“Mounds and Marriage Marks”

This barn, incredibly unique architecturally, sits on ancient land, occupied 2,000 years ago by the Hopewell Culture of Native Americans. They located along the banks of the Scioto River and its tributary, Paint Creek, and built extensive earthworks, circles, and mounds in what will be designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2023.

Ohio was rich in Indian mounds in the 1700s, many overgrown by forests, which settlers eventually trimmed down to plant their crops and graze livestock. In establishing their farms, they often leveled these mounds, reducing their numbers from an estimated 10,000 to around 500. In this location there are four major sites, all part of the National Park system, which stretch approximately 12 miles. When I visited, a park ranger, Dr. Bret Ruby, an archaeologist with a specialty in the Hopewell Culture, gave me a guided tour and took me to this barn.

In 1846 newspaper editor Ephraim Squier and physician Edwin Davis, two Chillicothe men with an interest in archaeology, surveyed these mounds, making detailed maps. Their findings, titled “Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley,” became the first publication of the young Smithsonian Institution in 1848. A year earlier one of the mounds was excavated, yielding over 200 stone pipes in the shape of birds, reptiles, and animals. In 1901 a human effigy pipe was found nearby, hand carved in the Adena Culture era (800 B.C. to A.D. 100), which has become the official state artifact. Many of these artifacts (obsidian blades from the Yellowstone area, copper and silver from the northern region of America, mica from the southeast, and shells and shark’s teeth from the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico. It was – and is – an archaeologist’s paradise.

In 1820 Caleb Atwater drew the first map of these mounds, which somehow missed being leveled by settlers, who were moving in to the region. One settler, William C. Clark, was already there, perhaps as early as the late 1790s, and his farm, called “Clark Fork” by Atwater, contained many mounds, which Clark apparently opted to preserve. His farmhouse and barn are recorded on the Squier and Davis map, adjacent to the North Fork of Paint Creek and near the largest Hopewell mound, 500 feet long, 180 feet wide, and 30 feet tall. The farm remained in the Clark family until a Civil War veteran, Mordecai C. Hopewell purchased it in 1889. Though he fought with the Confederate Army, being from Virginia, he settled here most likely because he knew other Virginians who had already been established in this area. Though he’s been called a major and a captain, Dr. Ruby explained that he was a sergeant. And, he was at the right place in the right time – to have his name attached to this magnificent mound building culture.

In 1891, two years after Mordecai bought the Clark farm, Warren Moorehead excavated twenty-eight mounds, discovering artifacts that were exhibited at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, an event to mark the landing of Christopher Columbus 400 years earlier. Since the findings came from Hopewell’s farm, archaeologists Moorehead and William C. Mills used his name to identify this Native American culture.

However, despite continued interest in these ancient mounds, preparing for World War I was a higher priority. In April of 1917 the United States declared war on Germany but its army needed men, prompting the building of a massive training facility, called Camp Sherman and named after Ohio’s Civil War general, William Tecumseh Sherman. Construction began in June, a barracks was built every 30 minutes, and the camp stretched three miles through Chillicothe and into the Hopewell mounds. A testament to the engineering and construction skills of the army, the complex was huge: in addition to the barracks and offices, there was a railroad system, theaters, 11 YMCAs, a hospital and library, a farm, and even a German Prisoner of War camp.

The first recruits arrived in September.

Unfortunately some of the mounds were bulldozed to make room, though many still remain today, underlining the size and complexity of these mounds. After the war ended and the influenza epidemic of 1918 subsided, work began again on the archaeology of the site. Somehow, two of Clark’s barns survived. Though park officials dismantled one several years ago, a remarkable one survived, brought to my attention by barn historian Tom O’Grady, who explained that the barn appeared on the Squier and Davis survey and had unique features.

The founder of the farm, William Clark, received a Revolutionary War grant – as did others in the Colony of Virginia – who were paid for their service in this land, part of the Virginia Military District, 4.2 million acres of present central and southern Ohio. Clark used his grant in 1798, which is about the time he may have built this barn. The district was opened for settlement in 1794, and many Virginians migrated here soon after that. Chillicothe, Ohio’s first capital, was founded in 1796.

The barn itself is small, an interesting log frame enclosed in a larger barn, the Dutch variety with doors on either end, though the small doors would not have allowed wagons to drive through. Today only its log skeleton remains – its barn siding has been removed. But what a find! Rudy Christian, one of the country’s foremost historic barn experts, wrote a report on the barn for park administrators in 2014. At the time, some of the timbers had rotted and needed replacing and an opening in the damaged metal roof was another recipe for disaster. On my visit in the summer of 2021, these problems had not been solved, though Dr. Ruby assured me that the barn would be restored soon.

The footprint of the barn, about twenty-by-twenty-feet, is typical of early pioneer barns. Clark, or whomever he hired, used the scribe rule method of construction, evidenced by marriage marks, Roman numerals carved into both the mortise and tenon beams, which is what barn builders of the 18th century used. What is more intriguing is that the square rule construction method was also used, identifying this barn as a rare transitional example of the combination of these two methods. This barn builder, schooled in the scribe rule method, was daring enough to try something new – the square rule method, which, easier to use and less labor intensive, became the most popular method in timber framing in early 19th century in Ohio, lasting nearly a century until it, too, became a piece of the past. Another unusual feature, seldom seen in Ohio, is four-by-six-inch hand-hewn braces on four-foot centers.

Though the builder of this barn, if not William Clark, may remain unknown as may the case with the barn’s original use and purpose, this is still an important part of early Ohio. And even though the Clarks owned the farm for most of the 19th century, eventually losing out on naming rights to Mordecai Hopewell, at least they’ll be remembered in this essay and painting – as will their marriage marks and mounds.