



# REINTERPRETATION OF “SACRED SPACE” AT THE NEWARK EARTHWORKS AND SERPENT MOUND:

Settler Colonialism and Discourses of “Sacred”

Mound building was a significant activity for the original, Indigenous occupants of the eastern portion of North America for at least six centuries. Approximately two millennia ago, the inhabitants of a broad swath of land primarily east of the Mississippi River and extending from the gulf to the Great Lakes, engaged in the construction of conical, enclosure and effigy shaped earthen mounds. The efforts were often combined to create a complex of mounds and are detailed in their individual geometric precision, which often mirror the cyclical astronomical phenomena of the sun and moon. Furthermore, the sites, although often at great distance, are in geometric relationships to one another. The proliferation of mounds with astronomical focus suggests the mound builder cultures privileged these activities; they had purpose and held meaning for the cultures over a considerable length of time. In the present-day state of Ohio there are 2,080 remnants of this activity (*Indigenous Wonders* 2022).

Two sites are the focus of this paper on “sacred space”: the Newark Earthworks and Serpent Mound. Both are short-listed for UNESCO World Heritage status.<sup>1</sup> The construction of these sites are dated nearly six-hundred years apart and credited to two

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1. UNESCO is an acronym for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, an agency of the United Nations (UN) aimed at promoting world peace and security through international cooperation in education, arts, sciences and culture.

different cultural groups. Over time they, more than any other mound sites, have been objects of great contestation over interpretation, symbolic meaning, and ownership.

In August of 2010, interest in and visits to the Newark Earthworks increased dramatically and the burgeoning interest was directly related to Glenn Beck, who featured this site and other ancient civilizations in North America on his FOX News Channel television program.<sup>2</sup> The basis of the program, which Beck referred to frequently throughout the broadcast, was a 2009 documentary film, *The Lost Civilizations of North America*. This documentary enjoyed some success, particularly after Beck featured it on his show, dedicating a full hour to its content. As a result of the program, tourism increased at the “prehistoric” sites mentioned, the Newark Earthworks among them.<sup>3</sup> According to one of the film’s producers, there were 37,000 hits on the film’s website in the days immediately following Beck’s program (Smoot 2011). While the documentary is not a blockbuster, it nevertheless continues to generate interest.<sup>4</sup> The film and Beck’s coverage triggered a domino effect that ironically achieved what scholars, public historians, and concerned public citizens could not: wider visibility. Scholars were outraged by the interpretations promoted by Beck and the film, while local tourism development partners were thrilled by the increased traffic to the area. This tension illuminates a number of interesting avenues of query about contestation and reinterpretation, which are examined in more detail later in this paper. But first, I’ll begin with a description and information about world heritage.

The Newark Earthworks are named as such because the small town of Newark, Ohio (located approximately thirty miles east

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2. The program aired on Wednesday, 18 August 2010. While Beck remained involved with the FOX News Channel, his daily program went off the air in the summer of 2011.

3. While I work to avoid the term “prehistoric” due to the term’s implication that there was no history prior to contact, I use it here as it is the language used in the program and documentary.

4. According to data from HypeStat.com, the film’s website receives “about 29 unique visitors and 66 (2.30 per visitor) page views per day.” The DVD is available from a wide range of sources and continues to be a topic of conversation at a variety of social conservative conferences. Likewise, a number of academics continue to critique the film.

of the state capitol of Columbus) grew in, around, and on a complex of mounds that contain both the Great Circle and Octagon earthworks. While nominated as two distinct sites in the UNESCO Ceremonial Earthworks proposal, it is commonly agreed that they were originally parts of one site that encompassed more than four square miles. The Ohio History Connection (OHC)<sup>5</sup> website describes the site as follows: “Built by people of the ancient Hopewell Culture between A.D. 1 to A.D. 400, this architectural wonder of ancient America was part cathedral, part cemetery and part astronomical observatory” (OHC, “Newark Earthworks”). Today, archaeologists identify four distinct cultural eras of mound-building cultures in the Ohio region. The earliest, the Adena, are dated circa 500 BCE–100 BCE; the Hopewell from 100 BCE–400 CE; and the Fort Ancient from 1000 CE–1650 CE. The distinctions are based on increasingly elaborate productions of material culture and lifeway patterns that shifted from horticulture to agriculture. The height of quality material cultural production peaked during the Hopewell era. By the time the Fort Ancient culture emerged at the end of the Hopewell era, efforts had shifted from mound building to agriculture.

The Newark Earthworks are frequently referred to as monumental architecture due to the size, scale, and precision of the earthen construction. Its Great Circle encloses thirty acres of land with one entrance point at the northeastern side demarcated by two parallel earthen walls. The earthen walls rise approximately eight feet tall and immediately inside the circle walls is a moat that is about five feet deep. The diameter of the circle is approximately twelve hundred feet. Less than two miles to the northwest are the Octagon Earthworks, which are composed of a twenty-acre circle attached by parallel walls to a fifty acre octagon. Scholars

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5. The OHC has been organized under a number of different names over the long history since its incorporation in 1885. Originally known as The Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society and later the Ohio Historical Society (OHS), it is also one of the few state history organizations in the US that is not a branch of the state's government. Rather it is a non-profit organization whose primary contract is with the state. In this essay I generally use the official name of the organization in its historical context.

Ray Hively and Robert Horn persuasively argue that the Octagon served as a lunar observatory for the Indigenous builders and inhabitants of the land. The lunar cycle is much more complex than the three hundred- and sixty-five-day solar cycle. It takes 18.6 years to complete a full rotation of the moon, which involves eight standstill points during its movement. The sightlines from an observation mound at the circle, through the parallel walls, to the furthest angle of the octagon shape aligns with the northernmost rising of the moon as viewed at this location (OHC, “Archaeoastronomy”).

Travel about one hundred and twenty miles to the southwest (approximately 70 miles east of Cincinnati) and you arrive at Serpent Mound. The Fort Ancient culture is credited with the construction of Serpent Mound circa 1070 CE based on radio-carbon evidence. This date is centuries after the construction of the geometric mounds of the Newark Earthworks. However, excavations of burial sites near the location date as far back as the Adena. This suggests the possibility of cultural continuity for at least one millennia. Serpent Mound is considered the most outstanding example of effigy mound building that remains and perhaps the most well-known of the mound sites nominated. Called “serpent” because its shape evokes the image of a large sinuous snake, this effigy mound is approximately twelve-hundred feet (1200) in length. The tail spirals inward and the mouth of the serpent appears to be in the process of eating an egg, an oval shaped mound, the body curves seven times in between the head and tail. While not as impressive in height as the Newark Earthworks, the detail, scale, and precision are similarly impressive. The Serpent Mound also aligns with astronomical phenomena, in this case solar.

The Newark Earthworks have been nominated as part of a larger package referred to as “The Hopewell Ceremonial Earthworks” and Serpent Mound is a stand-alone nomination for UNESCO World Heritage status. In April 2022, The OHC opened a new museum exhibit at their headquarters in Columbus, Ohio. Titled, *Indigenous Wonders of Our World: The Hopewell Ceremonial Earthworks*. The purpose of the new exhibit is to educate the public and draw attention to the grouping of eight sites in anticipation of final approval by UNESCO. OHC staff believe the final vote will

be announced during the next meeting of UNESCO which has been set for September 2023. The road to UNESCO approval has been long and arduous, more than twenty years to date and the many organizations and individuals have invested their efforts in the process. While a number of sites nominated from Ohio are short-listed for UNESCO approval (Serpent Mound among them), stakeholders decided to move the “Hopewell Ceremonial Earthworks” forward first, as UNESCO only approves a small number of sites annually.

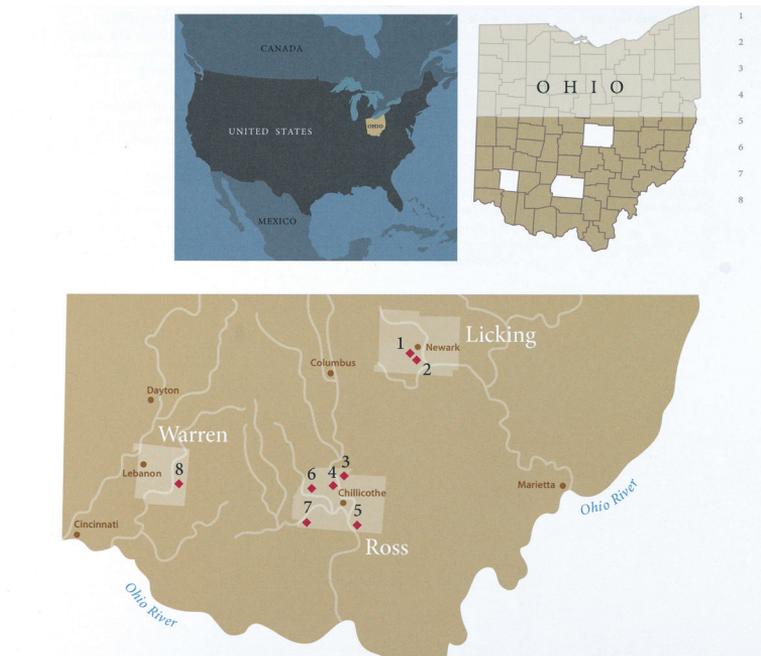


Fig. 1. Hopewell Ceremonial Earthworks (2022: 9)

The sites moving forward as the “Hopewell Ceremonial Earthworks” nomination cover significant geographical distances and include Mound City, Seip Earthworks, Hopewell Mound Group, High Bank Works, Hopeton Earthworks, Great Circle Earthworks, Octagon Earthworks, and Fort Ancient (Figure 1). It is approximately 110 miles between the eastern- and western-most sites (Octagon and Fort Ancient, respectively), and approximately 90 miles between the northern and southern most sites (Octagon Earthworks and Seip Mound respectively). The commonality between the sites, ostensibly the reason for the group nomina-

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tion, is that all are geometric mounds (except Fort Ancient). They were all constructed during a cultural era that archaeologists refer to as “Hopewell.” Fort Ancient existed at the end of this era at what was a moment of transition into the contemporary one for Native peoples. Significant amounts of sophisticated artifacts were found at these locations, and there appears to be a ceremonial function associated with the sites. The Hopewell Ceremonial Earthworks do not enjoy name recognition on the local, state, national or international stage; they are relatively unknown. It is remarkable that so many of these extraordinary efforts remain despite the disruptions characteristic of settler colonialism.

Historian Patrick Wolfe argues that territoriality was the primary motive of settler colonialism, a process that destroys in order to replace (2006: 388). This “logic of elimination” operates on two registers: the dispossession of Natives lands and a vast array of assimilationist strategies meant to transform the collective identity of Native to one of individuality. Over time, settler colonialism reaches critical mass, as the settler population outnumbers the original inhabitants who are displaced from their homelands. Legislation and policies lead to forced assimilation on multiple fronts, such as economics and education. Thus, settler colonialism becomes a structure, not an event (2006: 388).

The names of the mound builder sites are one example of the “logic of elimination.” Newark, Hopewell, and Serpent are all names given by the dominant Anglo-American culture and they have no relationship in name to the Indigenous architects and builders. We do not know the name of the people(s) who designed, built, and used this monumental architecture due to the physical elimination of Indigenous people from this land, a process that took several centuries. “The Great Dying” begins in 1492 and lasts until 1650. In spite of never encountering a settler, diseases that decimated the populations were spreading. Huge numbers of surviving Indigenous people sent into exile by settlement in the east moved west into the present-day Ohio area. Continuity of cultural knowledge was ruptured. Yet, the earthworks endure and resist, despite a long and complicated history of dominance.

While the focus of this paper is on what scholars David Chidester and Edward Linenthal identify as the processes that produce

American sacred space: the contemporary ritualization, interpretation and contestation surrounding the symbolic meaning, I begin with a brief overview of contact with settler colonizers that served to eliminate the Native. This historical contextualization serves to demonstrate the impacts of settler colonialism, which severed connections between Indigenous people and this land while simultaneously reinterpreting the sites as distinctly American. This lays a foundation for the web of narratives refashioned and recirculated in today's contestation over World Heritage status and symbolic meaning. Central to these narratives is the ascription of the sites as sacred.

#### AN OVERVIEW OF HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When settlement in this area of Ohio began in earnest, mound building sites were recognized as the result of creative human genius and monumental efforts (note this is a criterion of World Heritage status). Settler colonists could not mentally link these astounding achievements to the local Indigenous inhabitants, who they considered savage, unintelligent, barbaric, lazy creatures (Zeisberger 1910). The local Native populations were in a state of chaos as they sought to deal with continued colonial intrusion into their territory and the influx of Native refugees from eastern Native communities driven west by expansionism in its various formations in the east. For example, the Shawnee who returned to the Ohio area after more than sixty years of exile founded Lower Shawnee Town circa 1730 where the Scioto and Ohio rivers connected. However, the Shawnee were not the sole residents of this town, which also included Delaware, Seneca, and Cayuga refugees, a situation described by historian Stephen Warren as a "shatter zone" (2009). Continued encroachment and resultant treaties drove the Natives further north to Chillicothe and by the time the Treaty of Greenville was signed in 1795 the new boundary of the emergent United States relocated Native peoples to the northern third portion of Ohio. Representatives from twelve tribes signed the treaty, the majority of which were refugees to the area. Only the Shawnee and Miami considered these lands to be their traditional homelands.

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Three decades later, Native peoples were further dispossessed from their homelands as a result of the Indian Removal Act, signed into law in 1830 by President Andrew Jackson. The logic of elimination, a principal force in the settler colonial project, did more than remove Native peoples from their homelands and settle them in faraway Indian territory (present day Kansas and Oklahoma), it ruptured the cultural knowledge and continuity of tribal communities. It is thus not a surprise that more than 160 years later when Chief Glenna Wallace of the Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma was in the area at an unrelated event at The Ohio State University (OSU) that she expressed mixed emotions of wonder and anger when she was taken on a tour of the mounds (2016: xi). It was likely that her distant ancestors had built the mounds and she, a descendant, had not even known they existed.

Almost simultaneous with the removal of the last remaining Indigenous people from the area, settler colonists settled in and they recognized the larger and monumental mounds as important and unique. While numerous mounds were razed for colonial interests of settlement and farm production, others were kept relatively intact. The city of Newark, incorporated in 1802 (Ohio became a state in 1803), is a good example of this process. As noted earlier, the entire complex at Newark encompassed four square miles. Low-lying mounds outlined the site, which included the Octagon, the Great Circle, and an ellipse that contained some burial mounds. Over the years the mounds that comprised the outline of the complex gave way to colonial expansion and the ellipse was similarly razed. As a result, the two monumental mounds that remain appear as two distinct sites and their place in a larger complex is erased.

As the last Natives were removed, settlers recognized the significance of the monumental sites and took steps to “preserve” and document them. Throughout the 19th century “scientific” studies, property ownership, and capitalism drove local engagement with the sites. For example, in 1845, Edwin Hamilton Davis teamed up with Ephraim G. Squier to undertake the ambitious task of surveying the hundreds of ancient earthen works in Ohio. The task took two years and in 1848 the documentation of their findings became the first publication of the Smithsonian Institution.

*Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley* offered a scientific documentation of the sites, some of which were later destroyed. They were preceded in this effort by Caleb Atwater, who in 1820 published his illustrations and descriptions of earthworks in *Description of the Antiquities Discovered in the State of Ohio and Other Western States*. The Squier and Davis work was more extensive. In 1853, Licking County purchased the Great Circle portion of the Newark Earthworks for eight thousand dollars. The site was variously used as the site of the Ohio State Fair in 1854, the county fair, training grounds for the 76th Regiment (1861), a site for public performances by traveling troupes such as Buffalo Bill's Wild West show (1884), a public park (1890), and an amusement park (1898). In 1927, the property was deeded to the Ohio Historical Society.

The history of property ownership of the Octagon portion of the Newark Earthworks is more obfuscated. In 1892, a local tax levy to purchase the Octagon was passed. The intention was to increase tourism dollars in the area and to provide a place for the National Guard to train. Every summer from 1893 to 1907, approximately seven thousand guards were trained at the site. Site management fell to a group of local businessmen called the Newark Board of Trade and the deed of the site eventually fell into their hands. At the dawn of the twentieth century, golf became the leisure sport of the well-to-do businessman and in 1910 the very same members of the Newark Board of Trade formed the board of the emergent Licking County Club. The Newark Board of Trade leased the Octagon grounds to the country club in order to undertake the construction of a golf course and club house on the site. It was renamed the Moundbuilders Country Club, and until very recently members of the country club asserted ownership through their promotional materials that referenced our mounds.<sup>6</sup> While the Newark Board of Trade deeded the property to the Ohio Historical Society (OHS) in 1933, included in that package was a commitment to continue the lease to the country club for site usage. This was renewed regularly at the end of each lease.

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6. Until the recent legal battles between OHC and Moundbuilders Country Club, the country club's website used this language. During my last visit to the site the language of ownership implied by "our" has been removed.

However, the last lease, signed in 1997, was for an exceptionally long period of time and is not due to expire until 2078. It is difficult to fathom why OHS made the decision to renew again, at the moment when public awareness of the site was increasing. As movement toward a World Heritage nomination began to build momentum, the occupancy of the Octagon mounds by the country club became an issue threatening to block the World Heritage nomination. Reorganized, with new leadership and new branding under the new name, Ohio History Connection (OHC), and the organization began negotiations with the country club to relinquish their lease. According to an article published by Michaela Sumner in May 2020 in the *Newark Advocate*, the local paper in the area, OHC filed a lawsuit against the country club seeking to buy out the remainder of the country club's lease, exercising eminent domain. The legal battle has been ongoing since 2018 and court rulings have sided with OHC with the caveat that fair reimbursement occurs. At the time of the news article, the most recent offer by OHC was slightly over 1.6 million dollars, but the country club perceives the value as much higher. While it seems that Moundbuilders Country Club has exhausted all of the legal avenues to resist, there is still a golf course on the site and at the time of this writing golfers are still teeing off and memberships to the club are being sold.

Property ownership is a means to the accrual of capital and the investments made for the purchase of the Great Circle and the Octagon were seen as investments toward hailing tourism and tourist dollars, an argument that continues to be forefront in the contemporary moment as the sites are poised for World Heritage status. City leaders and community businesses focus on the nomination for its potential to lure infrastructure investment and tourism dollars from both national and international sources. Yet land has not been the only means for building wealth. The earliest surveyors of the sites uncovered a treasure trove of ancient artifacts, which were collected, cataloged, and sold. The trade and profit from the sale of artifacts found at the sites was not insignificant. Edwin Davis (of the Squier and Davis team) amassed a huge store of artifacts during the survey and excavation of the sites, a collection eventually sold to "William Blackmore for ten thousand dollars. Blackmore then established the Blackmore

Museum in England which displayed the collection. The Blackmore Museum eventually became part of the British Museum. The Squier & Davis Collection can still be seen today at the British Museum” (National Park Service). Even today the sale of artifacts on the black market (as it is illegal) remains brisk and lucrative.

Squire and Davis’ relationship with Frederic Ward Putnam, of Harvard University’s Peabody Museum cemented and began the academic professionalization of the emergent field of American archaeology (National Park Service). Their work also impacted Serpent Mound. Putnam, intrigued by Serpent Mound in particular, led the effort to raise funds to purchase the site. The Peabody Museum acquired the site in 1887 and for the next two years Putnam began an archaeological excavation of the site including “portions of the effigy, the adjacent burial mounds, and parts of the surrounding landscape.” Upon the conclusion of his study, he “carefully restored the mounds.” Serpent Mound was opened to the public as a park and in 1900 ownership transferred to the Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society (World Heritage).

#### CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSES: THE EARTHWORKS NOMINATIONS

By the late twentieth century, settler colonialism and the project of elimination (removal of the Native) had proved successful in the Ohio region. Native peoples who considered the area their traditional homelands and/or had historical ties to the area had long since been removed to so-called Indian territory. There are no reservations for any federally recognized tribe in the state of Ohio. As such, living Native peoples were (and are) invisible to the public. This made it easier to continue to relegate Native Americans as a people of the past, not the present. The dispossession of Native lands also successfully served to rupture Native cultural memories of and connections to the mounds. The OHC serves as stewards over the sites discussed here.<sup>7</sup>

It was not until the 1980s that dominant perceptions of the mounds began to change due in large part to the research conducted by the aforementioned Hively and Horn. Initially published in 1982,

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7. Note that other sites included in the Hopewell Ceremonial Mounds have other stewards.

their work argued that the Mound Builders' monumental architectural achievements at the Octagon were astronomical observatories that aligned with significant cyclical lunar movements. Originally their work was dismissed by archaeologists. As Brad Lepper, now curator and manager of the OHCs archeology and natural sciences, notes in his blog for OHC, the reception to their theories was chilly to say the least. They told Lepper that they shared their early findings with a senior Ohio archaeologist who was certain "that the Hopewell could not have aligned their earthworks to the complicated lunar cycle, because those people were savages" (Lepper 2013). Hively and Horn have continued their work and persuasively claim not only alignment at specific sites, but repeated complimentary alignments at other sites, some at a great distance. This work meshes well with Lepper's work on a road that he posits led between sites such as the Newark Earthworks and Mound City some seventy miles away. He refers to it as a pilgrimage road. These alignments, the pilgrimage road, evidence of complex funerary functions, and the sheer number of artifacts found at the mound building sites poised for UNESCO World Heritage status comprise the primary pieces of evidence to support the argument that sites such as the Newark Earthworks and Serpent Mound held a ceremonial purpose and were sacred to the original Indigenous builders.

In the early years of the new millennium, a group from OSU started an initiative to generate public awareness of the Newark Earthworks and began outreach to federally recognized tribal governments. The team,<sup>8</sup> housed at the Newark campus of OSU, wrote and received a substantial grant, and in 2006 became the Newark Earthworks Center. They engaged in a wide range of public education and programming to draw attention to the sites. This team remains a key stakeholder in the World Heritage nomination.

As a critical mass of interest built, the process for submitting a nomination to UNESCO began in earnest and it became clear that the concerned academics were not the only ones to posit the mounds as "sacred" sites. I return to the opening vignette about the impact of Glenn Beck's coverage about the Newark Earthworks. On 20 August 2010, two days after Beck's broadcast,

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8. I was a member of this team as a graduate research associate from 2004-2010.

Susan Fryer, the then-Executive Director of the Great Licking County Convention and Visitors Bureau, told *Newark Advocate* reporter Amy Hollon, “Our phones are ringing off the hook.” Fryer further commented that “the talk is good for Newark and [...] she hopes Beck continues to mention the earthworks” (Hollon 2010). While those interested in tourism to Licking County were thrilled with the impact of the broadcast, others, such as Brad Lepper, then Curator of Archaeology at OHS, were less enthusiastic. In the days immediately following the broadcast, chatter on archeological blogs focused on the “pseudoarcheology of Glenn Beck” (Feagans 2010). In December 2010, Lepper and five other academics issued a statement about the documentary that was published in the *Ohio Archaeology Blog*. Each scholar was featured prominently in the film and their inclusion was ironic, to say the least, since none supported the overarching theory advanced in *The Lost Civilizations of North America* and subsequently, on Beck’s program. In a collaborative statement they wrote, “We fear that the context of our general remarks as they currently appear in the film might lead viewers to conclude that our words on these subjects provide support for the film’s claims. That would be a mistake” (Lepper 2010). The group asserted that when they were interviewed, they had no knowledge of the claims promoted by the documentary, and they were asked general questions that were taken out of context during film editing. The scholars strongly implied that the (mis)use of their interviews was a conscious move on the part of the documentary’s producers to mislead the public (Lepper 2010).

Lepper and other experts featured in the documentary continued to speak out about the narrative offered in *The Lost Civilizations of North America*. Beginning in the fall of 2011 *The Committee for Skeptical Inquiry* published three sequential articles in the journal in which the scholars promised to “refute many of the more serious errors of fact and interpretation” (Feder et al. 2011; Lepper et al. 2011; Bolnick et al. 2012). Alice Beck Kehoe, another scholar prominently featured in the documentary, responded in a feature column for *Reports of the National Center for Science Education*. She draws attention to the Mormon affiliations of the film’s producers. Kehoe argues that the purpose of the documentary is to affirm “a Mormon claim that the Lost Tribes of Israel inhabited

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North America” thus verifying the historical narrative of the *Book of Mormon*, which asserts the origin of Native Americans as Hebraic. Kehoe states that the film has a Mormon evangelical purpose that “is apparent at the *Book of Mormon Evidence* website” (2011: 2.1).

Indeed, Kehoe is correct as she points to the Mormon commitments of the documentary’s producers: Rick Stout (Director/ Co-Producer), Steven E. Smoot (Co-Producer/Executive Producer, and Barry McLerran (Co-Producers). And it takes little research to find the producers’ connections to the *Book of Mormon Evidence* website, which is associated with the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research (FAIR) and self-identifies as Mormon apologetics. On FAIR’s website they define apologetic as literally meaning “in defense of faith” and note they are interested in verifying the historicity and doctrine of the *Book of Mormon*, as well as countering the criticisms of “anti-Mormon authors.” They note that their “enemies have invoked ‘science’ or ‘reason’ to attack faith [and] it may now be necessary that someone respond in the same vein.” In other words, those engaged in Mormon apologetics are interested in using arguments similar to those made against them in order to bring light to what is really at stake, the truth of history as documented in the *Book of Mormon*. The Mormon claim was not new.

In 1860 David Wyrick allegedly discovered a set of artifacts within a group of ancient Indian burial mounds near Newark, Ohio. They have subsequently been referred to as the Newark Holy Stones. The set consists of a number of stones inscribed with ancient Hebraic symbols and are housed at a local museum. The interpretation of the stones has been vehemently challenged by leading archaeologists and numerous articles have been written on the issue. Archaeologists posit they were *forged* to support the theory of monogenism: the theory that all humans come from a single pair of individuals. In 1860 slavery was a subject of heated debate. Anthropology and other scientific disciplines were often used in defense of or in opposition to discussions promoting monogenism and would also be used to oppose slavery and segregation (Bush et al. 2022: 84–85).

The Newark Holy Stones continue to draw many visitors to the Johnson-Humrickhouse Museum where they are on dis-

play. One of the largest interest groups is composed of members of the Church of the Latter-Day Saints. The *Book of Mormon* states that the ten “lost tribes of Israel” relocated to North America to live with the Native Americans. The existence of the Newark Holy Stones seems to give credence to their views. Another significant interest group follows a para-archaeological movement whose premise is that pre-Columbian trans-oceanic travel occurred hundreds of years earlier than what historians and archaeologists accept as true. The leaders in this movement point to similarities between widely different cultures and to artifacts that are “out-of-place,” supposedly proving that people traveled hundreds of years prior to the tenth century when Icelandic Vikings journeyed to Greenland. This theory has been gaining popularity since 2013 when the Newark Holy Stones were featured on the History 2 Channel’s *America Unearthed* (Bush et. al. 2022: 89).

While tour buses full of Mormon apologetics continue to arrive in Newark and at other sites, the mounds have also long been claimed by a wide range of groups that connect the sites to a variety of reasons, such as: they were built on ley (energy) lines or that they were sites of extraterrestrial visitation, among others. This view is prominent among folks associated with Friends of Serpent Mounds (FOSM). Delsey Wilson, Executive Director of the organization, moved to a house her parents built when she was in the sixth grade that was less than a half mile away from the mound. She has lived next to Serpent Mound ever since, and she has been closely involved with events and has followed developments in the scientific study of the site. In an interview with WYSO, a radio station out of Yellow Springs, Ohio, Wilson notes that FOSM helped with the recent study led by archaeologist Bill Romain “Bill Romain’s findings perfectly, I believe, explain Brad’s findings” she says, referring to Brad Lepper (WYSO 2014). Romain and his co-authors believe the site was occupied and reconstructed by the Fort Ancient people, but that its origins are much older.

Wilson says she has no reason not to believe that evidence. She is also not sure how the matter of management and access will ever be fully resolved. She notes that OHC owns the site, and many other people have their hands in it. She continues “Who is the committee or the person or the group who makes decisions?

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Who decides who gets to do research there, and who decides what gets put on the new signs? That really has yet to be established” (WYSO 2014). Wilson, who does not claim Native ancestry, concluded the interview by noting that to her, that is part of Serpent Mound’s beauty: it means different things to different people. A variety of Native American tribes and people of Native American descent visit the mound yearly, and many other non-native people have found meaning in the site as well. “Let me quote my father,” says Wilson. “Any place can be a spiritual place, it’s what we make it. If we go to a place and it moves us in a way, then we call that place a spiritual place. Any place can have that power over a person[...].it just seems that Serpent Mound has affected a lot of people to the point where they find it very moving, very spiritual, and so they come back to it” (WYSO 2014). This notion of a generalized spirituality where difference is glossed over and is in direct tension with the National Historic Preservation Act,<sup>9</sup> which states that in undertakings by federal agencies, “Agency officials shall acknowledge that Indian Tribes[...] possess special expertise in assessing the eligibility of historic properties that may possess religious and cultural significance to them” (36 CFR 800.4 (c)(1)).

FOSM is made up of individuals and organizations that care about and see the value in preserving the Great Serpent Mound Park. It was formed in 2004 by a committee of the Adams County Travel and Visitors Bureau (ACTVB). The ACTVB Committee met with then-Park Manager, Keith Bengtson and other representatives from OHS to consider ways they could help improve upkeep and accessibility to the park. During one meeting it was decided that to show OHS their determination and that people in Adams and the surrounding counties cared about the Serpent Mound Park, by holding a membership drive for OHS. In less than two months the membership drive in Adams County grew from six to over 100 members. The committee succeeded and had OHS’s attention; FOSM was born.

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9. Title 36 of the National Historic Preservation Act serves to set guidelines for identification of historic sites that may have connections to contemporary Native peoples in the U.S. (36 CFR 800.4 (c)(1)) An electronic version of the text can be found at <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-36/chapter-VIII/part-800/subpart-B/section-800.4>.

In 2009, OHS contracted with the Arc of Appalachia to manage Serpent Mound and Fort Hill. FOSM is not a volunteer group for either OHC or the Arc, but a non-profit stand-alone organization and support group to Serpent Mound Park and other local Indigenous ancient sites. On their website the group states, “We continue to try and work with these two groups, as well as other groups in our area like the Archeological Conservancy, Heartland Conservancy, the Alternate Universe, and others” (Friends of Serpent Mound).

The Friends of Serpent Mound and its Board originally formed to increase public understanding and knowledge of and to improve the quality of operations at the Serpent Mound State Memorial. Upon not being established as a subordinate organization under the Ohio Historical Society (OHS) the group expanded as an independent organization with the purpose to: “Protect, preserve, and promote Serpent Mound and other Native American sites, while facilitating education and experiences for visitors” (Friends of Serpent Mound). For now, FOSM’s focus and the use of “the site” refers to the Great Serpent Mound Park. However, the new purpose allows FOSM to help in supporting other Ancient Native American sites, either in the local vicinity or further away (Friends of Serpent Mound). During the years that the volunteer Arc of Appalachia group managed the site, FOSM was given full access to develop and manage public programming on the winter and summer solstices. The winter solstice in particular became a popular regional event that drew large numbers of the general public. But as relationships with established federally recognized tribal governments such as the Shawnee became stronger (as a result of the outreach of OHC and NEC), representatives of the tribes took issue with the events due to the lack of discernment on the part of the organizers regarding speakers (so-called experts on Bigfoot) and activities (such as dowsing) that did not reflect Native culture or values (Friends of Serpent Mound).

In 2021, OHC reclaimed oversight and management of the site. One of their first orders of business was to prohibit FOSM from using the site for their public programming. Conveniently for FOSM there was no break to the programming, which is now held right

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next door on Wilson's farm, the Soaring Eagle Retreat.<sup>10</sup> Since reclaiming site management OHC has organized its own programming at Serpent Mound featuring representatives from federally recognized tribes who have a vested interest in the site. Thus, there are competing events next door to each other during the solstices. In the summer of 2022, the events at Serpent Mound included tours of the site and daily lectures from Chief Glenna Wallace of the Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma, Chief Ben Barnes of the Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma, and staff from OHC. At Soaring Eagle Retreat, programming will include a wide variety of topics such as "Bigfoot Investigations in Ohio and Kentucky," "The Lost or Forgotten History of the Eastern North American Continent," numerous performances, such as flute music and crystal singing bowls from musicians that claim Native roots, and workshops on activities such as dowsing.

Another organization fascinated with the mounds calls themselves Unite the Collective. According to their Facebook page, created in 2010, they are an "alternative and holistic health service [...] Light Workers here to assist in the Ascension of Planet Earth." Unite the Collective have active social media accounts in addition to their Facebook page, they are active on Twitter, have a podcast on Spotify, and a YouTube Channel that regularly registers over three thousand views per post. One regular segment on the Facebook site is "Morning Coffee" with Rion deRouen. In a video posted in May 2022, deRouen promised to "teach you to be a supernatural being" with segments about "how to astral project, use your energy hand and activate your dormant DNA" (Big Changes Inbound). One section of videos uploaded on YouTube are from their "missions" the purpose of which is to activate energy portals to assist the ascension of the planet. In 2012 they did just that at the Serpent Mound. It wasn't until the video appeared on YouTube that people became aware of the activity whereby the "light workers" buried organites in the mound. According to Mary Annette Pember, an Ojibwe journalist and frequent contributor to the newspaper

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10. As I finish this article the 2022 summer solstice is upon us and there is significant publicity about this year's competing events at the Serpent Mound for the summer solstice. To get a sense of the programming by FOSM see, <https://www.serpentmound.org/fullschedule/>

*Indian Country Today*, orgonites are objects made of resin, metal and crystals. Purportedly “orgonites draw in negative energy and emit positive energy” (2018). The article traces the invention of orgonites to an Austrian inventor, Wilhelm Reich in the 1930s. They were later declared fraudulent by the FDA in 1954 and Reich was charged, found guilty, and jailed. However, orgonites could be found for purchase in the Serpent Mound gift-shop prior to the return to OHC management in 2021 (Pember 2018).

Similar activities, such as the 1987 Harmonic Convergence, or the 2011 Crystal Skull Festival featuring a Mayan shaman, have occurred. It is not surprising that all of this activity has drawn the attention of evangelical, conservative activists such as the Pass the Salt Ministries. During the winter solstice in 2020, minister Dave Daubenmire led members of the congregation to Serpent Mound to cast the demons out of the site. Believing that the earthworks were constructed by a race of giant fallen angels and human women, they sought to pray the darkness out of the site on the darkest day of the year. Members of the American Indian Movement (AIM) caught wind of the activity and were in the parking lot when the Pass the Salt Ministry arrived. However, the congregation members proceeded to the mounds and prayed. The confrontation was tense and the local sheriff’s department was called in, but no one was arrested. Daubenmire claimed that the group from AIM were the aggressors.

This is not in any way an exhaustive list of examples of the contestation over the legitimate ownership of the sacred symbology of the mounds, a critical process identified by Chidester and Linenthal in the production of American sacred space (1995: 2). What is noticeably absent are Native voices. While there have been many Indigenous visitors to the sites over the last century such as the performers in the Buffalo Wild West Show, the founding members of the Society of American Indians who visited during their first meeting at OSU in 1911, Native peoples relocated to Ohio in the post-WWII era of termination and relocation, to present day Native scholars, it was not until Chief Wallace’s visit to the Newark Earthworks in 2007 that a sustained Native voice began to coalesce. Chief Wallace was already familiar with Serpent Mound, but the Newark Earthworks was a shock to her.

She is decidedly careful with the truth claims she makes about the mounds. A retired college professor and administrator prior to her election as Chief of the Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma, she is cautious about stating that her Shawnee ancestors built the mounds. But, she does assert a connection due to the fact that her people lived in the region prior to removal and that the builders were “ancestors of Native Americans” (Wallace 2016: xi). She is one of the strongest Native voices leading the charge for World Heritage status. At the least it would solidify the preservation of this monumental architecture and the narrative of active Native presence. In her early eighties, she drives from Oklahoma to Ohio numerous times a year to speak to various groups about the mounds, and she travels to Washington, DC, and beyond to advocate in the political realm for UNESCO approval. She is an ambassador fulfilling her “commitment—to learn all I could about the Newark Earthworks, to teach others about them, and to preserve them” (2016: xi).

#### AMERICAN SACRED SPACE?

Chidester and Linenthal note that sacred space is a ritual space; “carved out of ordinary environment” (1995: 9). In the case of the Mound Builders, this activity was literal and on an extraordinary scale. The rupture of connection to the history and memory of the origins of creative genius of the architects of the site, a result of settler colonialism, has created fertile ground for continued contestation over the legitimate ownership of the symbols of the sacred and their meaning; a uniquely American experience (Chidester and Linenthal 1995: 2). And while this effort will serve to preserve the sites, it is unlikely to quell the contestation over the meaning of and answer future questions about access to the mounds. Currently OHC, owner of the sites discussed here, works to privilege Native voices in their explanatory historical narrative and consider their input about site management.

The approach to include Native voices is clear in the new museum exhibit discussed earlier. The exhibit is carefully curated to draw attention to the importance of the grouping of the “Hopewell Ceremonial Mounds” nominated for World Heritage as sacred sites, without ever using the term sacred or directly linking them

to a particular contemporary Native tribe. Displays frequently reference general phrases such as “special artifacts,” “release an object’s spiritual power,” “rituals,” and “ceremonies.” And many of the displays offer explanatory remarks from multiple perspectives: the scholarly archaeologists, Native peoples, and staff workers. There are three displays that feature a specifically Native voice including that of Chief Wallace, Shawnee tribal member Eric Wensman, and even renowned Native scholar Vine Deloria, Jr. The Deloria entry serves to legitimize the Native connection, at least in regard to purpose and sacred space:

Much Indian knowledge involved the technique of reproducing the cosmos in miniature [...] this principle enabled the people to correlate their activities with the larger movements of the universe. Whenever possible the larger cosmos was represented and reproduced to provide a context in which ceremonies could occur. Thus, people did not feel alone; they participated in cosmic rhythms. (*Indigenous Wonders*)

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OHC has dramatically improved its outreach to Native tribal nations and inclusion of Native voices, but still falls short. For the Deloria quote, while they do note his tribal affiliation, they don’t cite the source of the quote. Deloria is the most prolific and influential Native scholar of our century, whose seminal works have shifted the landscape of Native intellectual thought. While it is not likely there is a contemporary Native person who does not recognize the name, the same cannot be said about the general public. OHC also has a history of interaction that suggests a lack of discernment about the politics of Native identity and who has a seat at the table. Until the recent past, any person or group that claimed Native heritage, no matter how distant, was treated as having a stake in the contestation over ownership of the symbols of the sacred. That has changed in recent years due both to a change in leadership in the organization and the efforts of Native peoples such as Chief Wallace, Marti Chaatsmith (Comanche/Choctaw), associate director of the NEC, and John Low (Potawatomie) director of NEC, and more recently Chief Barnes (Shawnee Tribe). And while making progress, displays in the exhibit demonstrate there is still room for discernment as OHC blurs the distinction between tribes with historical connections to Ohio and those who identify the area as their traditional homelands. One sign notes:

We recognize that the Ohio History Connection is situated in the original and sacred homeland of the living tribal nations of the Myaamia, the Shawnee, the Delaware, the Wyandotte, the Peoria, the Osage, the Seneca and Cayuga of the Haudenosaunee, the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomie of the Anishinaabeg, and others.

While the ten tribe nations included in this statement do have historical connections to the Ohio area as a result of settler colonialism, only two lay claims to the area as ancestral homelands.

This is not the only issue facing OHC as the sites are poised for World Heritage status. I suggest that while this inclusion will serve to preserve the mounds, contestation over ownership of the message and access is just beginning. This issue recently came to head over a request to film at Serpent Mound for a new documentary. Journalist Graham Hancock's documentary *Ancient Apocalypse*, was recently released on Netflix in November of 2022, and to popular appeal. For a number of weeks it held the most viewed documentary on the streaming giant. The eight part series looks at global ancient sites and argues that an advanced ancient civilization from the ice age is responsible for the many wonders of the world and the complex knowledge of geometry, astronomy, architecture, among others. Underpinning the argument is a sentiment antagonistic to archaeology, one that claims that his work is being suppressed. Important to this paper is his inclusion of the Serpent Mound, one of the sites he uses as a case study in his argument. Hancock applied for permission to film at Serpent Mound, but OHC refused and he was denied access to the site. Hancock calls the move censorship, OHC claims they would not support a theory that has no basis in fact.

As steward of the sites for the citizens of the state of Ohio, OHC's mission is to carry "out history services for Ohio and its citizens focused on preserving and sharing the state's history" and they note that "[t]he Ohio History Connection is committed to providing our visitors, volunteers and staff an environment free from intimidation, harassment, and discrimination with respect to admission and access to our sites, programs and activities (OHC "About Us").

Finally, returning once again to Chidester and Linenthal, they posit that ownership of the sacred is "intimately entangled in such

‘profane’ enterprises as tourism, economic exchange and development, and intense conflict of contending nationalisms” (1995: 1). Already one of the most common concerns of tribal nations about access restriction has to do with the perceived desecration and defilement of the sacred spaces from the hitting of golf balls, to dancing on the mounds, the insertion of orgonites into the mounds, drug use at the sites, and the list goes on. While defilement can be rectified and cleansed through ritual activities, according to Chidester and Linenthal, the desecration caused by dispossession is another matter.

When World Heritage status is conferred, and I do believe it will be, how will OHC manage all of the concerns of all of the vested constituents? The vast number of constituents who claim a seat at the table regarding “ownership” and a voice regarding the sites is astounding. These include governmental agencies from the local to global, historical societies, Native peoples, academics, golfers, and small pockets of the public. Into this mix we can include those with religious/spiritual claims such as the Mormons, new-agers, fundamentalist Christians, and contemporary Native tribes. Many of these stakeholders have come together to work toward the coveted World Heritage Status. But, if and when it happens, whose story will dominate, who will make decisions, and whose voice(s) will be heard?

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*Abstract:* Moundbuilding was a preoccupation for the original, Indigenous occupants of the eastern portion of North America for at least six centuries. Approximately two millennia ago, the inhabitants of a broad swath of land primarily east of the Mississippi River and extending from the gulf to the Great Lakes, engaged in the production of conical, geometric, and effigy shaped earthen mound constructs. The efforts, from small to monumental, reflect a precision, often reflecting astronomical phenomenon. The proliferation of mounds and astronomical focus suggest the moundbuilder cultures privileged these activities, they had purpose. Today many remnants of these extraordinary efforts remain despite the systems of erasure that are characteristic of settler colonialism. Two such sites are the focus of this paper on “sacred space”: the Newark Earthworks and Serpent Mound. Both sites are short-listed for UNESCO World Heritage status. The Newark Earthworks as part of a larger package referred to as “The Hopewell Ceremonial Earthworks” and Serpent Mound is a stand-alone nomination. The names of the sites are exemplary of the “logic of elimination,” central to settler colonialism in the Americas (Wolfe). Newark, Hopewell, and Serpent all names given by dominant culture with no relation to the Indigenous architects

and builders. They endure and resist, despite a long and complicated history of dominance. While the focus of this paper is on contemporary contestation surrounding the sites, this paper begins with a close description of the sites and offers a brief overview of context. This historical contextualization serves to demonstrate the ramifications of settler colonialism, which ruptured connections between Indigenous people and this land while simultaneously reinterpreting the sites as distinctly American. This lays a foundation for the web of narratives refashioned and recirculated in today's contest over World Heritage status. Central to these narratives is ascribing the label of "sacred" to the sites. The vast number of constituents who claim a seat at the table regarding "ownership" and a voice regarding the sites is astounding. These include governmental agencies from the local to global, historical societies, Native peoples, academics, golfers, and small pockets of the public. Into this mix we can include those with religious/spiritual claims such as the Mormons, new-agers, fundamentalist Christians, and contemporary Native tribes. Many of these stakeholders have come together to work toward the coveted World Heritage Status. But, if and when it happens, whose story will dominate, who will make decisions, which voice will be heard?

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Among Garner's publications: *To Come to a Better Understanding: Medicine Men and Clergy Meetings on the Rosebud Reservation, 1973-1978* (University of Nebraska Press, June 2016); "Community-Driven Research: From Indian Country to Classroom and Back in Replanting Cultures," Chief Ben Barnes and Stephen Warren, editors, (SUNY Press, 2022); "To Come to a Better Understanding: Complicating the Two Worlds Trope" in *Beyond Two Worlds*, Joseph Genetin-Pilawa and James Buss, editors, (SUNY Press, 2014); "Aztec Dance, Transnational Movements: Conquest of a Different Sort," *The Journal of American Folklore*, (Fall 2009); three encyclopedia entries "Black Hills Dispute and Black Hills War," "Shawnee," and "Tecumseh's War," for *Multicultural America: A Multimedia Encyclopedia*, Carlos E. Cortés, editor (SAGE Reference, 2013); and multiple invited book reviews..

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