

## History of Fort Ancient Earthworks & Nature Preserve

In Warren County, Ohio, an isolated peninsula rises 80 meters (about 260 feet) above the muddy banks of the Little Miami River. There exists an immense monument to the dedication and technological savvy of the original inhabitants, American Indians, of prehistoric North America. This vast 51-hectare (about 126 acres) plateau is enclosed by embankment walls that stand 1.5 to 7 meters (about 5 to 23 feet) high, constructed by repeatedly dumping baskets loaded with soil upon one another. The people of the Hopewell Culture, known for their engineering expertise, built these walls and many other features both within the enclosure and on the steep valleys that surround the site: conical and crescent-shaped mounds, limestone pavements and circles, and many subsurface elements that are currently coming to light. Today, the Fort Ancient Earthworks & Nature Preserve is listed on the National Register of Historic Places because of its importance to Ohio prehistory.

Early investigations at Fort Ancient were conducted in the form of mapping expeditions in the early 1800s and expanded towards the end of the century to surface collecting and full-scale excavations by William King Moorehead, a local man from Xenia, Ohio. Moorehead, along with others, was convinced that the impressive bluff-top embankment walls were created to defend against invaders. Later research showed, however, that Fort Ancient represents an embankment of ceremonial space rather than a fortress. Archaeological investigations have been nearly continuous at Fort Ancient since Moorehead, but the techniques used and the information gained have drastically changed how the site is viewed.

In 2005, Dr. Jarrod Burks performed remote sensing, a method for detecting what is below the ground without actually digging, in areas that had not been previously excavated. These tests revealed a mysterious feature never seen before in Hopewell archaeology, a circular arrangement of posts nearly 60 meters (about 200 feet) in diameter. The Ohio History Connection asked Dr. Robert Riordan, Professor Emeritus and Chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio to conduct an archaeological investigation in this newly discovered area with the help of his Field School in Archaeology. He began excavations in 2006 and continued through 2015. At the center of this ring of posts, now referred to as the Moorehead Circle, there lays a shallow basin filled with presumably burned red clay. Currently, there are several research projects based on the work being done at the Moorehead Circle in hopes that we might gain insight into how it was used and, potentially, how Fort Ancient itself was used in prehistory.