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Mysteries of the Tuckerton Mound

Jim Alexander



Heading south on the narrow Great Bay Boulevard below Tuckerton, most travelers fail to see it through the roadside vegetation. Of those who do, most do not recognize what it is: a shell midden. Middens are “accumulations of refuse about a dwelling place, especially an accumulation of shells . . . bones, and other refuse on the supposed site of the dwelling places of prehistoric tribes. . . .”² Examining the contents therein can help evaluate earlier life at such sites through analyzing consumption and/or discard patterns, an opportunity archaeologists recognized as early as 1866.³

In the United States in particular, scholars view middens as places to learn about early indigenous communities. Thousands of middens once existed, often in low and marshy areas, including over 2000 in Maine, and many more moving southward along the Atlantic coast all the way to Florida. The indigenous peoples in Maine likely created the middens there and they are thought to be between 2,200 and 1,000 years old,⁴ but all are subject to erosion and loss in the face of climate change and increasing population pressures.

Of those that once existed in New Jersey, the Tuckerton Mound is the last prime remaining example.

Discussing a special visit to the Mound in 1892, archaeologist Francis Jordan Jr.⁵ wrote:

This remarkable deposit stands about a mile from the mainland on Egg Harbor Bay, and as far as the eye can see is the one solitary object on this apparently illimitable salt meadow. It is impracticable to reach the Mound except in midsummer when the numerous rivulets which intersect the marsh are dry, and then only by sailing down Tuckerton Creek to a point nearest the Mound and thence across the intervening marsh on foot. No single aboriginal shell-heap on the coast of the North Atlantic States equals it in size or is similarly situated. . . .”⁶

DESPITE MULTIPLE ARCHAEOLOGICAL VISITS OVER THE ENSUING DECADES, THE MOUND PRESENTS AS MANY MYSTERIES AS ENLIGHTENMENT

Tuckerton itself has a rich history dating back to the arrival of early Quakers, becoming one of the earliest settlements in South Jersey. During the Revolution, Little Egg Harbor was a principal port of colonial privateering. The American privateers used Tuckerton Creek for shelter and for unloading their contraband. British forces attacked and burned Tuckerton in retaliation. But that history occurred after the local indigenous peoples created the Mound.⁷

Archaeologists generally believe that the indigenous people (sometimes referred to as aboriginals, people of antiquity, or latterly, the Delaware bands of the Lenni Lenape) initially lived a nomadic life but came to occupy small settlements inland during the colder periods. They would move toward the coastal areas to feast on the bounty of the bays and ocean in warmer seasons, sometimes staying in houses on stilts above the local marshes and processing the food for consumption later in the year.⁸

The Tuckerton Mound came to academic attention in the mid-1800s. Writing in his 1868 pioneering work *Geology of New Jersey*,⁹ State Geologist George H. Cook (for whom Rutgers’ Cook College, now Rutgers School of Environmental and Biological Sciences, is named) noted:

There are immense deposits of shells found at different places along the seashore. They are the marks of the aborigines who came down here to gather their supplies of clams and oysters, and left the shells in piles as we now see

them. Some of them are the remains of shells which have been broken up to make wampum.

The enormous piles of clam and oyster-shells which were accumulated by the Indians are all in the marsh, and extend down to the hard ground. There is every indication that the marsh has grown several feet about them since they were deposited. They can be examined near Beesley’s Point, at Absecon, at Leed’s Point, at Tuckerton, and at numerous other places.

At that time, he regarded the shells’ value primarily as an agricultural amendment, as they are rich in calcium carbonate and other minerals. While shells do eventually decompose over time, it is a very slow process unless aided by fire or physical impact, and the shells in mounds also tend to protect other items in a pile from rapid deterioration.

Charles Conrad Abbott discussed the Tuckerton site in 1881, when he referred to it as “The Hummock,” a moniker that apparently survived into the 1930s.¹⁰

No written records exist of the actual purpose, creation, or use of the Mound, and while archaeologists can posit some conclusions, and local lore has added to the suppositions, some questions remain unanswered.

LOCATION AND ACCESS

From a regional perspective, the Mound is in the salt marshes that border the Little Egg Harbor’s west side, near the mouth of the Tuckerton Creek, and west of the southern end of Long Beach Island.¹¹ Great Bay lies to the southwest.

Its location is about 100 feet west of Great Bay Boulevard, two miles south of US 9 in Tuckerton, but the boulevard did not exist in its current form until the twentieth century. In 1927, as part of a strategy to cope with growing automobile traffic, the State of New Jersey devised a plan to establish a highway route paralleling the state’s eastern shoreline, connecting Cape May with North Jersey. The section that would have connected Tuckerton to the south was a spur-route, designated as New Jersey highway S-4A, and intended to run through the salt marshes and cross the open water to Brigantine, and thence connect to Atlantic City.¹²

The map on the next page, part of the 1930 State of New Jersey Official Road Map, indicates with a dashed red line the intended route of S4A along what is now called Great Bay Boulevard,¹³ and across the water. By 1934, Atlantic County’s inability to construct the portion across the water from Little Beach to

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As noted above, when Jordan made his visits to the site beginning in 1888, he observed the lack of direct road access, and the need to travel by water, and then by foot, across the marsh. Certainly, no old Indian trails as such then remained. Local sources indicate that the Lenape camped in part of Tuckerton, but several miles north of the Mound, and imply that they then traveled south to its location.¹⁵ What nature of access initially existed, and how did they cope with the waterways and marshes to arrive there? And how high was the surrounding water at the time?

A fuller understanding of the historical topography of the Mound's area is also frustrated by later actions to alter existing marshes and waterways through extensive ditching for mosquito control (especially by Federal WPA programs in the 1930s). More

recent major lagoon development of the Mystic Islands area can be seen in the distance.¹⁶

Jordan wrote that in site visits in 1888 and 1892, he had concluded that the Mound's "position, isolation, and significant shape suggested the refuse of a group of huts built over the water," and, writing in 1906 about this, he cited subsequent corroboration by ethnologist Frank Hamilton Cushing, of the Smithsonian, who

Brigantine, coupled with lack of funding due to the Great Depression, and challenging weather conditions, led one newspaper to describe the uncompleted section, under a headline "Dream Road at Tuckerton Lies Deserted," as having "Abandoned state highway trucks, empty gas tanks at an angle, gravel all piled up by tons as a base for the road, and fence posts that have already been buffeted away by northeasters."¹⁴

Despite the State's efforts to complete the connection, the route was removed from the official state system by 1941. This left Great Bay Boulevard somewhat as it is today, narrow and terminating abruptly at the southern end without so much as a warning sign. Locally the road is referred to as Seven Bridges Road, but it has only five bridges, given the failure to construct the extension over the turbulent water.

One might conclude that the failure to complete the highway was fortuitous from the viewpoint of the Tuckerton Mound, which undoubtedly would have been more exposed and likely suffered damage had a major road with growing traffic and increasing visitors run adjacent to it. Today, as seen at the right, the view of the Mound is largely blocked by roadside vegetation. This side note of history still leaves us with the question "How did the natives get there?"



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he said had located remnants of pilings indicating that "an Indian village stood on piles over the meadow near the great heap."¹⁸ Cushing died, and no one followed up on this aspect.

Why did they keep dumping shells in the same location, and how close was the growing mound to where they habitated? A 1919 report noted that in contrast with smaller, more scattered, shell heaps on dry land, mounds on the marshes "... mark the spot where the Indian procured and dried oysters and other bivalves to carry inland for consumption."¹⁹ What of the smell; would they have really lived so close to a production operation, or at some distance? Other suggestions have included the idea that this served as a local gathering point, at which the indigenous peoples shelled the clams and then transported them to a more central collection point farther inland, which has not yet been identified. And why and how did they build the pile so high rather than extending it laterally?

While the natives consumed some clams on-site, the same people may have taken the remaining catch and processed them by cooking, smoking, or conversion to powder in a mortar and pestle. One description of how this might have been achieved follows:

On certain occasions, Native American women dug a hole and filled the bottom with wet seaweed. On top of this wet seaweed, the women laid piles of freshly caught clams. More wet seaweed was placed on top. Then dry wood was finally piled on to make a fire. This was the original "Clambake."

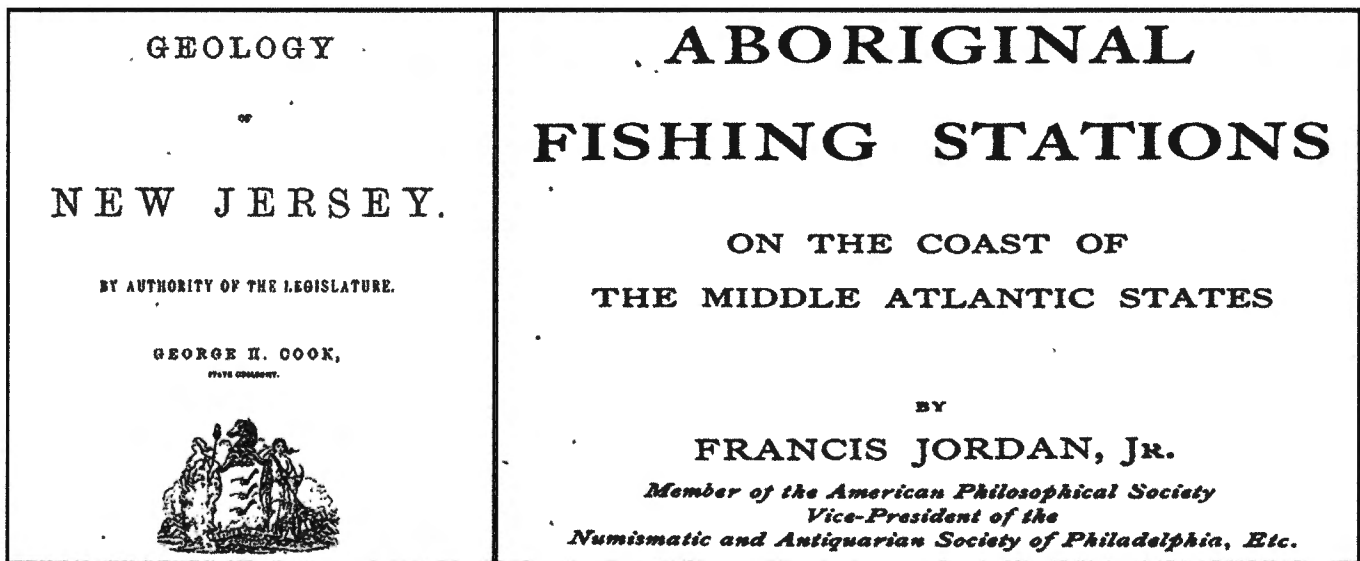
Locally, Lenape Tribes . . . harvested and processed clams for immediate consumption and for winter storage. Clams were smoked or dried on open fires and some were ground to a fine powder for use in winter dishes. Local Native Americans processed so many clams for so many years, early English settlers reported huge mounds of discarded clam shells towering over the marsh lands along the bay.²⁰

HOW BIG IS IT AND WHAT'S IN IT?

Both Cook and Jordan discussed the size of the Mound and that local farmers had substantially reduced the midden before each of their explorations: "It has been shorn of much of its original size by the farmers in the neighborhood, who have carted away the shells for fertilizing purposes. Its proportions, however, are still formidable. . . ."²¹

Estimates of the overall Mound size vary slightly, given the different temporal periods and that the mound provided a ready source for agricultural and industrial needs. Casual visitors over the years likely helped themselves to souvenirs from the midden. The major offenders have often been referred to as "limeburners."²² Heating certain stones and shells is a process that releases their minerals.

As seen from above today, its shape is irregular. Over the years, half a dozen academic visitors described the mound as measuring about 100 feet long, 50 feet wide at its widest, and between 9 and 12 feet high. The shells extend several feet below the current marsh level, and an undocumented number of feet wider. The largest



Pioneering works of George H. Cook and Francis Jordan, Jr.

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estimate is 14 feet below the current surface.²³ Aside from subsidence and exploitation, speculation suggests that at the time of its creation and continual native use, the land surrounding the Mound stood at a different relative elevation to the nearby sea than now.

“The Tuckerton Site is protected from the ocean shore by a sandy beach now stabilized by a shore road [Great Bay Boulevard]. During its occupation, the shell mound was adjacent to a tidal estuary and was on the shores of an inland bay.”²⁴

The Mound’s original height can only be speculated, but the possibility of its having been higher than observed in the 1800s exists. A report in 1886 noted that even then “It stands out in solitary prominence above the low level of the surrounding meadows, and is visible for a great distance in every direction. The angulations of the coast were made from it by the Coast Survey.”²⁵ It has been commonly reported that sailors used the mound as a dead reckoning navigation marker, which may have been more feasible before the Boulevard’s construction, or because the mound was in fact higher than later measured.²⁶

Certainly, the Mound has been exposed to considerable weathering, and survived the nearby landfall of the disastrous Superstorm Sandy in 2012. Great Bay Boulevard is currently subject to increased flooding on a regular basis.

In Jordan’s 1906 work, he included a photo of the Mound, which had been taken during one of his earlier forays, making mention that the “thick verdure which covers the entire surface” concealed the fact that “the observer is actually treading among the shells.” He continued to note, “A remarkable bunch of six venerable weather-beaten cedars crowns the summit.”



More recent photos of the Mound also show cedars and other vegetation, with some speculation as to whether some remain from over a century ago.

As for the Mound’s contents, when a group of archaeologists visited the site in 1939 as a part of a major WPA-enabled statewide effort,²⁸ a major excavation was undertaken:

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In addition to this photo, a supplementary cross section sketch of the excavation notes the condition and types of the shells at various levels, and the minimal presence of decayed vegetative layers, except for a thicker humus buildup at the surface. Essentially, the mound consisted of hard clamshells, with a layer of oyster shells at part of the bottom, and conch shells in the later accumulations. Also encountered was a meager amount of charcoal, animal bones, and a few pieces of burned and blackened pottery. The shells on the northern side were more decomposed, suggesting that that side was the first to be filled.

WHEN WAS IT CREATED?

Exactly when the Mound was built up has been the subject of some discussion. Occasional references to its being 10,000 years old²⁹ are not substantiated and may represent conflation with broader references to the early advancement of natives across New Jersey. No written records exist.

One source suggests that “The Tuckerton Shell Mound represented a food procurement site and the remains of food processing activities at least during the Middle Woodland.”³⁰ (200 BCE to 500 CE) The most authoritative dating estimate comes from R. Alan Mounier,³¹ who has personally explored the site and evaluated the history of its documentation as well as contributing his own. He cites radiocarbon analysis of a clamshell found near the surface and a wooden twig found near the bottom of the mound, plus gourd seed analysis, with calibration to tree-ring dating. He concludes that the period of the mound’s activity likely occurred between 40 BCE and 420 CE, suggesting

that the mound’s origins date, at the very latest, to well over 1500 years ago.

This is consistent with the general dating of other proximate archaeological sites,³² and provides adequate guidance for dating.

WHO CREATED IT?

As to the “who” question, expert and common consensus suggests the Lenni Lenape created the mound, but Jordan’s report raised a fascinating complication, leading to suggestions that some earlier “race” might have created the mound.³³

Late in the seventeenth century, the first white settlers arrived in the Little Egg Harbor area, including Edward Andrews, who purchased 500 acres along

the Pohatcong Creek. Andrews, a Quaker, observed that only a few Indians inhabited the area.³⁴ It was logical to ask them about the mound, but their response was not helpful.

As Jordan would later recount, referring to the question posed to the remaining local natives:

Its authorship . . . is enveloped in obscurity. . . . Those who lingered in the vicinity through infirmity or inclination did not regard the mound as the work of their progenitors, but of a race much older than their own, of whom they had no knowledge, even of a legendary character.³⁵

The possibility that the Lenape did not build the mound gained traction with a discovery across the marshes from the mound. There, where the land rises from the lower marsh level, excavations of skeletons occurred on what was known as the Jillson Farm, in an area now known as the Harbortown development in Mystic Island.

There is, on the property of the Jillson brothers of Tuckerton, a shell heap and a burial ground in which were found thirty-two skeletons. Eighteen of these were buried in one trench. The position of the bones was such as to lead the discoverers to believe the Indians to have been the victims of a massacre or pestilence. . . .³⁶

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The description Jordan appended, referring to its having occurred coincident with his own area visits (1888 and 1892), adds intrigue:

One of the skeletons measured over seven feet and was that of a veritable giant. It was plain to be seen that death was caused by a fracture of the skull produced by some blunt weapon. The blood which had congealed along the track of the wound was surprisingly brilliant notwithstanding the lapse of centuries.³⁷



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During the major statewide archaeological surveys that Dorothy Cross and her associates conducted in the late 1930s, their work included additional excavations of the Jillson site. As she noted:

A few years ago several skeletons were reputedly uncovered and publicity was attracted because they were said to be giants, in accordance with local legends. . . . After consultation with the owner as to location of skeletons and richest areas of surface finds, four trenches and several test pits [were dug]. All the excavations were entirely sterile. Aside from the skeletons, the authenticity of which cannot be verified . . . there is little to suggest that this site would have been a likely place of occupation.³⁹

Local lore and speculation continued, some attributing the tall skeleton(s) to Vikings having visited the coast much earlier and possibly having fought with the Indians. Others conjectured that a reported high iron content in the soil near the skeletons suggested the early invaders had worn body armor.⁴⁰ Were these “tall men” in any way involved with the Mound?

More recently, a new resident of Tuckerton spent several years making diligent inquiries in an attempt to pin down the nature of the skeletons. Despite reaching out to the Smithsonian Institution, the University of Pennsylvania, and authoritative and local sources, his initial skepticism of the lore remained.⁴¹ Documents were sketchy if available at all, and the skeletons had been scattered to the mythical winds. Beliefs seemed to have evolved with the retelling of the story.

Whether the Jillson find involved misunderstanding or a hoax, none of the speculation seems to have addressed the possibility of the skeleton having been of the Adena culture, a group reported to live in part (500 BCE to 100 CE) of the Early Woodland period. Referring to the Adena, one source indicates that “In the 1800s, reports began to surface of the discovery of very large skeletal remains in the burial mounds of North America. . . . As is well known, nineteenth and early twentieth century newspapers frequently ran stories of gigantic skeletons found throughout the country.”⁴²

Seeking some clarification of the Lenape’s role, if any, your author was encouraged to note the presence of a weathered copper statue of an Indian, located in a small park where Great Bay Boulevard begins at Route 9 in downtown Tuckerton. As with other parts of the story, things were not quite as expected, since the statue had originally been erected in Camden in 1920 in honor of the local members belonging to the Improved Order of Red Men, a fraternal organization, who had participated in World War I. Threatened by pending construction in Camden, it was relocated to Tuckerton in 1981 as the community hosted one of the last IORM lodges in the state.⁴³ Its presence provided no elucidation regarding either local natives or Norsemen.

Tuckerton seems to abound in interesting tales and mysteries, but none so great as the Tuckerton Mound story. In fact, the Tuckerton Mound is located in adjacent Little Egg Harbor Township, from which state lawmakers created Tuckerton Borough in 1901. Ten years earlier, the state legislature approved a bill to remove Little Egg Harbor Township from Burlington County and add it to Ocean County.⁴⁴

Some questions concerning the Tuckerton Mound are either unanswerable or subject to speculation. As one drives down the humble but majestic Great Bay Boulevard, the seagulls continue to drop clams from a high to crack them open, sometimes seeming to favor in doing so onto the five bridges of Seven Bridges Road. Their ancestors no doubt witnessed what happened at the Tuckerton Mound centuries ago, but they cannot talk, so the Mound's mysteries continue, and its shells remain in great profusion.



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NOTE

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In addition, appreciation is due to Paul Schopp, not only for his editing skills, but for his keen perception of New Jersey history.

This paper's content, however, is solely the responsibility of the author.

ENDNOTES

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- 10 R. Alan Mounier, "A Brief History of Investigations at the Tuckerton Shell Mound," *Bulletin of the Archaeological Society of New Jersey* no. 54 (1999), 43, 44.
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- 13 *1930 Official Road Map*, issued by the State Highway Commission. Courtesy Paul W. Schopp collection. Dotted red markings show the upper part of the proposed S4A as completed, and the dashed red markings show the lower half above the open water as underway. The expected connection at Brigantine is not shown.
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- 18 Alanson Skinner and Max Schrabisch, *Bulletin* 9, *A Preliminary Report of the Archaeology Survey of the State of New Jersey*. (Trenton, NJ: MacCrellish & Quigley, State Printers, 1913), 11.
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- 28 Dorothy Cross, *Archaeology of New Jersey* vol. 1 (Trenton, NJ: Archaeological Society of New Jersey and the New Jersey State Museum, 1941), 39–41.
- 29 Brendan McNerney, "Inside the creepy, abandoned villages deep in the New Jersey Pine Barrens that were once bustling towns and are now home to something much more mysterious." October 31, 2019. <https://www.insider.com/inside-new-jersey-pine-barrens-legends-abandoned-ghost-towns-2019-10#the-story-of-the-pine-barrens-goes-back-thousands-of-years-before-the-iron-mills-of-the-17th-century-the-tuckerton-mound-a-mound-of-seashells-created-by-indigenous-people-who-would-travel-to-the-great-bay-seasonally-is-thought-to-be-10000-years-old-47>.
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- 45 Courtesy of Jeanette Peterson.