

The Lenni-Lenape Indians

"There is a story told by the Lenni-Lenape Indians, who lived in the eastern United States, that their ancestors in the very earliest times were mere animals living underground. One of them accidentally found a hole by which he came to the surface of the ground, and soon the whole tribe followed. These Indians believed that they gradually became human beings; so in remembrance of their ancestors, they chose such names as "Black Bear," "Black Hawk," "Red Horse," and "Sitting Bull." Some of the tribes believing in this tradition would not eat any underground animals like the rabbit, groundhog, and ground squirrel, for fear they would be eating their kinsmen.

Another very interesting tradition told by these Lenni-Lenape, or Delawares are that these ancestors came from west of the Mississippi and that when they tried to cross this stream the right of passage was disputed by a powerful force called the Alligewi, from whose name we get the word Allegheny. Being determined to cross this mighty stream and move eastward, the Lenni-Lenape joined with the Mengwe (Iroquois) in a war upon the Alligewi, overcame them, and almost exterminated them, drove the remnant of their tribe entirely from the country.

General G.R. Clark, Colonel McKee, and Colonel James Moore at different times and places were told by Indians, among them the noted chiefs "Cornstalk" and "Tobacco," that before the red men came to Kentucky—named from Ken-tuck-ee, meaning in Indian language, "the river of Blood"—a white race, superior in many arts and crafts unknown to[13] the red men, the builders of the many forts, and the inhabitants of the vast burying grounds, had been besieged by the early Indians in a great battle near the Falls of Ohio. The remnant was driven into a small island below these rapids, where the entire

race was "cut to pieces."

In confirmation of this, there was found on Sandy Island, a vast burying ground, and "a multitude of human bones was discovered." This traditional testimony has been in many instances confirmed by unmistakable traces of a terrible conflict throughout the Ohio Valley. The story of these bloody battles, handed down for generations, very probably caused the Indians to name this place the "Dark and Bloody Ground." Believing it to be filled with ghosts of its primitive people, it is no small wonder that this race, full of imagination and superstition, should use it so little as a permanent home.

But who was this primitive race? Whence did they come and what did they accomplish? The works they built have lived after them, and from these silent memorials, the people have been called Mound Builders. Beyond the bounds of memory, into the land of mystery, we go when we strive to learn of them. They have left their imprint in the valleys of the Licking, Kentucky, Ohio, and the Cumberland. Their many mounds vary in size, shape, structure, location, contents, and use. Some cover only a small area, while others have a diameter of over[14] one hundred feet and one covers fifteen acres. They display considerable knowledge of geometry, engineering, and military skill.

Relics of the Mound Builders.

Because some have supposed these ancient people to have been sun worshipers, the "high places" for ceremonial worship are called temple mounds. The fact that these are more numerous in Kentucky than elsewhere, may have given rise to the expressions "sacred soil" or "God's country." Within or near these enclosures are mounds containing altars of stone or burned clay, known as altar mounds; the burial places, called mounds of sepulture, are

isolated and contain human remains which shed more light on the character and achievements of this prehistoric race than any others. The military mounds, or works of defense, are usually near a waterway, often on a precipitous height, in a commanding position, and with an extension ditch or moat; the skill, the foresight, and the complete system shown by these would prove that there were fierce foes to be resisted and a vast population to be defended.

It is possible that all agricultural work was done with "digging sticks." Fishing and hunting were accomplished by arrows, knives, and spears, chipped from stone or rubbed out of antlers, by fishhooks of bone, and by nets. There were also "animal calls" made from small mammal bones and the hollow bones of the birds. The knives were probably chipped stone points, clamshells, or bear teeth; there were also[15] awls of bones, strainers of pottery, hammerstones, whetstones, chisels of bone, and needles from bones of small animals. Modeling, impressing, twisting, knitting, painting, and sculpture were carried on; personal ornaments, rattles, whistles, and pipes were made. Moccasins, beads of pottery, bone, shell, teeth, and copper, and pottery of various sizes, shapes, and decorations were and sometimes are still found all along the streams of the state.

We know that they were an agricultural class because in some mounds were found remains of Indian corn and beans, also hickory nuts, butternuts, walnuts, chestnuts, hazelnuts, and pawpaw seeds.

While in some instances the graves were more or less surrounded by limestone slabs, in other places the dead were laid on skins or on the bare ground and covered with skins and soil heaped above. As this soil had to be carried in baskets or skins, these immense mounds stand as mute memorials of

their love for one another."

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Source: Stories of Old Kentucky by Martha Grassham
Purcell