

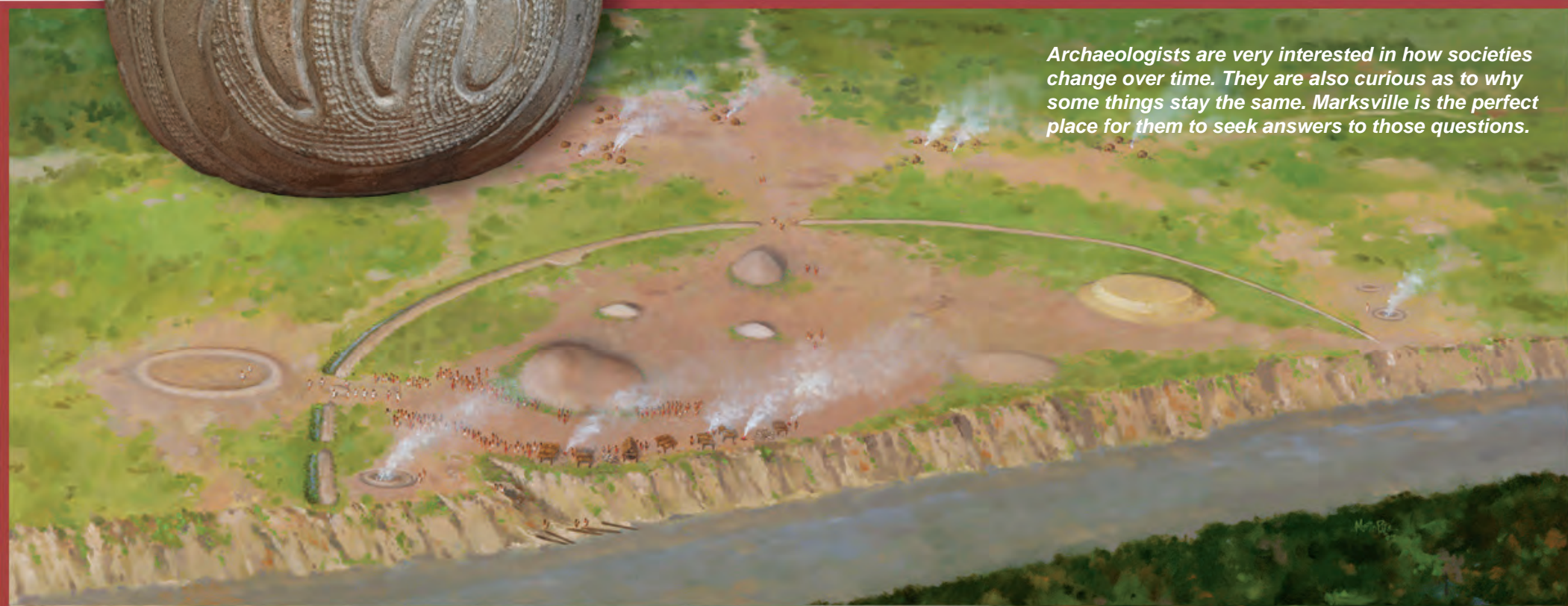
MARKSVILLE

A.D. 1 — A.D. 400

The Marksville site in central Louisiana shows how ideas from far away can spark change. About the time of Christ, travelers brought news of the [Hopewell culture](#) from where it started hundreds of miles to the north. That culture had distinct artifact styles and rituals. At Marksville, people adopted several of the new customs, but not all of them. The site they left behind gives a peek at how these people balanced tradition and change.



Archaeologists are very interested in how societies change over time. They are also curious as to why some things stay the same. Marksville is the perfect place for them to seek answers to those questions.

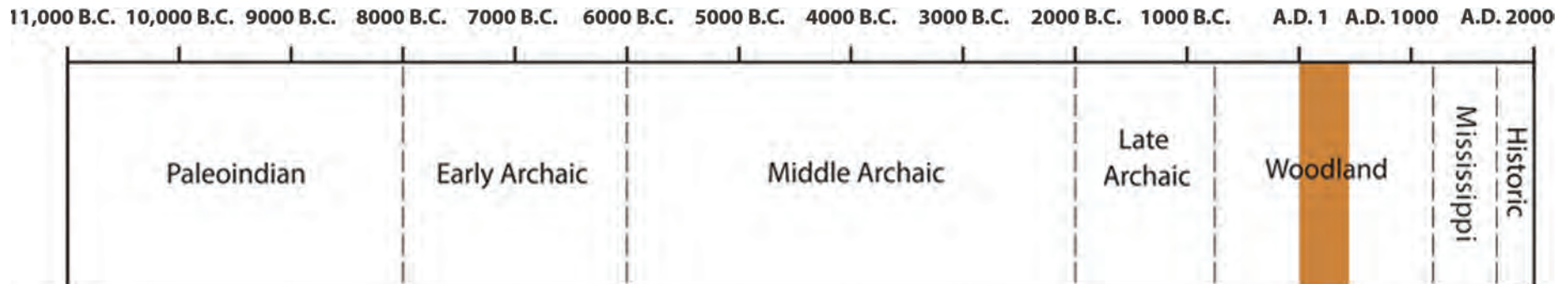
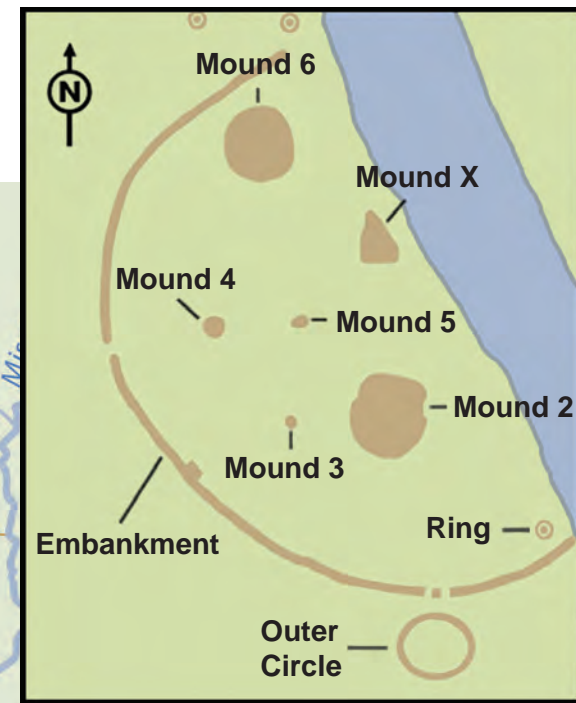


Time and Place

The Marksville site is in Avoyelles Parish on high ground next to Old River. About 2,000 years ago, American Indians built a group of **earthworks** here. The site has six mounds and one ring enclosed by a C-shaped earthen ridge. The ridge is known as the embankment. Other **earthworks**, including a circle and more rings, are outside the embankment. Marksville covered at least 60 acres and was the largest site in use in Louisiana at that time. It was a place where people gathered for ceremonies and to mourn the dead.

People used the site from A.D. 1 to A.D. 400, during the **Middle Woodland period**. That time is when the **Hopewell culture** spread from the Midwest over much of the eastern half of North America. Marksville shows a great deal of Hopewell influence. After A.D. 400, the way of life at Marksville changed, and people left the site. Archaeologists started to study the site about 100 years ago.

What else was going on around the world in Marksville's day? This was the era of the Five Good Emperors in the Roman Empire, which was at the height of its power. In South America, the Moche had come to power in Peru. Meanwhile, the Kushan dynasty in northern India began spreading Buddhism in the region.



Hopewell Culture

About 100 B.C., the **Hopewell culture** began to flourish in what is now Illinois, Ohio, and other parts of the Midwest. Hopewell groups shared four traits. First, they built groups of mounds and embankments, some of which were hundreds of acres in size. Second, they had elaborate graves inside some mounds. Third, they made artifacts of materials that came from far away. Fourth, they made special styles of decorated pots and pipes.

Hopewell ideas swept across most of eastern North America. They spread down the Mississippi Valley to the Gulf of Mexico. Each community decided which customs to follow and how to change them to fit their way of life. The Hopewell customs in use at Marksville were 1) mounds and embankments, 2) burial traditions, and 3) pottery decorations.

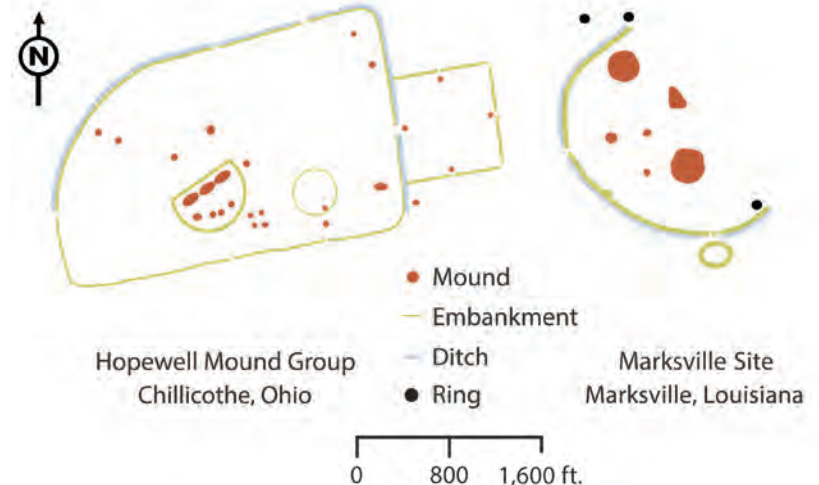
The **earthworks** at Marksville are similar to, but not exactly like, those in the north. For example, in Ohio, people built embankments in circles, squares, octagons, parallel lines, and other shapes. At the Marksville site, people built a large semi-circle and a small circle. They even made very small circular **earthworks** known as “rings.” Rings have not been found at any other Hopewell site. They may be related to a special activity that took place only at Marksville.

One of the mounds at Marksville, Mound 4, is a burial mound. Some of the tombs in this mound are built with logs and cane mats. These graves are very much like Hopewell tombs in mounds in Arkansas and Illinois. Only a few of the people who used the Marksville site were buried in this mound. Those individuals and their families likely were important leaders in the community.



(Above) Some of Marksville's mounds would have stood out not only for their shape and arrangement, but also for their color. Marksville's mounds were built with different colors of soil. Painting by Martin Pate.

(Below) Hopewell sites vary a lot in size and form, even though many have large embankments and mounds.



Many Hopewell communities traded for large amounts of stone from far away. However, the people at Marksville did not do that. They continued to use local stone to make most of their tools and other items.

The people at Marksville created some artifacts in the Hopewell style. They made pottery bowls and jars from local clay. Then, they added designs that were nearly identical to those on pots in Ohio and Illinois. In particular, certain birds are on pots in all these areas. These designs show that the birds had a special meaning for people in the Hopewell world. Marksville potters also modeled their smoking pipes on styles found in Illinois. Although they made them of local clay rather than stone, the shapes are very similar.

Many communities in Louisiana made pots with Hopewell designs on them. At some places, these pottery designs continued long after people left the Marksville site. Pottery is the major example of the long-lasting effect that Hopewell traditions had in Louisiana. Other Hopewell traits were less widely adopted in this region. For example, earthen embankments and elaborate tombs in mounds were very rare, and Marksville is unusual because it had these.



*Hook-billed bird pot, Marksville site, Louisiana
Catalogue Number 331688
Department of Anthropology,
Smithsonian Institution*



*Clay pipe, Marksville site, Louisiana
Catalogue Number 331691
Department of Anthropology,
Smithsonian Institution*



*Stone "Monitor" pipe, Oscar Hood site, Illinois
Credit: Kenneth Farnsworth and the Upper
Mississippi Valley Archaeological Research
Foundation*

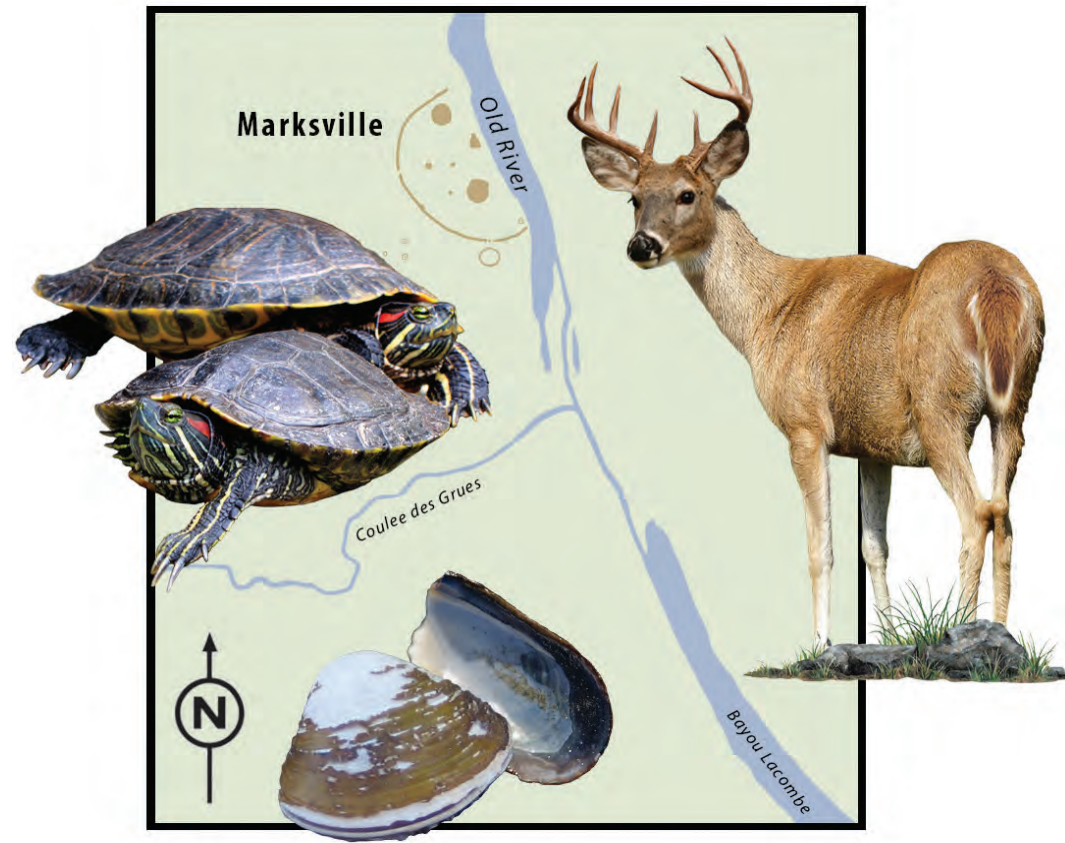


*Hook-billed bird pot, Mundies Mound site, Illinois
Credit: Kenneth Farnsworth and Tommy Bryden*

Food

Archaeologists named the Marksville site after the modern city of Marksville, where the site is located. The site sits nearly 25 feet above an abandoned channel of the Mississippi River, now called Old River. The Mississippi River flowed here several thousand years before Marksville. At this spot, between prairie and flood-plain, the people who built the site found lots of resources for food and tools.

Prairies were good places for people to gather certain plants and to hunt deer and rabbits. In the forests east of the site, nuts like acorns and pecans were available. American Indians also harvested wild grapes, persimmons and berries. Although people in the Midwest at this time grew some crops in gardens, the people at Marksville did not. They ate only wild plants. They also hunted animals like turtle and birds. Nearby rivers allowed for fishing and gathering fresh water clams.



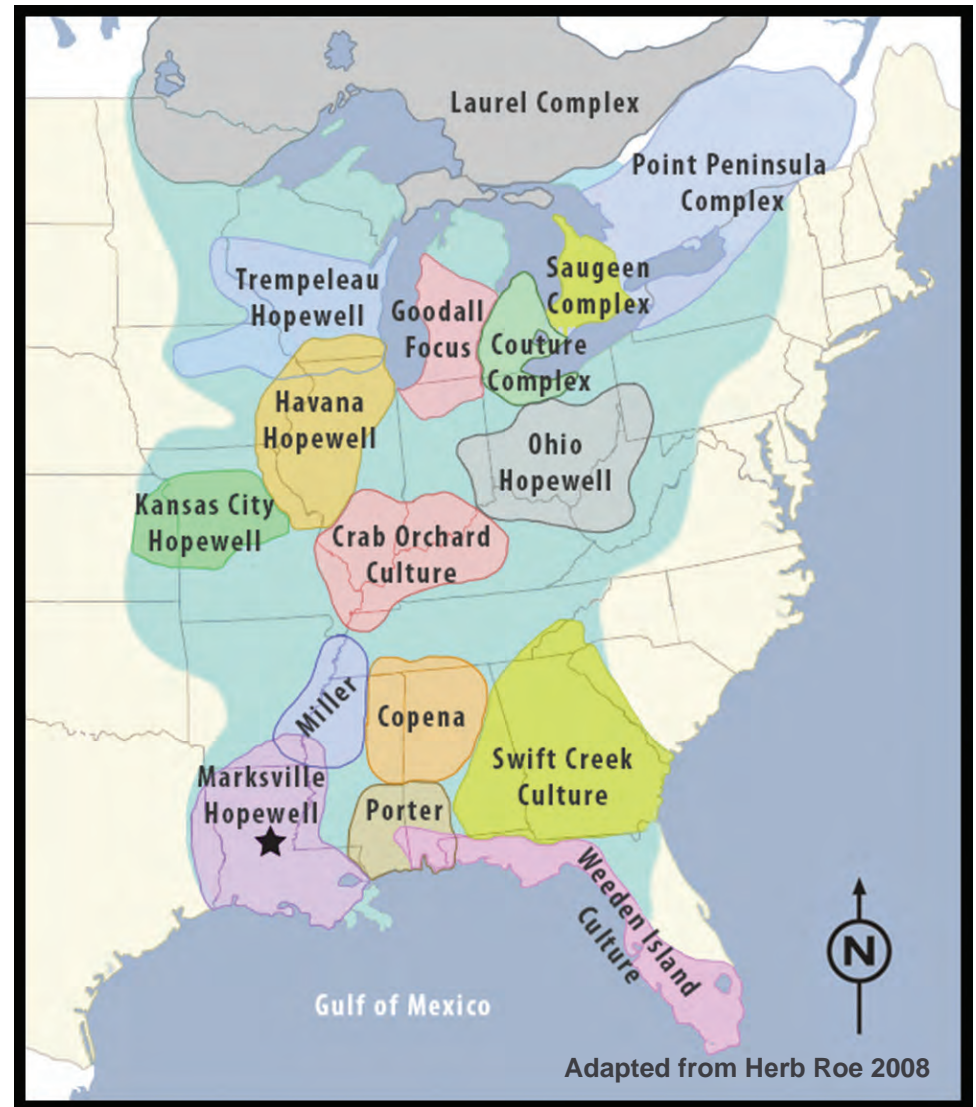
Paintings by Martin Pate.



Trade and Travel

Rivers were ancient people's best means of sending and getting news. Canoes carried people, goods, food, and information. In fact, people probably built most of the big Hopewell sites along rivers in part because it made it easier for them to trade and stay in touch. It is easy to imagine news about events at these sites spreading along rivers, lakes, and bayous.

Long-distance trade was a big part of life at many Hopewell sites. Archaeologists might expect to find non-local stone at Marksville, given that it is so close to major rivers. Instead, it looks as if the people who built the site did not place a high value on trade goods. They preferred to use and make things out of local resources. In this sense, they valued what was familiar to them.

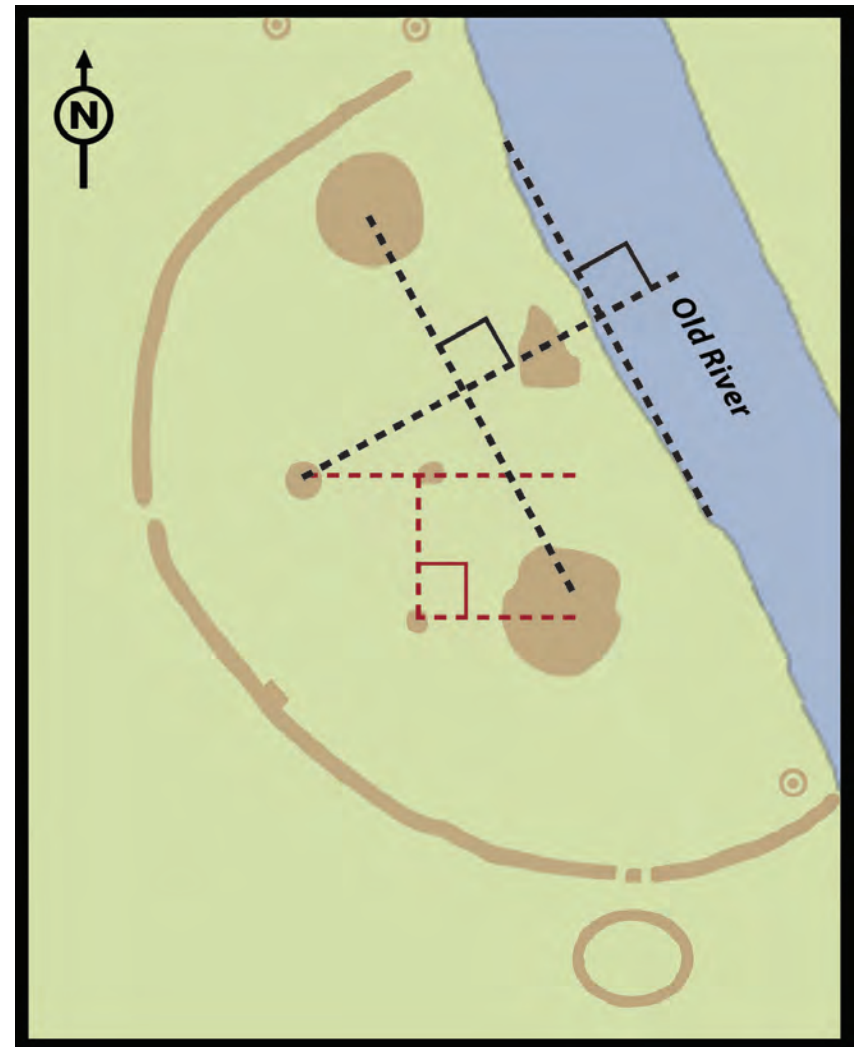


Hopewell people did not share a single culture. Rather, they had a common set of beliefs that was carried to other people through trade and travel. Each group chose what Hopewell beliefs to adopt and how they would be expressed in their culture. The area of trade and shared beliefs is called the Hopewell Interaction Sphere. The sphere stretched in the U.S. from Minnesota to Florida and from New York to Kansas City and Louisiana. At Marksville, people adopted Hopewell earthworks and burial customs but did not choose to trade many materials. People made most stone tools from rock that was found locally. Stone from far away (left) was used only rarely at Marksville. These pieces are from Illinois (dark) and Missouri (light).

Ceremonial Life

American Indians built the Marksville site in a Hopewell style. This means the site has different kinds of mounds that, together, form geometric patterns on the land. Builders enclosed these mounds inside an embankment, an earthen ridge that surrounded the site. Yet, it was not just how the site was built that ties it to Hopewell culture. Just as important is how the site was used.

Archaeologists have not found any houses at Marksville. This means that American Indians probably used the site just for ceremonies. They also honored the dead there. Mound 4 was only used for the burials of important people, and perhaps their families. The earthworks and burials are the strongest signs of a Hopewell connection at the site.



Geometry is a way for people to think logically about space. It is a process that expresses patterns that can be seen in the natural world. The people of Marksville tapped into that process. The result was a beautiful arrangement of mounds, each built in a unique relationship to the others (above).

The geometric patterns found at some Hopewell sites are very complex. Some patterns, like those found at the Newark site in Ohio (left), may have been used as a way to track the paths of the sun, moon and stars. Painting by Steven Patricia. www.snpatricia.com.

Ceremonies may have even taken place outside the embankment, at an earthen circle and several earthen rings. The circle is south of the embankment and its purpose is not known. A raised walkway connects the circle to the embankment at one of the openings.

The rings, which are smaller than the circle, were among the first earthworks people built at Marksville. The American Indians built a fire in a pit inside each ring and later cleaned the pit after each use. There is a narrow space between the ring and the fire pit. This means that only small groups of people could have used them at any given time. Archaeologists have not been able to tell what sorts of activities or ceremonies people performed within the rings.

Some artifacts may shed light on ceremonial use of the site. Archaeologists have found clay pipes at Marksville. Healers or leaders

may have used these pipes in ceremonies. Researchers have also found human figurines at Marksville and other Hopewell sites. Only the head portion of one has been found at Marksville. It is unclear why people made these figurines, but they certainly could have used them in rituals.

A lack of artifacts also reveals something about the site. Archaeologists have found lots of artifacts along the edge of the bluff where the site overlooks Old River. Yet, they have found few artifacts in the open spaces between the mounds. Perhaps, like the pits in the rings, people cleaned the site plaza between ceremonies and dumped the trash along the bluff. Then again, the activities conducted in the plaza may not have produced any artifacts, or these areas may not have been used by most people. Regardless, it means that the spaces inside the embankment were not all used the same way.



Painting by Martin Pate

Mound 4 is the only burial mound at the site. Thirty-four people (and two dogs) were buried there, some laid to rest with fancy pots and other things. The few people buried in this mound, together with its position inside the enclosure, indicate this place and these people were important. The people buried in this mound may have been political, religious or other kinds of social leaders. A look at another nearby Hopewell site makes it clear that the people in Mound 4 were treated differently in death than most people.

The Crooks site had only two mounds and no embankments. Yet, one of these mounds, which is the same size as Mound 4 at Marks-ville, had more than 1,100 burials! Many of these individuals were buried in a mass grave rather than in separate tombs. Archaeologists found a range of Hopewell objects buried in the mound, some of them lying next to bodies.

Some of the pots in Mound 4 were very ornate, while others were plain and tiny. The front row of cups in the photo below stand barely over two inches tall!

The special burial customs at the Marks-ville site were short-lived. All of the bodies in Mound 4 represent, at best, no more than a few generations. Even so, people still used the site for nearly 400 years. Painting by Martin Pate.



Catalogue Numbers (Left to Right): 369012, 369011, 369013, 369009, 369008, 331693, Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution