

# Ancient mounds found in Wis. cemetery

**Indigenous land features were known to 19th century designer of site**

**Frank Vaisvilas**

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel  
USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

At Milwaukee's Forest Home Cemetery, the city's oldest operating cemetery, history can be seen in every direction - etched on the gravestones, mausoleums and monuments of founders, pioneers, industrialists and beer barons.

But new evidence has unearthed another layer of the city's past, one that stretches back thousands of years.

Researchers from Marquette University, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and the Wisconsin Historical Society and the Ho-Chunk Nation have confirmed that two ancient Indigenous mounds were hidden within the cemetery, camouflaged as its characteristic rolling hills.

As it turns out, Increase Lapham, the prominent civil engineer who helped transform Milwaukee from a small village into a booming city in the mid-1800s, knew the mounds were there when he designed Forest Home. But, according to Lapham's extensive notes, he made sure they were protected.

Wisconsin is a hub for ancient effigy mounds. Hundreds of mounds once dotted what is now known as Milwaukee, before being leveled to make way for development, something Lapham was likely to have witnessed firsthand.

Until the rediscovery, local experts believed that Lake Park was home to the only surviving Indigenous mound in Milwaukee.

Now, the two mounds rediscovered at Forest Home bring that number to three, revealing another important - and sometimes forgotten - piece of the area's early history.

The cemetery's oldest section, known to non-Native settlers as "Indian Field," marks the area where Indigenous inhabitants were displaced as settlers moved into the area. During the cholera



**The shape of an ancient Indigenous mound can still be seen in a burial lot located at the Forest Home Cemetery and Arboretum on Oct. 26 in Milwaukee, Wis.**

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outbreak in the mid-1800s, settlers turned to Indian Field to create a cemetery.

The first burial took place in 1850, just four years after Milwaukee became a city.

The natural hills in the 72-acre section led some staff members to believe it may be home to ancient burial mounds, said Sara Tomlin, executive director of the Forest Home Historic Preservation Association. But the staff wasn't sure where they might be located, Tomlin said.

Sally Merrell, a docent at Forest Home, often pointed out during visitor tours that some of the hills could be ancient Indigenous mounds.

Merrell and Tomlin contacted William Quackenbush, the tribal historic preservation officer for the Ho-Chunk Nation, who visited the cemetery in February 2022. Quackenbush and his tribe are experts in ancient Indigenous mounds in Wisconsin, and use state-of-the-art equipment to find them, so they can be protected.

Tomlin said it took Quackenbush little time to identify two mounds. In late 2023, state historians confirmed the mounds were indeed ancient.

Merrell reached out to Bryan Rindfleisch, a history professor at Marquette University, who along with his research students, pored through Lapham's notes, preserved by the Wisconsin Historical Society, to determine if he had documented the mounds. They discovered that Lapham had recorded about 50 circular mounds in the area, as well as a few lizard-shaped ones. Two of the mounds were located within the planned cemetery grounds, and Lapham had written that he intended to preserve them.

Lapham "realized that everywhere you step is Native history and Native remains," Rindfleisch said. "There's a sacredness to that."

Some of the earliest burial mounds built by ancient Native Americans, which were conical shaped, date back to roughly 500 BC. And effigy mounds depicting people, animals or spirits were built from between 700 to 1100 AD.

"That's what Wisconsin's known for," said Kurt Sampson, an archeologist who leads mound preservation, clean-up events that includes removing invasive plants from mounds around the state.

Estimates suggest that about 20,000 mounds once blanketed the landscape,

but roughly 4,000 remain today because of development during the last two centuries. Experts believe many were destroyed by Wisconsin residents and amateur archeologists.

"All of these sites are, first and foremost, burial grounds," Sampson said. "We know from 150 years of excavations that they do all, in fact, contain burials."

In the 1800s, early non-Native settlers in Wisconsin theorized that the mounds were built by a "lost race" or even the Vikings because they couldn't accept that Native Americans, whom they were removing from their lands at the time, would be capable of creating such massive and impressive earthworks.

Researchers have since determined that many of the mound systems, in fact, resemble the clan systems and spirit animals used by Indigenous tribes today, like the Thunderbird and Water Panther, mythological animal-like supernatural beings.

During the last 150 years, dozens of people had been buried within the two mounds, including many members of one family who had purchased the plot. These burials are along the edges of the mounds, leaving much of the center of the mounds untouched.

The last person buried on top of one of the mounds was laid to rest in the 1960s.

Rindfleisch said it's likely the original cemetery owners knew that Lapham designed that section of the cemetery the way he did in order to preserve the mounds.

"That didn't stop them from putting graves on the mounds," he said. "There's the hypocrisy that goes along with that."

And now that historians, archeologists and cemetery officials know the two mounds are there, the next step is to figure out what to do next.

According to Tomlin, cemetery officials are in the process of contacting families that still own plots where the mounds are located, but it's unclear what the next steps of the families will be.

Tomlin is working with an anthropologist who is a tribal expert at UW-Milwaukee and Milwaukee Intertribal Circle to develop a plan.