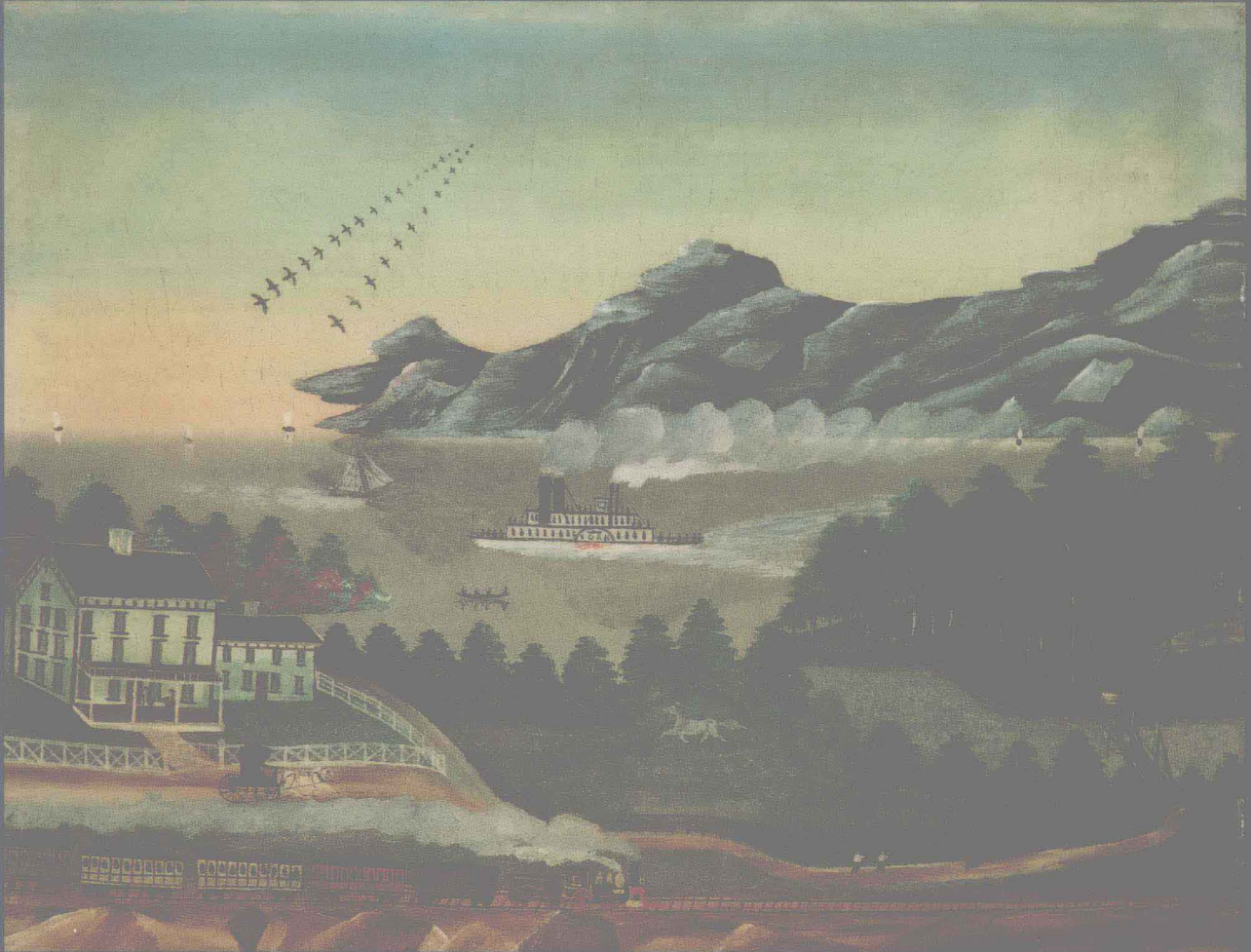


Historical Moments

Changing Interpretations of America's Past



Volume I

The Pre-Colonial Period Through the Civil War

Jim R. McClellan

➤ Historical Moments ➤

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Northern Virginia Community College



The Dushkin Publishing Group, Inc.

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A native of Texas, Jim McClellan has served since 1975 on the faculty of Northern Virginia Community College, one of the nation's two largest community colleges. A professor of history, he teaches a wide variety of courses, most frequently American History and American Indian History. He has also joined with colleagues to lead a number of seminars, including field expeditions to Mayan sites in Mexico.

Professor McClellan's previous publications and writing activities include articles on politics, book reviews, and a variety of scholarly pieces. *Historical Moments* was developed in his classroom in a continuing effort to challenge his students to think critically about historical events.

Professor McClellan's many outside interests include the outdoors, travel, and community service. He is currently vice chairman of the City of Alexandria Human Rights Commission and has been a director of a local school for retarded adults and a child care center. He enjoys playing football and basketball, and fondly remembers dunking a basketball before 15,000 spectators at a professional basketball game—from an unusually tall unicycle.

➤ Historical Moments ➤

Changing Interpretations of America's Past

Volume I

Preface

There are moments in history, often seemingly insignificant at the time, which cause an entire nation to change the course of its development. Sometimes these moments produce mere course alterations. Sometimes they cause a society to move off in a whole new direction. This volume, *Historical Moments: Changing Interpretations of America's Past*, Volume I, is an attempt to examine some of the moments in American history that have produced a change of course. It is an attempt to look at these moments through the eyes of those who lived them and through the thoughts of those who lived after them.

Understanding the past is almost as difficult as predicting the future. History is not a mere listing of all that has happened; it is an attempt to understand what has happened in the past in order to better understand the present. A compilation on paper of all that happens to the American people on even a single day would overfill most of the nation's warehouses. But while such a compilation might record all that has happened, it would not explain why. History is an interpretative process. It is an attempt to cull from all that has happened those things that explain the development of the nation.

Each generation rewrites history. It has no choice but to do so. It finds itself at a place along the continuum of time different from that of its predecessors and must understand how it got there. It searches the records of the past to explain its present. Consequently, though what has passed cannot be changed, interpretations of what has passed are forever changing.

With each turning point in history comes a search for its meaning. Not only does the generation that lives through the incident seek to record and assess the meaning of the event, but so do succeeding generations.

The chapters that follow examine the attempt to find the meaning of significant moments in America's past. Each approaches its examination of a moment in history in a similar manner. Following an introduction to the event is a section entitled *First Impressions*. Here the event is described in the words of those who participated in it or through the commentary of contemporary observers. From the writings and speeches of participants, journalists, political leaders, scholars, and others, as well as from an examination of primary documents, a firsthand view of the event may be secured—and secured within the context of its times.

The next section is called *Second Impressions*. With every step forward through time, a glance back through history reveals the past from a new vantage point. This section presents the ongoing effort to make sense of the past. Some of the scholars whose views are presented in this section look at the past with the biases of their time; others seek to challenge the biases of their time by drawing on the lessons of the past. All seek to make sense in their own time of the events that have led to their present.

The third section of each chapter of this volume is entitled *Questioning the Past*. A chapter might be conceived of as a seminar. Around the conference

table sit scholars of the past and students of the present. After the topic is introduced with the words of those who lived it, scholars of succeeding generations present their interpretations of the historical moment under review. Students of the present then continue the search for the meaning of the moment.

The moments chosen for inclusion in this book were selected because they in some way affected a large segment of the American people. Their impact may have been political, social, cultural, economic, diplomatic, psychological, or even a combination of these. No claim is made that the events studied in the chapters that follow constitute a complete listing of all the moments that have shaped the direction of American history. Indeed, every single moment finds the American people acting and reacting in ways that shape their course through history.

At an early stage in the development of the two volumes that make up *Historical Moments*, I received valuable advice on concept and content from several historians: Arthur H. Auten, University of Hartford; John C. Kendall, California State University, Fresno; Robert James Maddox, Pennsylvania State University; and Sylvia W. McGrath, Steven F. Austin State University. Their suggestions led to an important alteration in this work.

I also want to acknowledge my indebtedness to my wife, Catherine Lee Burwell McClellan, for her advice, support, and patience. I am very appreciative of the support and professionalism of the people I have worked with at The Dushkin Publishing Group. In particular, I want to thank Irving Rockwood, program manager at DPG, for his help in the development of these volumes, Wendy Connal for her perseverance in the massive undertaking of securing the permissions, and Catherine Leonard for her work as my editor.

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Source 1: Cherokee Legend

Long ago a powerful unknown tribe invaded the country from the southeast, killing people and destroying settlements wherever they went. No leader could stand against them, and in a little while they had wasted all the lower settlements and advanced into the mountains. The warriors of the old town of Nikwasi, on the head of the Little Tennessee, gathered their wives and children into the townhouse and kept scouts constantly on the lookout for the presence of danger. One morning just before daybreak the spies saw the enemy approaching and at once gave the alarm. The Nikwasi men seized their arms and rushed out to meet the attack, but after a long, hard fight they found themselves overpowered and began to retreat, when suddenly a stranger stood among them and shouted to the chief to call off his men and he himself would drive back the enemy. From the dress and language of the stranger the Nikwasi people thought him a chief who had come with reinforcements from the Overhill settlements in Tennessee. They fell back along the trail, and as they came near the townhouse they saw a great company of warriors coming out from the side of the mound as through an open doorway. Then they knew that their friends were the Nunne'hi, the Immortals, although no one had ever heard before that they lived under Nikwasi mound.

The Nunne'hi poured out by the hundreds, armed and painted for the fight, and the most curious thing about it all was that they became invisible as soon as they were fairly outside of the settlement, so that although the enemy saw the glancing arrow or the rushing tomahawk, and felt the stroke, he could not see who sent it. Before such invisible foes the invaders soon had to retreat. . . . As they retreated they tried to shield themselves behind rocks and trees, but the Nunne'hi arrows went around the rocks and killed them from the other side, and they could find no hiding place. All along the ridge they fell, until when they reached the head of Tuckasegee not more than a half a dozen were left alive, and in despair they sat down and cried out for mercy. Ever since then the Cherokee have called the place Dayulsun'yi, "Where they cried." Then the Nunne'hi chief told them they had deserved their punishment for attacking a peaceful tribe, and he spared their lives and told them to go home and take the news to their people. This was the Indian custom, always to spare a few to carry back the news of defeat. They went home toward the north and the Nunne'hi went back to the mound.

And they are still there.

Source 2: Author Garcilaso de la Vega, *La Florida*, 1605

The Indians try to place their villages on elevated sites; but inasmuch as in Florida there are not many sites of this kind where they can conveniently build, they erect elevations themselves in the following manner: They select the spot and carry there a quantity of earth, which they form into a kind of platform two or three **pikes** in height, the summit of which is large enough to give room for twelve, fifteen, or twenty houses, to lodge the **cacique** and his attendants. At the foot of this elevation they mark out a square place, according to the size of the village, around which the leading men have their houses. . . . To ascend the elevation they have a straight passageway from bottom to top, 15 or 20 feet wide. Here steps are made by massive beams, and others are planted firmly in the ground to serve as walls. On all other sides of the platform the sides are cut steep.

The Mounds Become a Mystery

The great mound of Cahokia once towered over a city that by the middle of the thirteenth century was home to between 10,000 and 30,000 people—comparable in population to London at that time. Even in ruins it was astonishing to behold. With its 100 massive earthen mounds, sculpted to the shape of truncated pyramids, platforms, and cones, it was a puzzling place whose features raised more questions than they answered. Modern archeology has supplied some of the missing pieces of the puzzle. Excavations indicate that atop the fourth and highest terrace there once stood a public building. It was constructed of wood, rose perhaps 50 feet high, and encompassed 4,800 square feet of floor space. This structure and the grounds of the fourth terrace were enclosed by a wall. A stairway led from the enclosure to the lower terraces and ultimately onto a large public plaza at ground level. Around and on the plaza were 16 additional mounds, and the whole of this complex, encompassing 300 acres of land, was surrounded by a wooden wall 15 feet high.

Beyond this palisaded city core was a community spanning six square miles. Mounds were scattered throughout. Some served as elevated platforms upon which homes and public buildings were constructed. Others were places of burial. Four were circular in shape and appear to have served as mechanisms for astronomical observation and calendric reckoning. Thatched houses, plazas, and marketplaces were also part of the city. Dugout canoes loaded and unloaded cargoes of foodstuffs, copper, shells, ceramics, and other goods at a landing on Cahokia Creek, a stream that once flowed near the great mound. Cahokia Creek connected the city to the Mississippi River and through it to much of North America, making it in all probability the dominant commercial center of the interior of North America. The Mississippi and its great tributaries, like the Nile of ancient Egypt, served as the connecting highway for commerce. All along this network of waterways were cities, towns, and villages built around clusters of mounds. These communities have been labeled the Mississippian Culture by archeologists. This culture was not unique in its construction of mounds. Other peoples began building such structures more than 3,000 years before Columbus. Thousands are still scattered across North America from the eastern slopes of the Rockies to just east of the Appalachians. Many are designed like the mounds at Cahokia. Some, however, are fashioned into the shapes of geometric figures or creatures—birds, panthers, serpents, fanciful beasts of assorted kinds—whose outlines are distinguishable only when seen from above.

The mystery of the mounds is compounded by the fact that those who built them left no written record. All that is known of these people is what may be learned from those remains that have stood the test of time—statuettes and stone etchings, stone and metal trinkets buried with the dead, and, of course, the earthen mounds themselves. It is hard to draw an accurate picture of a people from such scanty information.

As one example, imagine that several thousand years into the future archeologists going through the remains of twentieth-century American civilization might find scattered across the country foundations of small buildings. In front of these foundations would be large golden arches made of indestructible plastic. These, the archeologists might deduce, were roadside temples. In the trash heaps adjacent to these temples they find clear plastic discs bearing the image of a character with a round

nose, its face painted with cosmetics, and head shaved clean except for a ring of hair above the ears. This plastic disc, four inches in diameter, had an X-shaped cut in its center, presumably so the people could run a string through the hole and wear the image of their principal deity around their necks. These assumptions made, the archeologists might then conclude that the capital of our arch-building civilization had been St. Louis, where the giant stainless steel Gateway Arch, 630 feet tall, stands as a testimonial to twentieth-century America's preoccupation with arches.

To define the Mississippian and other ancient cultures as mound builders because of their apparent preoccupation with earthen mounds may do ancient Americans a similar disservice. Nevertheless, much supposition has been devoted to the mysteries of the mound builders. That the mounds are the work of different peoples at different times is widely accepted. Just who built them, and what became of the builders, has been the source of considerable speculation throughout American history.

- ***Second Impressions: "A Knowledge of Art and Labor Foreign to the Red Man"***

Late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholars found it difficult to accept that the architects of the mounds had been the aboriginal peoples of America. Instead they theorized about lost civilizations, Danes, Romans, Greeks, Israelites, Phoenicians, Malays, and even the lost continent of Atlantis, under siege by the "savages" of America, building elaborate defensive earthworks. Only at the beginning of the twentieth century did scholars begin to credit the mounds to the Native Americans themselves.

Source 3: Account of journalist William Bartram, 1780

At about fifty yards distance from the landing place [on the St Johns River in Florida] stands a magnificent Indian mount. About fifteen years ago I visited this place, at which time there were no settlements of white people, but all appeared wild and savage; yet in that uncultivated state it possessed an almost inexpressible air of grandeur. . . .

At that time there was a very considerable extent of old fields round about the mount; there was also a large orange grove, together with palms and live oaks, extending from near the mount along the banks downwards. . . . But what greatly contributed towards completing the magnificence of the scene was a noble Indian highway which led from the great mount on a straight line, three quarters of a mile, first through a point or wing of the orange grove and continuing thence through an awful forest of live oaks. It was terminated by palms and laurel magnolias on the verge of an oblong artificial lake, which was on the edge of an extensive, green, level savanna. This grand highway was about fifty yards wide, sunk a little below the common level, and the earth thrown up on each side, making a bank of about two feet high.

Source 4: Writings of Thomas Jefferson, 1785

I know of no such thing existing [in Virginia] as an Indian monument: . . . unless indeed it be the Barrows [mounds], of which many are to be found all over the country. These are of different sizes, some are constructed of earth, and some of loose stones. That they were repositories of the dead, has been obvious to all: but on what particular occasion constructed, was matter of doubt. Some have thought they covered the bones of those who had fallen in battles fought on the spot of internment. Some ascribed them to the custom, said to prevail among the Indians, of collecting, at certain periods, the bones of all their dead. . . . Others have supposed them the general sepulchres for towns. . . . There being one of these in my neighbourhood, I wished to satisfy myself whether any, and which of these opinions were just.

For this purpose I determined to open and examine it thoroughly. It was situated on the low grounds of the Rivanna, about two miles above its principal fork, and opposite to some hills, on which had been an Indian town. It was of a spheroidal form, of about 40 feet diameter at the base, and had been of about twelve feet altitude. . . .

I first dug superficially in several parts of it, and came to collections of human bones . . . lying in the utmost confusion. . . . The bones nearest the surface were the least decayed. No holes were discovered in any of them, as if made with bullets, arrows, or other weapons. I conjectured that in this barrow might have been a thousand skeletons. Every one will readily seize the circumstances above related, which militate against the opinion, that it covered the bones only of those fallen in battle; and against the tradition also, which would make it the common sepulchre of a town. . . . Appearances certainly indicate that it has derived both origin and growth from the accustomed collection of bones, and deposition of them together; that the first collection had been deposited on the common surface of the earth, a few stones put over it, and then a covering of earth, that the second had been laid on this, . . . and was then also covered with earth; and so on. . . .

But on whatever occasion they may have been made, they are of considerable notoriety among the Indians: for a party passing, about thirty years ago, through the part of the country where the barrow is, went through the woods directly to it, without any instructions or enquiry, and having staid about it some time, with expressions which were construed to be those of sorrow, they returned to the high road, which they had left about half a dozen miles to pay this visit, and pursued their journey.

Source 5: William Cullen Bryant, "The Prairies," 1832

As o'er the verdant waste I guide my steed,
Among the high rank grass that sweeps his sides
The hollow beating of his footsteps seems
A sacrilegious sound. I think of those
Upon whose rests he tramples. Are they here—
The dead of other days?—and did the dust
Of these fair solitudes once stir with life
And burn with passion? Let the mighty mounds
That overlook the river or that rise
In the dim forest crowded with old oaks,

Answer. A race that long has passed away,
 Built them;—a disciplined and populous race
 Heaped with long toil the earth while yet the Greek
 Was hewing the **Pentelicus** to forms
 Of symmetry, and rearing on its rock
 The glittering Parthenon. These ample fields
 Nourished their harvests, here their herds were fed,
 When haply by the stalls the bison lowed,
 And bowed his maned shoulder to the yoke.
 All day this desert murmured with their toils,
 Till twilight blushed, and lovers walked and wooed
 In a forgotten language, and old tunes,
 From instruments of unremembered form,
 Gave the soft winds a voice. The red man came—
 The roaming hunter tribes, warlike and fierce
 And the mound-builders vanished from the earth.
 The solitude of centuries untold
 Has settled where they dwelt. The prairie-wolf
 Hunts in their meadows, and his fresh-dug den
 Yawns by my path. The gopher mines the ground,
 Where stood the swarming cities. All is gone;
 All—save the piles of earth that hold their bones,
 The platforms where they worshipped unknown gods,
 The barriers which they builded from the soil
 To keep the foe at bay—till o'er the walls
 The wild beleaguers broke, and one by one,
 The strongholds of the plain were forced and heaped
 With corpses. The brown vultures of the wood
 Flocked to those vast uncovered sepulchres,
 And sat unscared and silent at their feast.

Source 6: Account of Josiah Priest, 1833

Ancient millions of mankind had their seats of empire in America. Many of the mounds are completely occupied with human skeletons, and millions of them must have been interred in these vast cemeteries, that can be traced from the Rocky Mountains, on the west, to the Alleghenies on the east, and into the province of Texas . . . on the south: revolutions like those known in the old world, may have taken place here, and armies, equal to those of Cyrus, of Alexander the Great, or of Tamerlane the powerful, might have flourished their trumpets, and marched to battle, over these extensive plains.

Source 7: George Bancroft, *History of the Colonization of the United States*, 1842

[T]he country east of the Mississippi has no monuments. The numerous mounds which have been discovered in the alluvial valleys of the west, have by some been regarded as the works of an earlier and more cultivated race of men, whose cities have been laid waste, whose language and institutions have been destroyed

or driven away; but the study of the structure of the earth strips this imposing theory of its marvels. Where imagination fashions relics of artificial walls, geology sees but crumbs of decaying sandstone, clinging like the remains of mortar to blocks of greenstone that rested on it; it discovers in parallel intrenchments a trough, that subsiding waters have ploughed through the centre of a ridge; it explains the tessellated pavement to be but a layer of pebbles aptly joined by water; and, on examining the mounds, and finding them composed of different strata of earth, arranged horizontally to their very edge, it ascribes their creation to the Power that shaped the globe into vales and hillocks. When the waters had gently deposited their alluvial burden on the bosom of the earth, it is not strange that, of the fantastic forms shaped by the eddies, some should resemble the ruins of a fortress; that the channel of a torrent should seem even like walls that connected a town with its harbor; that natural cones should be esteemed monuments of inexplicable toil. . . . When Nature has taken to herself her share in the construction of the symmetrical hillocks, nothing will remain to warrant the inference of a high civilization, that has left its abode or died away,—of an earlier acquaintance with the arts of the Old World.

Source 8: Notes of archeologist J. D. Baldwin, 1872

There is no trace or probability of any direct relationship whatever between the mound-builders and the barbarous Indians found in the country. The wild Indians of this continent have never known such a condition as that of the mound-builders. They had nothing in common with it. In Africa, Asia, and elsewhere among the more uncivilized families of the human race there is not as much really original barbarism as some anthropologists are inclined to assume, but there can be no serious doubt that the wild Indians of North America were original barbarians born of a stock which had never at any time been either civilized or closely associated with the influence of civilization. . . . It is absurd to suppose a relationship or a connection of any kind between the original barbarism of these Indians and the civilization of the mound-builders.

Source 9: Account of scientist J. W. Foster, 1873

The evidences of the former existence of a prehistoric race known as the Mound-builders, who at one time occupied the principal affluents of the Mississippi, the Gulf coast, and the region of the Great Lakes, are too conclusive to admit of doubt. These evidences consist of **tumuli** symmetrically raised and often enclosed in mathematical figures, such as the square, the octagon, and circle, with long lines of **circumvallation**; of pits in the solid rock, and rubbish heaps formed in the prosecution of their mining operations; and of a variety of utensils wrought in stone or copper, or molded in clay, which evinces a knowledge of art and methodical labor foreign to the red man. . . .

The Indian possesses a conformation of skull which clearly separates him from the pre-historic Mound Builder, and such a conformation must give rise to different mental traits. His brain, as compared with the European . . . differs widely in the proportions of the different parts. The anterior lobe is small, the middle lobe is large, and the central convolutions on the anterior lobe and upper surface, are small. The brain-case is boxlike, with the corners rounded off. . . .

His character, since first known to the white man has been signalized by treachery and cruelty. He repels all efforts to raise him from his degraded position: and whilst he has not the moral nature to adopt the virtues of civilization, his brutal instincts lead him to welcome its vices. He was never known voluntarily to engage in an enterprise requiring methodical labor; . . . he imposes the drudgery of life upon his squaw; he takes no heed for the future.

To suppose that such a race threw up the strong lines of circumvallation and the symmetrical mounds which crown so many of our river terraces is as preposterous as to suppose that they built the pyramids of Egypt.

Source 10: Archeologist Cyrus Thomas, "Report on the Mound Explorations of the Bureau of Ethnology," 1894

It is . . . contended that the magnitude of some of the earthworks indicates a much higher culture and a more systematic government and centralized power than have been found in Indian history. That there must have been sufficient intelligence to plan the works is evident; that there must have been some means of bringing into harmony the views of the people and of combining their forces is also apparent. But the fact that at the discovery of the country several of the tribes were accustomed to build villages, surround them with palisades and moats, and in some cases to erect just such mounds as we now find, shows, beyond contradiction, that they had the necessary intelligence to plan such works and the means of combining forces to build them. . . .

It is strange that most writers who claim for these remains such high antiquity contend at the same time for a much more advanced culture than that attained by the Indians. It is true that when we stand at the base of the great Cahokia mound and study its vast proportions, we can scarcely bring ourselves to believe it was built without some other means of collecting and conveying material than that possessed by the Indians. But what other means could a lost race have had? The Indians had wooden spades, baskets, skins of animals, wooden and clay vessels, and textile fabrics; they also had stone implements. . . . It is also more than likely that all the people of a tribe, both men and women, aided in the work, and that the large works were built by additions made during successive generations. But the best evidence that they could build such structures is the fact that they did build them, that in truth they made every form of ancient works known to exist in the bounds of our country, even to the large canals of which there are yet traces.

Source 11: J. W. Powell, "Report of the Director," Bureau of Ethnology, 1894

[I]t was [until recently] the prevailing opinion among archeologists that the mounds and other aboriginal earthworks of the eastern half of the United States are vestiges of a people more ancient and more advanced than the tribes of Indians that occupied the continent at the time of the discovery by Columbus. . . .

It is difficult to exaggerate the prevalence of this romantic fallacy, or the force with which the hypothetical "lost races" had taken possession of the imaginations of men. For more than a century the ghosts of a vanished nation have

ambuscaded in the vast solitudes of the continent, and the forest-covered mounds have been usually regarded as the mysterious sepulchers of its kings and nobles. It was an alluring conjecture that a powerful people, superior to the Indians, once occupied the valley of the Ohio and the Appalachian ranges, their empire stretching from Hudson Bay to the Gulf, with its flanks on the western prairies and the eastern ocean; a people with a confederate government, a chief ruler, a great central capital, a highly developed religion, with homes and husbandry and advanced textile, **fictile**, and **ductile** arts, with a language, perhaps with letters, all swept away before an invasion of copper-hued Huns from some unknown region of the earth, prior to the landing of Columbus. . . .

But the assumption that the mounds . . . were the work of a lost and nameless race . . . has been losing ground before recent evidence accumulated by archeologists. The spade and the pick, in the hands of patient and sagacious investigators, have every year brought to light facts tending more and more strongly to prove that the mounds, which have excited so much curiosity and become the subject of so many hypotheses, were constructed by the historic Indians of our land and their lineal ancestors.

Source 12: Archeologist Robert Silverberg, *Mound Builders of Ancient America*, 1968

The dream of a lost prehistoric race in the American heartland was profoundly satisfying; and if the vanished ones had been giants, or white men, or Israelites, or Danes, or Toltecs, or giant white Jewish Toltec Vikings, so much the better. The people of the United States were then engaged in an undeclared war against the Indians who blocked their path to expansion, transporting, imprisoning, or simply massacring them; and as this century-long campaign of genocide proceeded, it may have been expedient to conjure up a previous race whom the Indians had displaced in the same way. Conscience might ache a bit over the uprooting of the Indians, but not if it could be shown that the Indians, far from being long-established settlers in the land, were themselves mere intruders who had wantonly shattered the glorious Mound Builder civilization of old. What had been a simple war of conquest against the Indians now could be construed as a war of vengeance on behalf of that great and martyred ancient culture.

Source 13: George E. Stuart, "Who Were the Mound Builders?" *National Geographic*, 1972

Generations have seen and puzzled over the continent's man-made earthen lumps. The first settlers east of the Mississippi Valley came upon thousands, many flanked by geometric earthworks of astonishing precision. Some formed shapes of humans or animals; others were flat-topped.

And their discovery led to wild speculation. Accounts of the 18th and 19th centuries, reflecting the attitudes of their times, simply could not credit the mounds to those "forest primitives," the eastern Indians. Gradually conjecture crystallized into a myth of "Mound Builders," a highly civilized race that supposedly flourished before the Indians came.

Who were the Mound Builders? Survivors of a sunken Atlantis, some said. Egyptians and Phoenicians wandering far from home, ventured others.