around 800 B.C (Youse 1969).

The Young Mound has one calibrated radiocarbon date of 161 B.C. (Maslowski et al. 1995).

Figure 39 is a plan map of the Young Mound excavations. Of interest is the circular pattern of paired post molds that are commonly found under Adena mounds. These probably represent the remains of a log structure similar to those found in the other mounds.

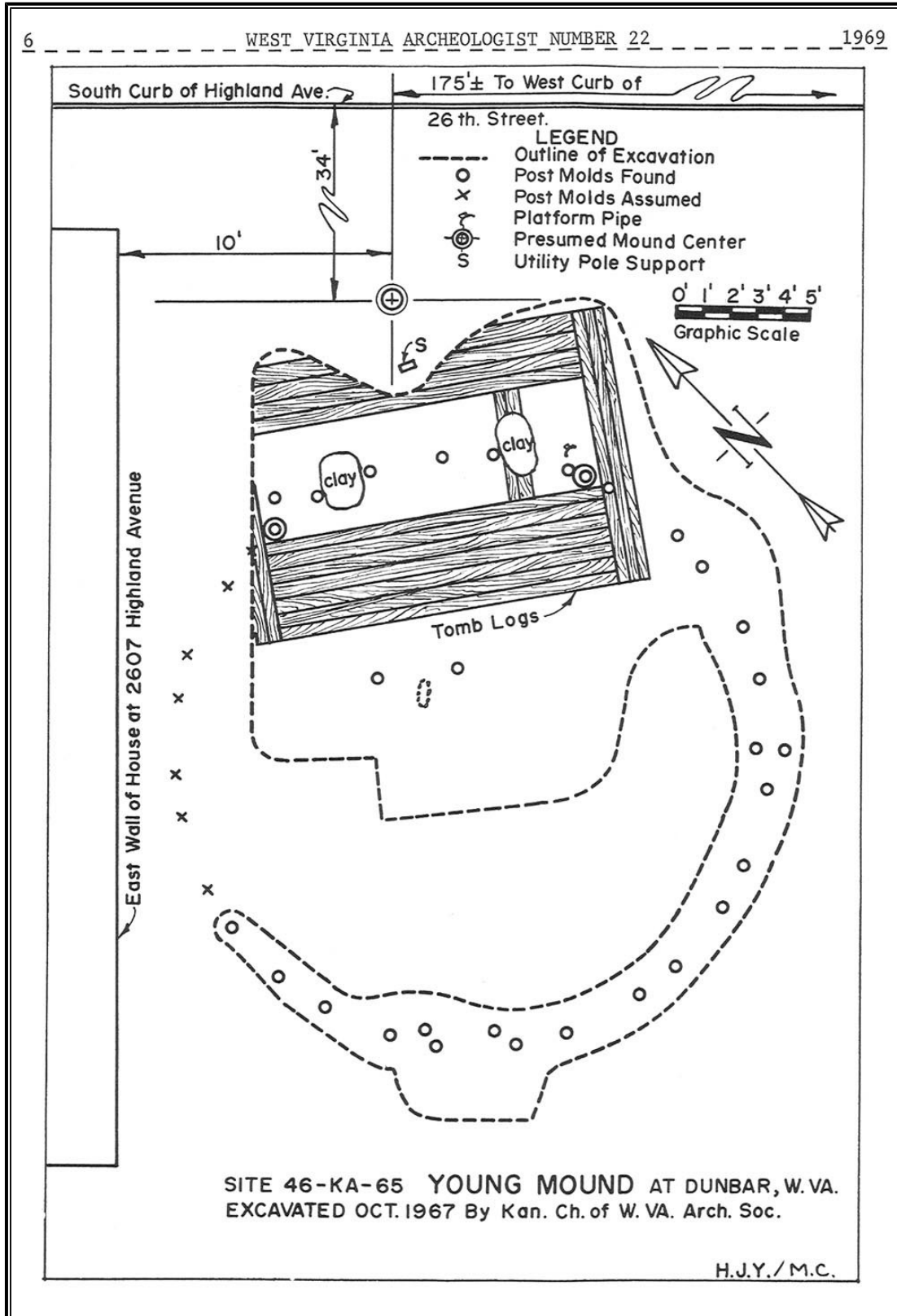


Figure 38. Plan map showing excavation of Young Mound (Youse 1969).

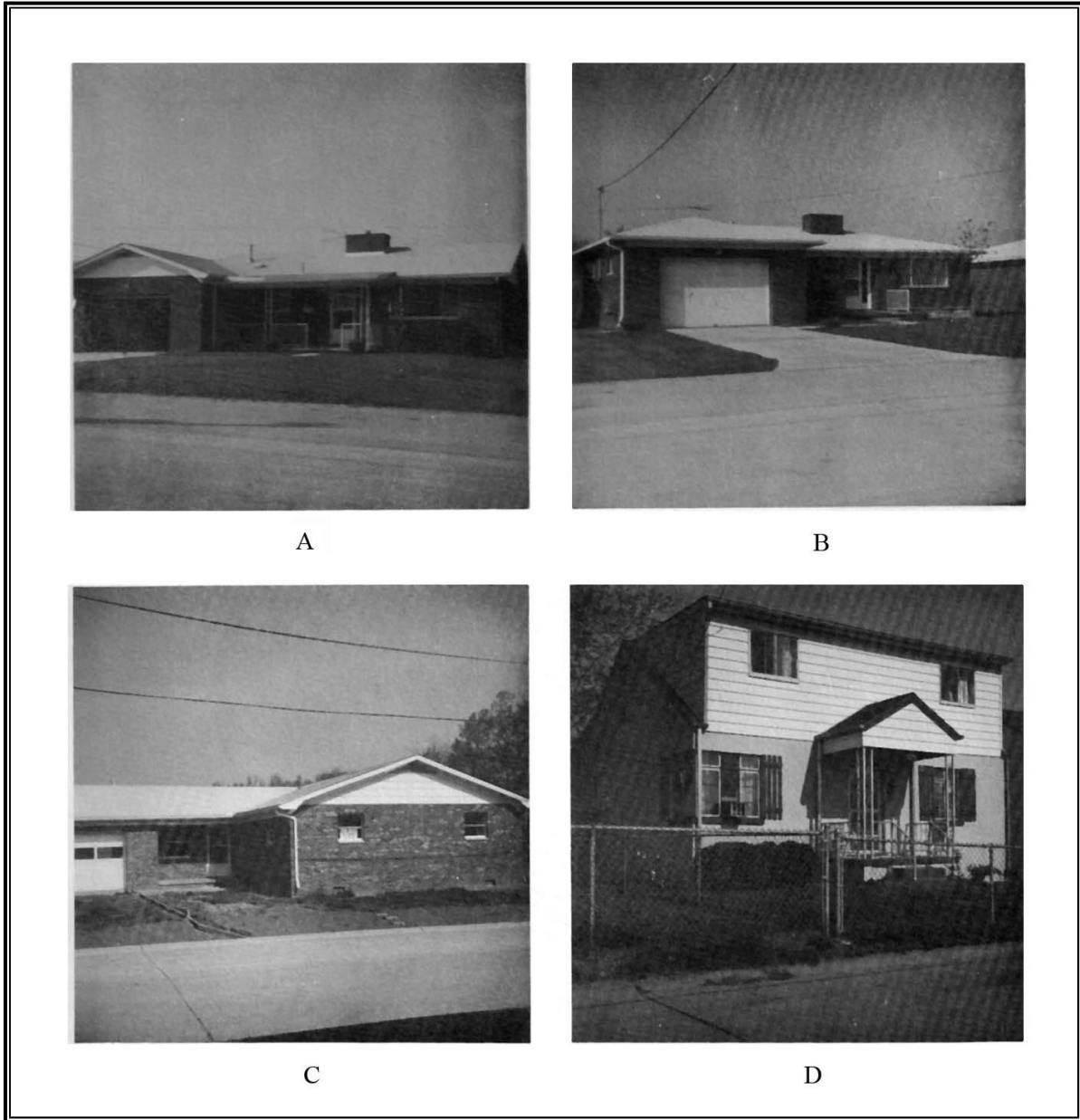


Figure 40. Dunbar mounds in 1969. A: Mound 30 (east half); B: Mound 30 (west half), 2605-7 Highland Avenue; C: Mound 29 opposite 512 26th Street; and D: Mound 28, 519-21 25th Street (Youse 1969: Figure 18).

The Poorhouse Mound (No. 31)

Mound No. 31 was located on the Kanawha County Poor Farm. It still exists today in Institute, West Virginia, and is known as the Shawnee Reservation Mound. At the time of the Smithsonian excavation, the mound measured 318 ft in circumference, 25 ft high, and 40 ft across the top. A 10-ft shaft was sunk from the top of the mound, and trenches were dug in from the sides. Three feet below the top of the mound was a layer of mixed clay and ash. Throughout the mound to the bottom the soil was mixed with ashes (Thomas 1985 [1894]:432).

Three feet below the top of the mound were two extended individuals, one above the other, facing each other. Near the heads of the individuals were a pipe, a celt, and several flint bifaces (Thomas 1985 [1894]:432).

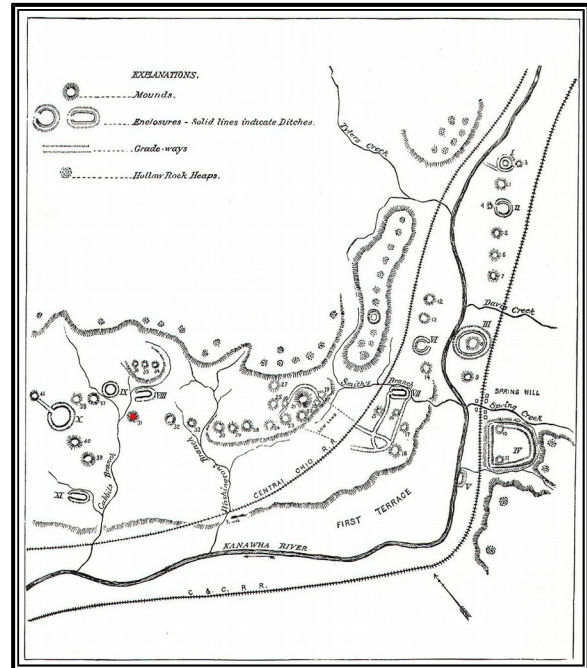


Figure 41. Map showing location of Mound No. 31 (Krebs and Teets 1914).



Figure 42. Aerial view of Mound No. 31, the Shawnee Reservation Mound. Photograph courtesy of the Huntington District Army Corps of Engineers.

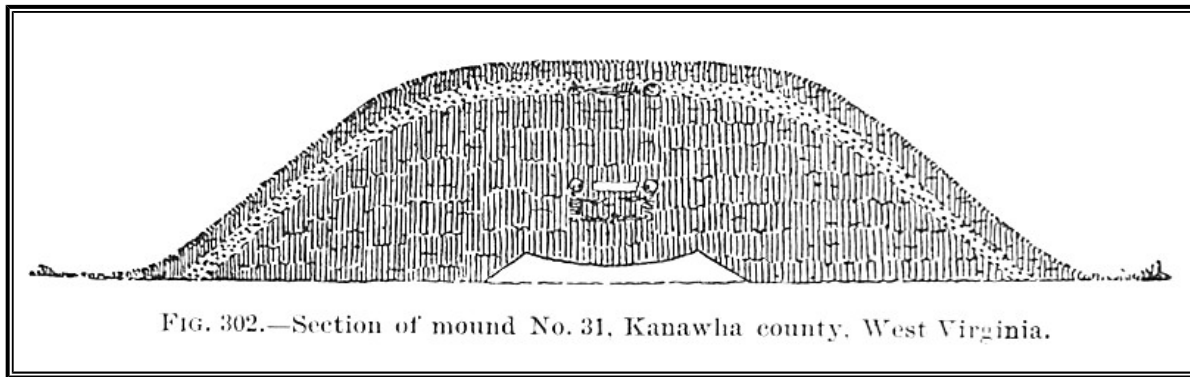


Figure 43. Drawing of cross-section of Mound No. 31 (Thomas 1894).

Ten feet below the top of the mound were two very large skeletons facing each other in a sitting position with their legs interlocked to the knees. Above their outstretched hands was a large hollowed-out sandstone slab. The stone slab, which was 2 ft across, had been burned, and was red and brittle. The hollowed cavity on the stone slab was filled with white ashes containing the fragments of burned bones. Over the slab was another slab of limestone 3 inches thick. Two copper bracelets were on the left wrist of one of the skeletons. A hematite celt and “lancehead” was with the other (Thomas 1895 [1894]:432).

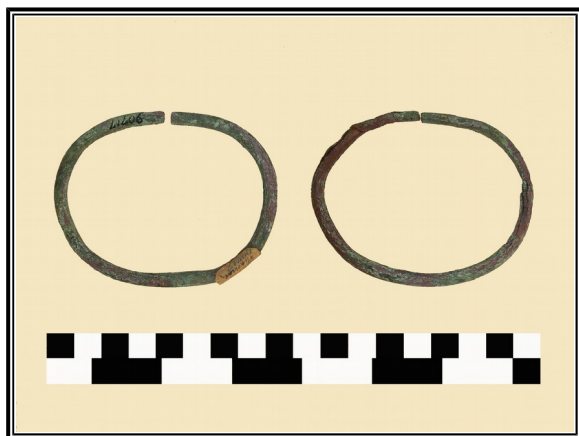


Figure 44. Copper bracelets from Mound No. 31.

At 25 ft from the top of the mound the excavators reached the natural surface. On top of the surface was a clay pad 6 to 18 inches thick with a concave center that Thomas (1895 [1894]:432) described as an “altar.” The upper portion of the clay pad had been burned to a deep red. The clay pad extended wider than the excavation shaft. On the top of the pad was a layer of fine white ashes from less than a foot to

two feet thick. Intermingled with the ashes were stones that showed signs of heating and fragments of bones.

Who Were These People?

During the Woodland period, beginning around 1000 B.C., the lifeways of people in eastern North America had changed dramatically from the previous, mobile hunter-gatherer groups. While they still depended on wild game for food, they also were cultivating wild plant to supplement their diet. They began to make clay pottery to cook and store their food. They also began to settle into small hamlets along the river valleys.

At some point, the people of the Kanawha Valley began to bury their honored dead in earthen mounds. The idea of burying the dead in mounds may have come from outside, perhaps farther down the Ohio River. The Kanawha River has been a major trade corridor for thousands of years transporting people and ideas from the Southeast, the Ohio Valley, and the Great Lakes region. Many of the exotic objects found in the mounds here such as marine shell, copper, and mica originated in one of these distant territories.

The mounds in the Kanawha Valley have historically been attributed to the “Adena Culture.” It is now clear that the inhabitants also participated in the Hopewell Interaction Sphere to some extent. Artifacts associated with both Adena and Hopewell cultures have been found throughout the valley.

Archaeologists have struggled with the identities of these cultures for over a hundred

years as well as the relationship between the two. Adena and Hopewell refer to two separate cultures of Woodland period peoples throughout eastern North America. Farther down the Ohio River, the Adena culture gradually changed over time into the dramatic Hopewell culture with its monumental architecture and spectacular works of art. Recent DNA studies have confirmed that the Adena were predecessors of the Hopewell (Mills 2003).

The Woodland inhabitants of the Kanawha Valley probably had contact with both Adena and Hopewell groups in Ohio and Kentucky throughout the span of their existence which lasted several hundred years. The mounds in the Kanawha Valley known as the Ancient City of Kanawha were probably built during the Middle Woodland period, after 500 B.C. We have one calibrated radiocarbon date for the Young Mound in Dunbar of 161 B.C. (Maslowski et al. 1995). Other Adena mounds in the Ohio Valley have dated after 500 B.C.

Most of the mounds mentioned here show several stages of construction. The first or sub-mound stage included human cremations placed in a burial pit or vault. Several of the mounds covered some sort of wooden structure that might have been used for years for burial preparations until the decision was made to cover it with earth. Some event, possibly the death of a leader, instigated the mound-building sequence.

As time went on, other individuals were placed within the mounds, although it is obvious that the majority of the population was buried elsewhere. In most instances, the individuals within the burial vault were probably persons of standing within their community.

More recent burial mound excavations in West Virginia revealed the pattern of a circular paired post structure beneath it, such as that found at the Young Mound. This is a common Adena feature that is thought to have been some type of mortuary structure. It is possible that other mounds in the valley had similar structures beneath them, but the excavation methods used by the Smithsonian excavators that involved digging a circular shaft from the top to the

bottom of the mound would have missed the remains of these structures.

Several of the mounds in the valley also contained later, intrusive burials in the top. These are thought to have been from a later group of people, possibly from one of the many villages in the area. This suggests that people in the Kanawha Valley were using the mounds to bury their dead for many years after their original construction.

While the methods of excavation used by the Smithsonian excavators were crude by today's standards, there is a great deal of information that can be inferred regarding the burial practices of the Woodland people of the Kanawha Valley from the records and artifacts from these explorations. For the majority of the mounds and earthworks here, that is all that remains. It is important that this record is made public to let the people of West Virginia know as much as possible about the dynamic culture that lived in the Kanawha Valley for hundreds of years.

Although the mounds reflect only one facet of their lifeways, the manner with which they treated their dead conveys a lot about a culture. The Kanawha Valley mound complex reveals a picture of a people who treated their honored dead with reverence and ceremony and built magnificent earthen monuments to demonstrate this respect for hundreds of future generations to see.

Acknowledgements

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