

2# Reading the Landscape

For more than 13,000 years people have lived along the shores of Lake Mendota. It is easy to imagine why people would find life near the water's edge appealing. Here you could find plentiful sources of food—fish, wild rice, mussels could all be had with relative ease from among the wetlands of the bay or the open water of the Four Lakes.

Some of what we know about these people can be learned from the cultural materials they left behind. Stone tools used to build canoes, or bits of pottery used to make containers for food storage are sometimes found by archeologists. Sometimes the evidence is hard to find because it is now buried. But at other times, if we know how to look, we can quite literally read the writing on the land.

About a thousand years ago, a Native American culture that we know refer to as the Mound Builders, created monumental earthworks throughout southern Wisconsin—and into bits of Iowa, Minnesota and Illinois. What these earthworks meant to the people who built them is still a bit of a mystery. But it is clear that these mounds were an important part of their cultural—especially as their way of life transitioned from a hunter-gatherer society to a more agrarian culture.

The Indian mound that you see here is an effigy type of mound—that is a mound in the shape of an animal, or sometimes a person. Can you guess what animal this mound might be?

We think that these animal shapes may have been linked to the Indians belief system, a cosmological world view of sky, earth and underworlds. Or perhaps the mounds represent the many clans who inhabited this region.

The UW-Madison campus and the Arboretum contain more ancient effigy mounds than any other university in the world. We have an important stewardship responsibility to preserve these places. Please remember that many mounds contain human burials and so we must treat these places not only as important links to our past but as sacred resting places.

There are four groups of mounds within the Preserve. Visit the other groups at Eagle Heights Woods, Picnic Point and Observatory Hill. Check out our website for more information on the mounds and other stops along our audio trail. Enjoy!