

Museum Studies Exhibition

Forgotten Markings on Earth: Monacan Burial Mounds of Virginia

Winona Gear '23

MST 202, Museum Exhibitions (Fall 2022) & MST 302, Museums in the Public Dimension (Spring 2023)

Image (detail): *Huge Mound and the Manner of Opening Them* (ca. 1850)

Scene 20 of 25 from John J. Egan's "The Panorama of the Monumental Grandeur of the Mississippi Valley"

Ancient Monacan Alliances

Around 10,000 years ago, a group of Siouan-speaking tribes began to migrate out of the Ohio River Valley. While some moved west toward the Plains regions, others settled into the mountains and valleys of Virginia and the Carolinas. In Virginia, five tribal groups formed an alliance and held territory over the Piedmont and Valley and Ridge regions: Manahoac, Occaneechi, Tutelo, Saponi, and Monacan. The Manahoac and the Monacan were the largest of these groups and controlled the northern and southern territories of these regions, respectively.

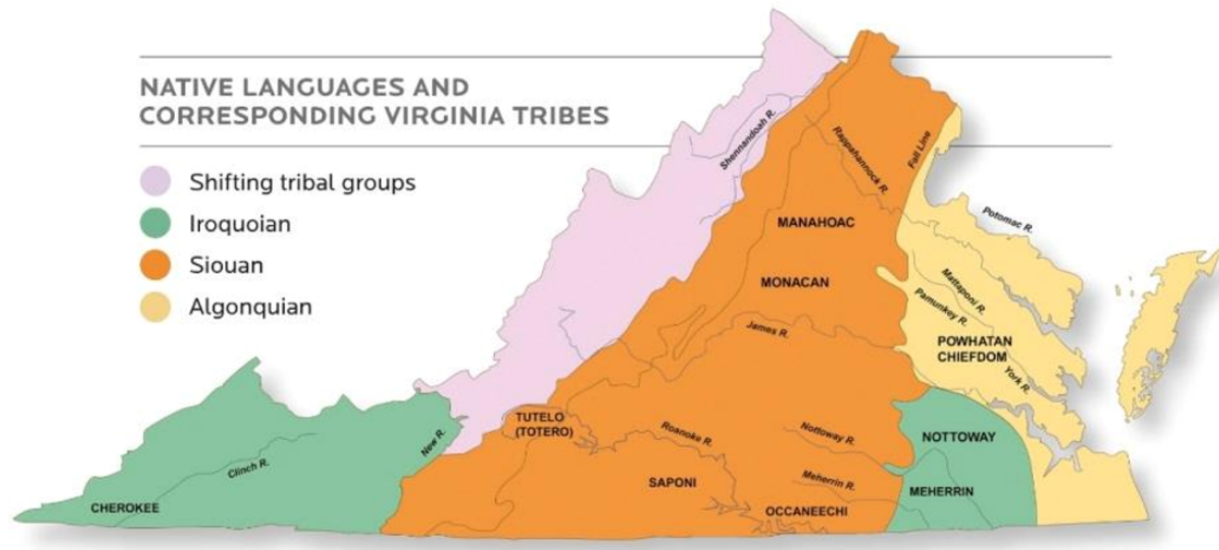


Image: Map of language groups and corresponding tribal territories in Virginia prior to 1600 CE.

Ancestral Monacan Society (ca. 900-1650 CE)

The Late Woodland period, beginning ca. 900 CE, marked the emergence of a Monacan culture and society that was distinct from their Iroquoian and Algonquian neighbors. For about twelve thousand years or more prior, during Virginia's late prehistoric period, the Monacans and other non-agricultural societies of the greater Chesapeake region were hardly fundamentally different as open boundaries permitted their connectivity through mobility, marriage, trade, and ritual.

Origin of the Burial Mounds

After the introduction of maize to the local economy in about 1000 CE, the social and political organization of these tribes was transformed. As major towns and villages began to be constructed alongside major rivers and tributaries where there was rich, fertile soil for agriculture, large earthen burial mounds began to appear on the landscape, as well. There are currently thirteen identified mounds in Virginia, each standing between 1 and 5 meters in height and containing between 50 and 2000 human remains. However, these have all since been considerably reduced in size due to changes in the natural landscape, such as flooding and erosion, and destructive cultural forces, such as looting, ploughing, and excavation.

However, with the introduction of maize to the Virginia economy in around 1000 CE, the Monacans began to adopt practices of agricultural domestication in relatively large amounts. As a result, three important socio-economic and cultural developments emerged in Monacan society: (1) the settlement of towns and villages alongside waterways with rich alluvial soil; (2) the development of a hierarchical social structure; and (3) the construction of accretional burial mounds.

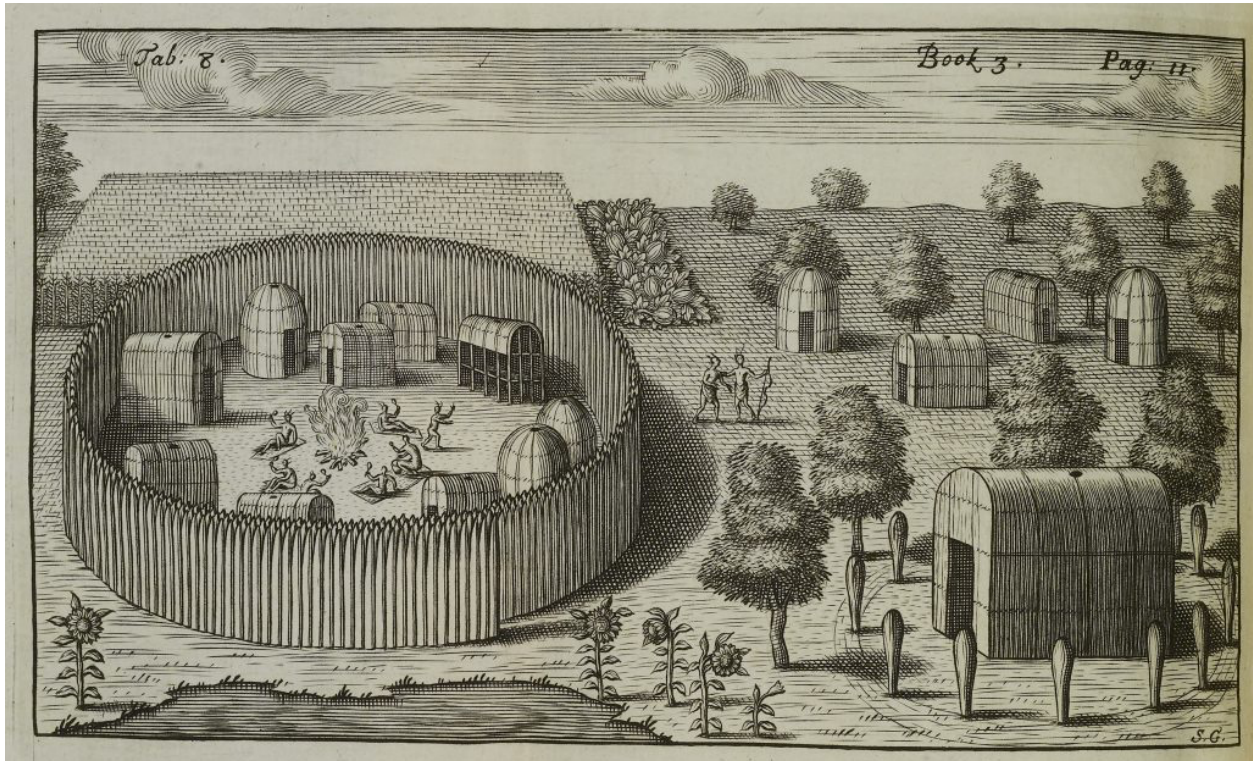


Image: Engraving of a Powhatan settlement at Jamestown from Robert Beverley Jr.'s *The History and Present State of Virginia* (1705).

Monacan Towns and Tributary Relations

Before 1000 CE, the pattern of settlement among tribes in Virginia was consistently small and dispersed. However, to accommodate intense agricultural production, the Monacans began to establish permanent villages, or towns, alongside rivers and streams.

Monacan towns were modest in size, but numerous in their dispersion across the James and Rappahannock River Valleys. At the beginning of the Late Woodland period, an average town would have contained up to four households, or about twenty-four individuals. However, these numbers doubled to eight households, or approximately forty-eight inhabitants, per village between 1200 and 1600 CE.

In *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles*, John Smith described that all of the Monacan towns paid tribute to the “chiefe habitation” at Rassawek. This tributary system was similar to that of the nearby Algonquian tribes. This system entailed that small communities were expected to pay annual tribute to their town chief who would collect the goods for prestige, storage, and redistribution, in addition to sending a portion to the capital. Though this relationship supported a hierarchical system of power, local communities remained as composite polities in which they were not fully incorporated and could govern their own internal affairs or pursue their own diplomatic agendas.

Virginia: Discovered and Discribed (1612)

From Captain John Smith's pamphlet, "A Map of Virginia"

Virginia: Discovered and Discribed was the definitive map of Virginia from 1612 until 1673.

Depicted are the Chesapeake Bay and four major rivers of Virginia: Powhatan (James); Pamunk (York); Tappahannock (Rappahannock); and Patowomec (Potomac). The map also denotes the names and locations of certain Powhatan towns in the Tidewater region (lower portion of map), as well as some of those associated with the Monacan and Manahoac in the Piedmont region (upper portion of map). In the Monacan and Manahoac's territory, Smith identified ten chiefly towns, or "king's houses": Tauxania, Hassinunga, Stegra, Shackonia, Mahaskahod, Monasukapanough, Rassawek, Massinacack, Mowhemoco ("Manakin Town"), and Monahassanaugh.



Image: Captain John Smith's map of Virginia

Emergence of Burial Mounds

Three types of burial practices characterized Ancestral Monacan society. The first type consisted of individual burials, practiced prior to 1000 CE, that extended throughout the region and were located in or adjacent to villages, caves, and rock shelters. The second were stone cairn burials, dating to the Middle Woodland period (ca. 200-1000 CE), which contained

secondary remains of up to two or three individuals and have been found in both the Piedmont and Valley and Ridge regions. The third type, accretional burial mounds, became dominant between 1000 and 1700 CE.

FIGURE 5: DEFINITIONAL AREAS OF A MOUND

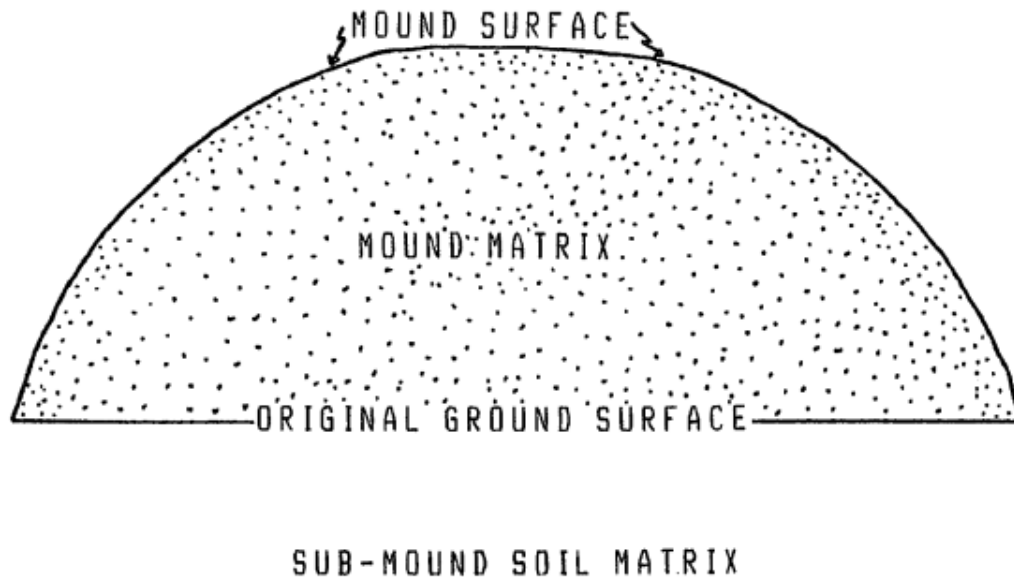


Image: Diagram of definitional areas of a mound.

Accretional Burial Mounds

Accretional burial mounds are distinguished by interval layers of human remains, earth, and stone, resulting in an elevated and visible structure. These mounds were in use for multiple generations and often outlasted the houses and villages of their inhabitants. There are currently thirteen identified mounds located along the floodplains and adjacent to major rivers and tributaries of the Virginia interior: Brumback, Jefferson, Rapidan, Clover Creek, Withrow, Hirsch, John East, Lewis Creek, Hayes Creek, Bell, and Leesville. Many of these sites, however, have been significantly reduced or removed overtime due to flooding, farming, and looting.

While it is difficult to discern for certain what these mounds would have meant to the Monacans, the predominant shift to this type of burial practice indicates a heightened concern for the curation of the dead and the forging and maintaining of ties with the ancestors. The deceased were no longer buried beneath the ground, but above it, placed together with the older dead of the community to form an increasing monumental edifice on the landscape.

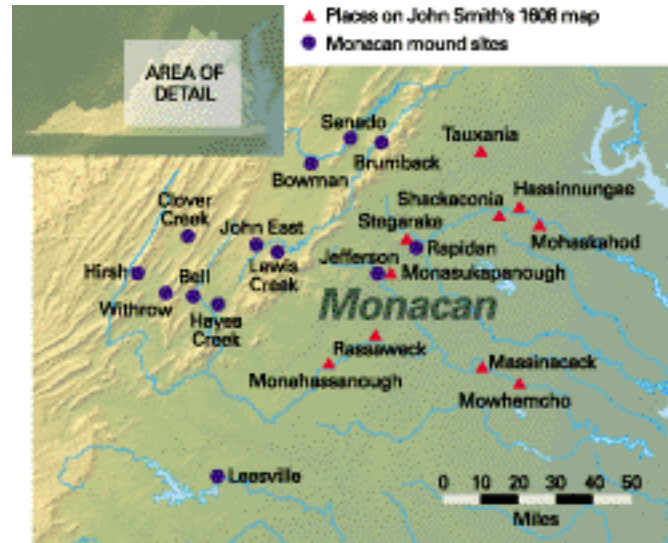


Image: Map of Monacan towns and burial mounds in central and west-central Virginia.

Construction of the Mounds

The Monacan burial mounds were constructed through several periodic depositions of human remains, usually in groups of between 25 and 30 individuals, and often without any accompanying grave goods. These remains would have been initially buried or exposed to remove the flesh through natural processes of decay, then brought to the mound site - which were usually built overtop of pre-existing burial locations - and mixed and joined together on the surface. Such commingling of remains meant that no individual could be discerned apart from any other in the mound so that all of the mound's occupants would be joined together as one.

The total amount of remains deposited in the mounds varied between each site. While some mounds only yielded between 50 to 100 individuals (e.g., Clover Creek, Hirsch, Bell, Senedo, Leesville), others had burial populations upwards to one thousand or more. Disparities between the size and population of the mounds can be attributed to the duration of their use as some mounds were only active for two generations, or about 14 to 24 years, whereas others remained in use for multiple centuries.

In 2003, Dr. Debra Gold also found through osteological analysis of more than 15,000 bones and bone fragments from the Lewis Creek, Hayes, and Rapidan Mounds that no exclusionary custom existed based on age or sex as both males and females of all ages – including children - were buried together in the mounds.

Table 1. Burial Mounds of the Virginia Interior (Monacan/Lewis Creek Mound Complex).

Mound Name	Other Names	Base (ft.)	Hgt. (ft.)	Volume (ft. ³)	Estimated Population	
					Sub Mound	Mound
I. Earth and Stone Mounds						
Bell Mound #1	Calfpasture	30	4	1361	—	ca. 50
Leesville	none	23	6	1201	—	ca. 50
Hayes Creek	none	24	4.5	1305	—	ca. 50
Clover Creek	none	36	10	4946	?	250-337
Hirsh	Jackson River	47	7	4396	228	81
John East	Middle River	40	5	3206	46	168
II. Earthen Mounds						
Linville	Bowman	36	14	6907	87	1191
Brumback	Pass Run	40	14	8459	95	798
Lewis Creek	none	40	16	9667	33	904
Withrow #1	Cowpasture	30	15	5103	13	990
Hayes Creek	none	56	10	7595	12	975
Rivanna	Jefferson	35	12	5562	—	812-1000
Rapidan	none	40	15	9089	168	1000-2700

Note: The population columns are estimations based on extrapolation from observed numbers of individuals in each mound. Differential preservation and excavation strategy make these estimates the best estimate possible with the available data. Sources: Danham (1994: Tables 3, 16, 17); MacCord (1986: Table IV).

Image: Comparative sizes and populations of Virginia Burial Mounds.

History of Excavations

As well-known landmarks in local history, the Virginia mounds have been repeatedly visited, excavated, and written about since the eighteenth century. With a few notable exceptions, most mound explorations until recently have been undertaken by undisciplined parties, such as boy scouts, farmers, a gas station owner, a colonel, a sculptor, a Richmond entrepreneur, and a future president. Thomas Jefferson recorded one of the first systematic excavations on the Virginia mounds in his *Notes on The State of Virginia* (1785). During Jefferson's time, people often speculated that the hundreds of unexplained mounds known east of the Mississippi River had not been built by the Indigenous peoples of the land, but rather by a mythical and vanished race of "mound builders." In conducting a trench excavation on a mound site located at the edge of his property near Charlottesville, Jefferson concluded that the origins of the mounds were derived from the "accustomary collection of bones, and deposition of them together." He also observed that the site was of "considerable notoriety among the Indians," and emphasized that these sites were part of a regional complex of mounds. However, because these mounds had been "much reduced in height, and spread in width, by the plough," Jefferson noted that they "will probably disappear in time."

This panorama painting depicts the excavations of the archaeologist, Montroville W. Dickeson, on ancient sites along the Mississippi River in the late 1830's and 40's. This painting is often used in textbooks to accompany descriptions of Thomas Jefferson's excavations on the Rivanna Mound in Central Virginia, though its contents bear no resemblance to Jefferson's description in his *Notes on The State of Virginia* (1785).



Image: *Huge Mound and the Manner of Opening Them* (ca. 1850)

Scene 20 of 25 from John J. Egan's "The Panorama of the Monumental Grandeur of the Mississippi Valley"

Other Early Excavations

Beginning in the middle of the eighteenth century and continuing through the nineteenth century, the Virginia burial mounds rapidly diminished in size due to agricultural ploughing, looting, and periodic flooding. Several attempts were made to systematically investigate the contents of the mounds, particularly by Richmond businessman Mann Valentine and his son, Granville, at sites in Rockbridge and Augusta counties in around 1877.

In 1891 and 1892, Gerard Fowke, an assistant archaeologist at the Smithsonian Institution, was instructed to conduct a regional survey and excavation of mounds, village sites, and quarries along the upper portions and tributaries of the James, Rappahannock, and Shenandoah Rivers. The results of these studies were published in *American Archaeologist* in 1893, and in his 1894 monograph, *Archaeological Investigations in the James and Potomac Rivers*.

In regards to the mounds, Fowke followed Jefferson by arguing that all burial mounds in central-Virginia could be attributed to the Indigenous people who "lived or hunted" in the region by the seventeenth century. He also divided the mounds into three "distinct types": (1) earthen accretional mounds; (2) stone mounds; and (3) mixed earthen-stone mounds. The latter two mound types he argued were more numerous and only differed by size. Among the first type, however, Fowke noted the presence of sub-complexes, or "pit burials," that consisted of "shallow graves of various shapes and sizes" and contained either individual primary interments, or several secondary deposits of human remains. While many of these mounds contained grave goods, however, these were all in relatively small amounts.

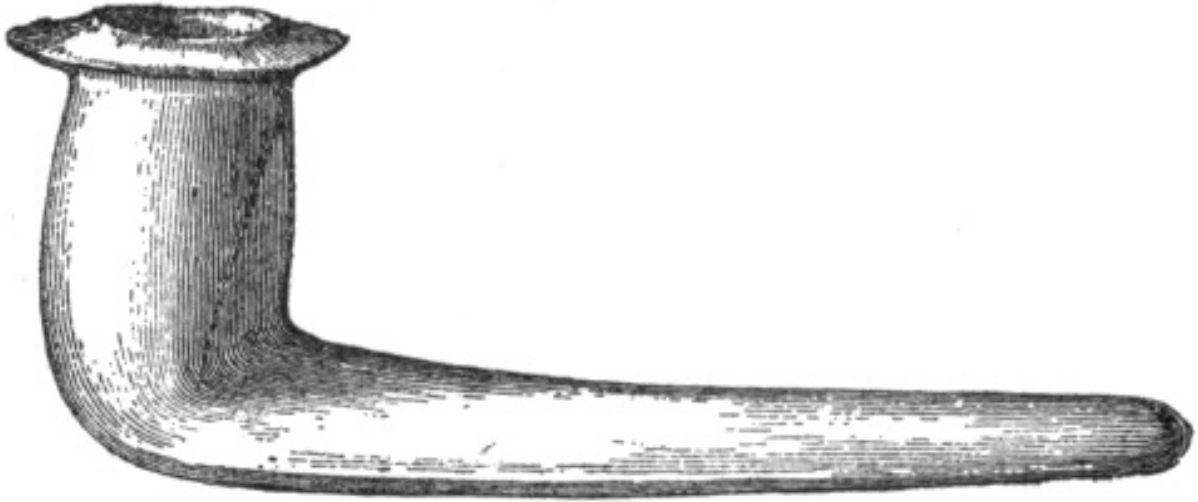


Image: Pipe Stem, Depicted by Gerard Fowke in *Stone Art* (1896) from objects in the collection of the Bureau of American Ethnology.

Pipes were sacred objects commonly used in ceremonial activities. This example has a flat base that was carved from slate. Similar pipe stems have been found in mounds in Tennessee, West Virginia, and North Carolina.



Image: Gorget, depicted by Gerard Fowke in *Stone Art* (1896) from objects in the collection of the Bureau of American Ethnology.

Gorgetts were a type of ornamental pendant that, after sinew was strung through the drilled holes, would have been worn around the neck or wrist. This example was found in a mound from Ohio. It was made from sandstone, and has a distinctive “boat-shape.”

Recent Analysis and Interpretation

Dr. Jeffery Hantman, an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Virginia, has set forth a regional synthesis and functional model of the burial mound ritual. Hantman has incorporated collaborative principles of Indigenous research in his study of the mounds, which involves actively working with the present Monacan community to re-examine their history and to repatriate remains recovered from archaeological excavations which have often been stored away in museum and private collections.

Hantman considers the mounds to be “relatively homogenous in form and content,” illustrating the inclusive nature of this mortuary custom and shared identity of regional tribes. Hantman has also developed an interpretation of three related ways in which the burial mounds served the hegemonic purposes of a chiefdom society: (1) the mounds and their burial rituals promoted “ancestral cults” built around the remains of elites; (2) the practice of collective, secondary burial rituals served to simultaneously conceal and promote social relations outside of the ritual context by emphasizing the lack of social distinctions among ritual participants and the dead; and (3) the accretional construction of the mounds reinforced the status and authority of the elite as they mobilized and coordinated “the labor in the act of mound building.”



Image: Facial reconstructions of Monacan female (top) and male (bottom) based on skulls recovered from Hayes Creek mound who lived in what is now west-central Virginia between A.D. 1000 and 1400. Completed by Sharon Long in 2000 at the request of the Monacan Tribal Council after several members stated during a meeting with Hantman that they had never “seen an image of ancestors older than a 1914 photographic wedding portrait.”

Deterioration of the Mounds and Present Challenges

The burial mounds of Virginia have rapidly deteriorated since their original construction due to changes in the natural landscape, such as flooding and erosion, and destructive cultural forces, such as looting, ploughing, and excavation. Though once large, visible markings on the landscape, most all of these have, as Jefferson described, “disappeared in time.” Systematic archaeological excavation and careful documentation of the Virginia mounds has provided substantial evidence for theories to be derived about these sites and their inhabitants in relation to the broader cultural practices and socio-political organization of ancestral Monacan society. However, the repatriation of human remains recovered from excavations on the Virginia mounds has largely been undertaken by the present Monacan people themselves.

Because the Monacans did not have federal recognition until 2018, they struggled to gain approval from the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act committee to have remains, such as those in storage at the Valentine Museum, returned to them. After extensive review, permission was eventually granted and these, along with others from the Rapidan Mound, were reburied in a ceremony at Bear Mountain in Amherst County in 1998. According to Chief Branham of the Monacan Nation, that day will always be remembered as one which “our people can be proud of in knowing that some of the injustices of the past can be corrected.”

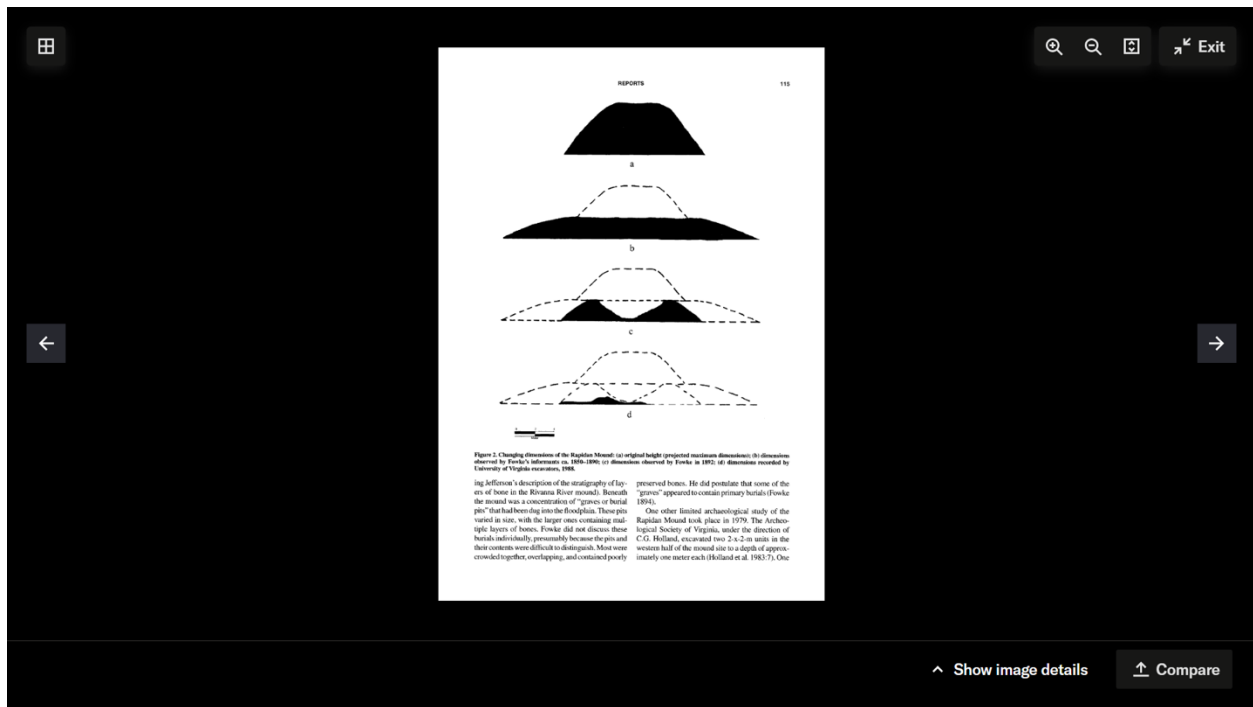


Image: Changing size and distribution of the Rapidan Mound from (a) its original projected height, to its reported dimensions in (b) ca. 1850-1890, (c) 1892, and (d) 1988.

“Markings on Earth,” lines 23-30, from Karenne Wood’s *Markings on Earth* (2001)

“As the only descendants of a nation, we remain to find ancestors stored in warehouses, bagged, labeled, their spirits neglected, dust pressing over their bones in the spirit of historical research. We are left among ruins to save what we can, our grandparents who did not depart but remain among us, as we may remain after nine hundred years. We would bring them home, give their bones to the cradle of the earth, their songs and ours quivering over the stone.”

Monacan Ancestral Museum

For more information about Monacan history and culture, plan a visit to the Monacan Ancestral Museum. The Monacan Ancestral Museum is open Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. until 3 p.m. There is a \$5 per person fee for touring the museum. The museum is closed on Sunday and the third Saturday of each month for Tribal Meetings. Due to drastic weather changes in this area, the museum will not be open during storms or snow.

Phone: (434) 946-5391

Address: 2009 Kenmore Road, Amherst, VA 24521

Link: <https://www.monacannation.com/plan-your-visit.html>



Meet the Museum Director, Edith (Lou) Branham Parrish, in this video for a preview of what you can find at the Museum.

Link: <https://youtu.be/KIJnb6dw2DI>

Monacan Indian Nation Preserves a Proud Heritage for the Next Generation

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F1vTw0aqq1A>

Image: Seal of the Monacan Indian Nation

Other videos of interest:

- Monacan Indian Nation Preserves a Proud Heritage for the Next Generation
 - Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F1vTw0aqq1A>
- Jeffrey Hantman on the 'Monacan Millennium' - May 24, 2019
 - Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oay3S6zGbv4>
- Politics Matter: Karenne Wood, Part 2
 - Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NS53f_Aoy-l
- Monacan Indian Nation Powwow 2022
 - Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ChuY_eHvf6E
 - Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4nNG-39Ausw>
 - Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FKenOHP_fts
- Community Conversation: The Natural Bridge and the Monacan Indian Nation
 - Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oYrbV5Jkl68>
- How many times you will take our land away - Monacan Indian Tribe
 - Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMEnU237dAM>

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Winona Gear: Winona Gear is a senior at the University of Lynchburg (class of 2023), where she is majoring in sociology with minors in archaeology, classical studies, history, and museum studies. Winona has been a student employee of the Daura Museum of Art, where she assists in all manner of collections management, exhibition preparation and installation, visitor orientation and event services, and educational and public and programming.

Winona has also been long-time volunteer with the Amherst County Museum. During the summer of 2021, Winona conducted research under the direction of Dr. Kareene Wood, professor of anthropology at the University of Virginia and Monacan historian, for a new permanent exhibition on the Monacan Indians, of which Winona is a member (pictured here).

For her senior project in museum studies, she has researched, written, and designed this virtual exhibition, *Forgotten Markings on Earth: Monacan Burial Mounds of Virginia*.

Image: Winona Gear placing Monacan artifacts in an exhibition at the Amherst Historical Society.

Acknowledgement: We acknowledge the Monacan Indian Nation as the traditional stewards of the land on which the University of Lynchburg now sits and we offer our respect to the Monacan people, past, present, and emerging.

Link: <https://www.lynchburg.edu/university-holds-ceremony-to-acknowledge-monacan-land-announce-special-scholarship/>

Virtual Exhibition Published March 28, 2023

Link: www.Lynchburg.edu/daura-museum-of-art