



Ancient Earthworks in Eagle Heights Woods

by Glenda Denniston

The Eagle Heights Mound Group

One day last spring, a small cloth bundle was found attached to a tree near the conical earth mound (40 feet in diameter) visible from the trail at the top of Eagle Heights Woods. The cloth bundle probably was left as an offering by a modern member of the Ho Chunk Nation, Native Americans who believe themselves to be the direct descendants of the ancient builders of these mounds. The pouch was filled with tobacco, a traditional offering to the spirit world, for this place and others like it are thought to be alive with spiritual power.

Standing on the path near this mound, a person can look out over Lake Mendota to the north. The mound is one of a group of three large earthworks. The other two are long (208 and 100 feet) linear mounds. The larger one has a 32-foot "tail" set at an angle. Its "head" end is oriented toward the conical mound.

When and Why Were the Mounds Built?

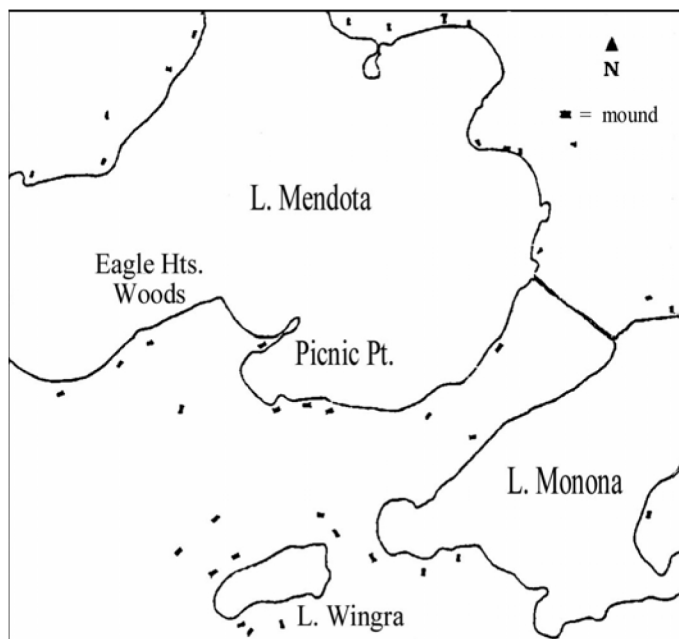
Madison is in the center of the archeological Effigy Mound area, so named because many mounds were made in the shape of animals. Mounds of more simple kinds were built starting around 500 BC and continuing throughout the Early and Middle Woodland Stages. The Effigy Mounds, including all mounds in the Campus Natural Areas, were Late Woodland Stage earthworks constructed sometime between 700 and 1200 AD.

The Late Woodland Stage was characterized by longer occupation of seasonal living sites than was the case in earlier times. Native Americans of the period exploited the rich resources of this area by engaging in hunting, fishing and food-gathering and by growing crops. In many, but not all, mounds of this time, a bundle or flexed burial was placed near the "head" or "heart" of the mound, sometimes with a few implements or other grave goods. Each mound is believed to represent a powerful spiritual force in the shape of an animal, each spirit belonging either to the cosmological upperworld, earth or underworld. Linear mounds are thought to represent the underworld water spirits, which also are portrayed as lizards, snakes and long-tailed "panthers" (Birmingham and Eisenberg, 2000, *Indian Mounds of Wisconsin*).

Earthworks on the UW-Madison Campus

The group of three mounds in Eagle Heights Woods is one of several groups of ancient earthworks on the Madison campus of the University of Wisconsin. The others are located near the middle and tip of Picnic Point; behind the Natatorium within sight of the Howard Temin Lakeshore Path; and on Observatory Hill. Formerly there were more, but some were destroyed by early University

building projects. In the early 1900s the existing mounds on campus were recorded and described by Charles E. Brown, a University of Wisconsin archeologist.



Map showing location of prehistoric mounds in the Madison area (Charles E. Brown, 1933)

A New Archeological Survey

In order to plan the relocation of the path farther from the mounds, Daniel Einstein, Environmental Management Coordinator for UW Facilities, Planning and Management, initiated a new archeological survey of the locality. The first document, "Eagle Heights Woods. . . Archeological Survey," by George W. Christiansen III, was issued in November of 2001. This spring, Daniel Einstein will lead an FCNA field trip to the six mounds and other archeological sites on Picnic Point (see Field Trips page 2).

Caring for the Earthworks

In the summer of 2002, a member of the FCNA removed brush, mostly buckthorn, which was obscuring the form of the Eagle Heights mounds. This was done respectfully, following instructions of CNA Field Manager Cathie Bruner and with the advice of Ho Chunk tribal members as conveyed by Daniel Einstein. Specifically, woody plants were cut at the ground – without the use of poisons or fire, or disturbance of the earth.

A Place of Power

Looking out over Lake Mendota from the heights where these mounds are located, especially in solitude, one can feel the spirit of the place. We are fortunate that they survive.