

**MOUNDS IN VERMONT:
PREHISTORIC OR HISTORIC?**

**WILLIAM A. HAVILAND
University of Vermont
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Some of the most striking and intriguing remains of prehistoric man in the Northeast consist of burials mounds. In their simplest form, they consist of low mounds of earth thrown directly over human remains. From this, they range all the way to larger mounds built over specially constructed tombs. The center of mound building seems to have been in the Ohio-Mississippi River areas, where other forms of earthworks occur as well. Vermont, however, is generally considered as lying outside the mound-building area altogether (c.f. Huden 1960: 64, Ritchie 1965: 214, Willey 1966: 267). Yet, from time to time, low earthen mounds have been reported in Vermont.

A recent instance of such a report came to the writer from Mrs. Leo Gorton of Cornwall. She reported several mounds, oval to round, with ditches around them. At least one contained charcoal at a depth of about 18 inches. An older report is the following from Perkins (1900: 89-90):

“On the highway from Bristol to Burlington, in Edgewood, there is a hill of glacial debris that rests on stratified gravel. On this hillside have been seen low mounds, undoubtedly artificial, which had not been constructed since the White Man settled in Bristol.’ An excavation was made into one of these mounds with the following result: ‘Digging down about two feet through soil that showed plainly marks of previous disturbance, we came to a level floor made of cobble stones, perhaps three feet long by two feet wide. When these stones were removed we found yet another layer, beneath which showed plain evidence of a severe heating. Between the two layers of stones was an inch or more of charcoal. The lower floor rested on undisturbed gravel”.

Finally, the writer was shown two low earthen mounds on Pine Island, Colchester, by their owner Mr. Irving McKinstry (Haviland 1969). Low earthen mounds do, then, exist in Vermont. But the question arises: who is responsible for them, Indians or White Men?

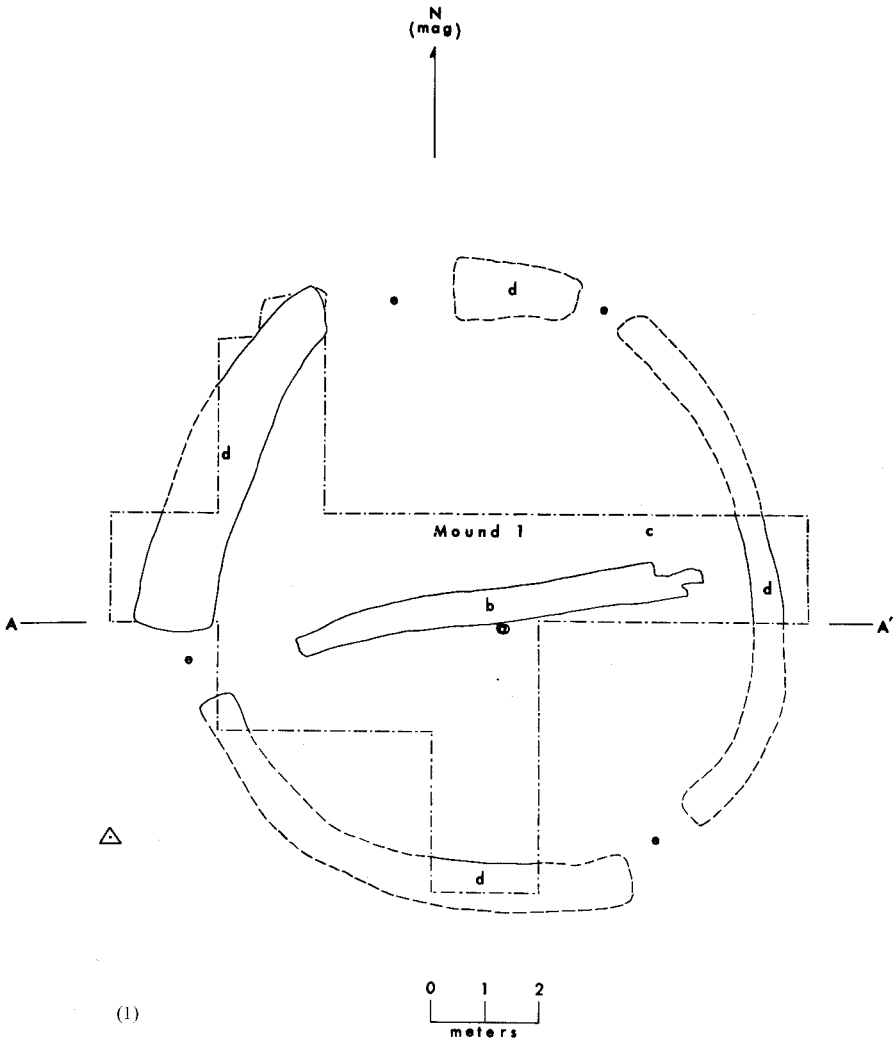


Figure 1: Plan of Mound 1, Pine Island. Limit of excavations indicated by broken and dotted line.

- a. small hole, probably from a branch on large log
- b. Large charred log, which lay directly in lower ash bed.
- c. Location of artifacts, which lay on the lower ash bed (Fig. 3)
- d. Surrounding ditch. Solid line indicates edge as seen in excavation; broken line is a reconstruction from surface appearance in unexcavated areas.

e. Raised earth causeway-like areas, which break the ditch.

The datum (lower left triangle) is located on the USGS Fort Ethan Allen 7.5 minute Quadrangle precisely 2,450 m. from the west edge, and 2,125 m. from the south edge, of the map.

The VAS excavations in one of the Pine Island mounds suggests the answer to the question. Figure 1 is a plan drawing of the mound, Figure 2 is a section drawing (A-A', Fig. 1). These remains are interpreted as follows (Haviland 1969: 3):

“First, logs were put in place for a fire. Then, the ditch was dug, and the sand thrown up on top of the wood. As the wood burned down, the sand was discolored and became mixed with the charcoal. As it filtered down through the burning wood, a residue of charcoal was left on top. The ditch prevented the fire from spreading from the burning site.”

A few artifacts were found together just above the ash layer in the mound (Fig. 3-5). These might at first suggest Indian responsibility for the mound, but this seems ruled out by other evidence. Mr. David Blow found, among The Ira Allen papers in the Wilbur Library, an agreement of August 4, 1794 for Alexander Dodge and Abiather Tacher to clear for Ira Allen at least 20 acres of land which included Pine Island. In another agreement, concerning the lease of a forge and anchor shop, one Aaron Brownell is to “cut cole wood” (wood to make charcoal, used for forging) on the intervale land. Apparently, the mounds are the remains of this charcoal burning. The method used by early European settlers in the northeast was to build up a crib-work of logs which was set afire, then covered with earth to reduce the oxygen so as to produce charcoal rather than ash. This would produce just such remains as the Pine Island mounds, and indeed some of the pieces of charcoal appear to be from wood which was cut by a saw or steel axe. The presence of the stone artifacts is explained by the presence nearby of an Indian campsite; apparently, a few artifacts were accidentally picked up in a shovel-full of sand which was dumped on the burning wood.

The Cornwall and Edgewood mounds mentioned above sound similar in outward appearance to the Pine Island mounds. In both instances, there is also evidence for burning. Therefore, it seems probable that these too represent early historical charcoal burning on the part of white settlers. Other mounds found in Vermont might be the same thing, or as was the case with some mounds recently tested near St. Johnsbury by Stephen Loring, they might be old manure piles. In any case, the impression that Indian mounds are not to be found in Vermont still appears to be valid.

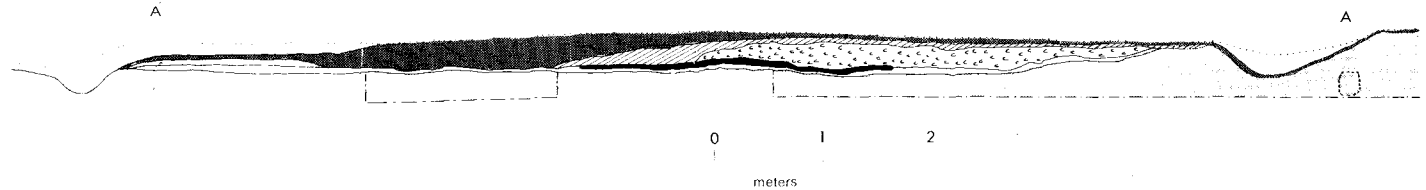


Figure 2: Section A-A', Mound 1, Pine Island. Light ash overlies undisturbed (except for the ditches) yellow sand. The portion of charred log which overlies the ash, through which the section passes, is indicated by solid black. Over the log and ash are layers of variously discolored sand and charcoal. The mound is covered by a layer of charcoal which peters out at the ditch on the left (east), and just west of the ditch on the right. The debris layer before excavation is indicated by the line of dots.

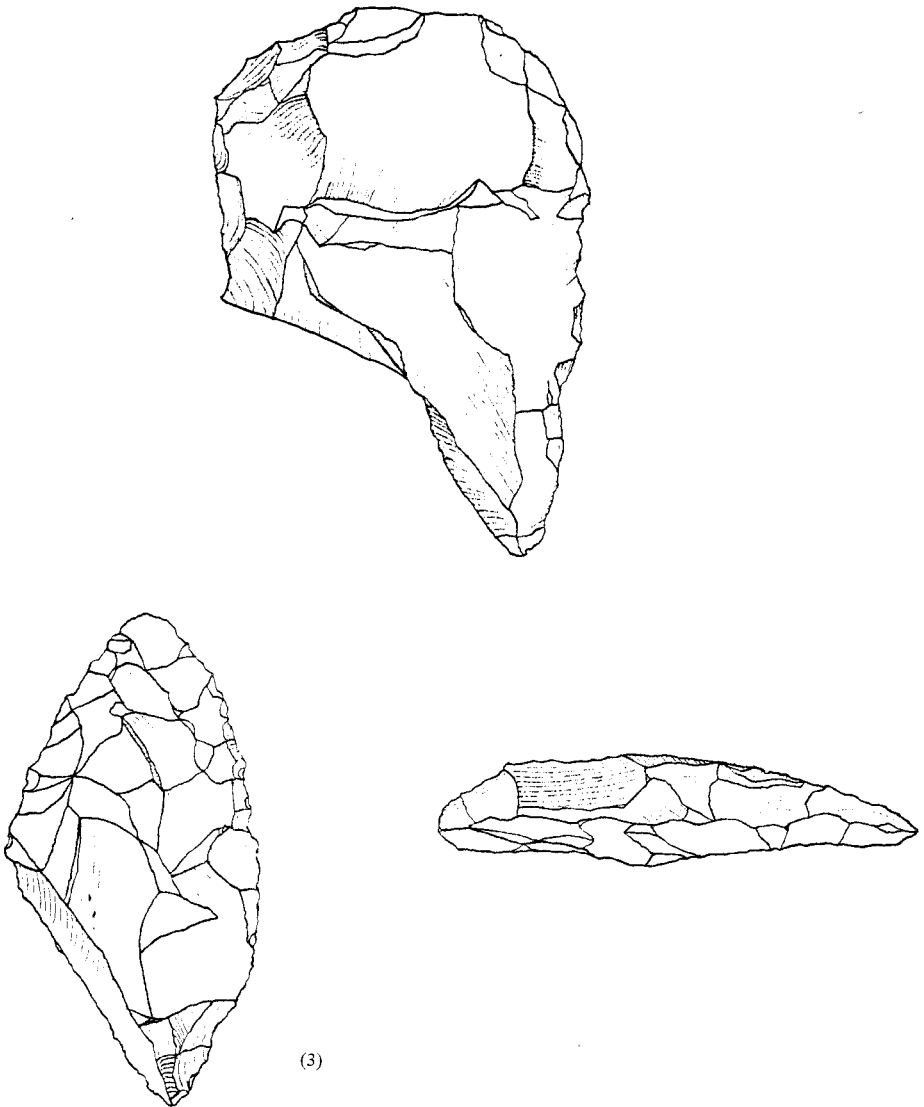
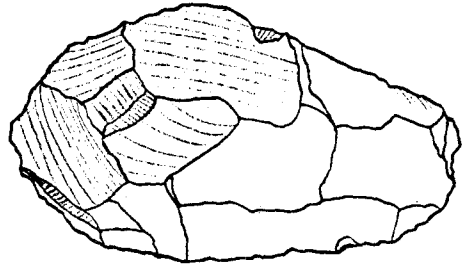
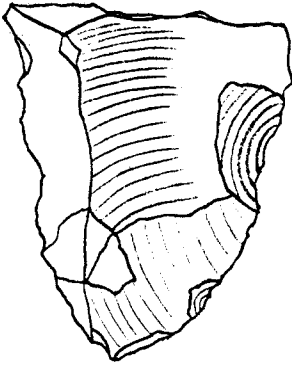
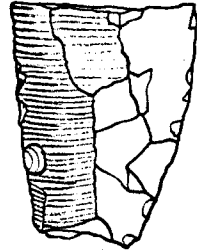
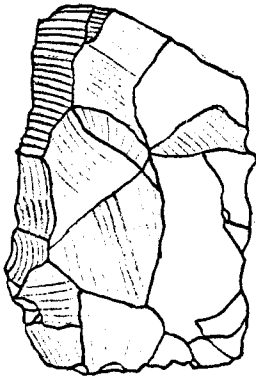


Figure 3: Artifacts of quartzite from Mound 1, Pine Island. Top: portion of a bifacially-shaped "chopping" tool. Bottom: top and side view of one of two large triangular flakes, each with one purposely blunted edge.



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Figure 4: Artifacts of quartzite from Mound 1, Pine Island. Top: two blade fragments. Bottom: blade fragment (left); bifacially re-touched flake (right).

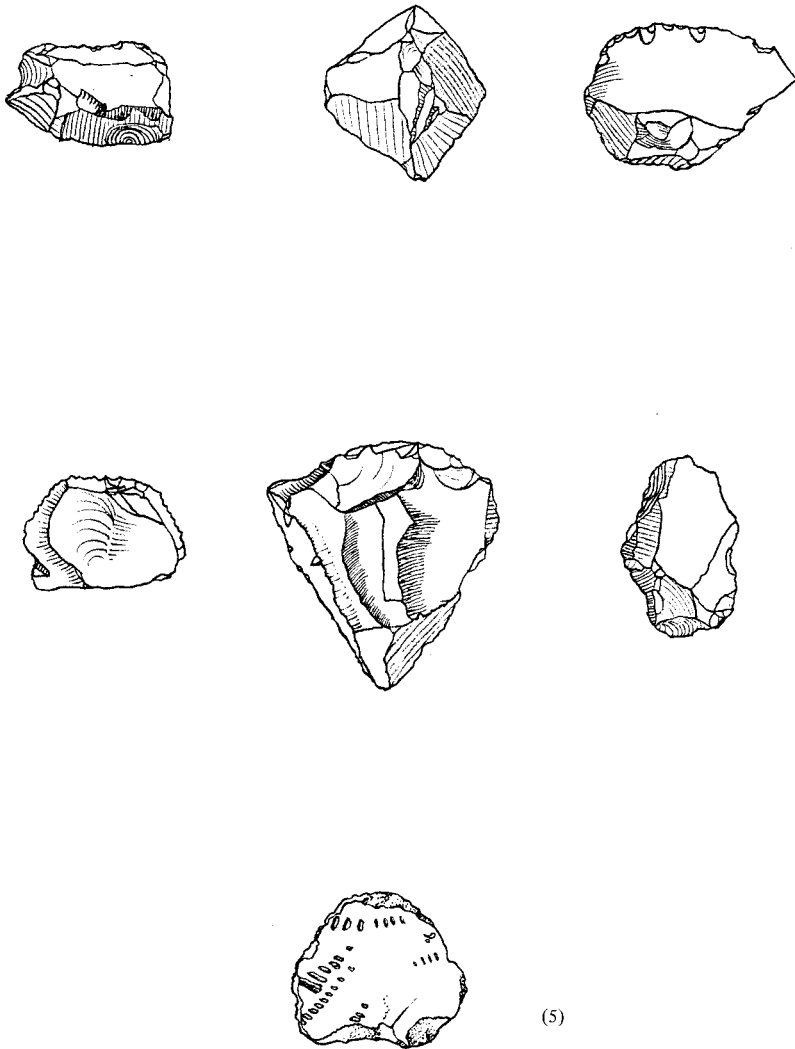


Figure 5: Pottery sherd and artifacts of flint from Mound 1, Pine Island. Rows 1 and 2; Irregular, used flakes. Row 3; Pottery sherd.

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