

AMERICAN ANTIQUITIES AND THE PROCESS OF ETHNOGENESIS IN THE EARLY REPUBLIC

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This essay discusses some of the literary expressions dealing with the gigantic earthworks which the first European immigrants and people from the Atlantic seaboard discovered in the Mississippi Valley, thus articulating the inchoate processes of ethnogenesis and nation-building in the early Republican period.

I tumuli della Valle del Mississippi e il loro ruolo nel processo della costruzione della nazione americana

L'articolo tratta delle espressioni letterarie che discutevano la presenza dei tumuli giganteschi scoperti nella 'Mississippi Valley' dai primi emigranti europei e americani provenienti dalla costa atlantica. Ciò formulò, nel primo periodo repubblicano, importanti processi di etnogenesi e 'nation-building'.

Part I

In his controversial poem "The Gift Outright", which he read at the inauguration ceremony of President John F. Kennedy, Robert Frost offered a memorable description of the fraught relation between the early republican problem of forging a nation and an accompanying national American identity: «The land was ours before we were the land's. [...] the land. [...] still unstoried, artless, unenhanced» (Frost 236). In truth, in the first decades of the nineteenth century, the geography of the United States was by no means a well-known or even definable territory, nor was it 'unstoried' and 'unenhanced'. What both Frost and a host of antebellum observers overlooked were the stunning earthwork structures of a vanished civilization now known generically as the Moundbuilders. In this essay, I will discuss the cultural disconnections that arose above all before and during the period of Jacksonian democracy as European immigrants and people on the eastern seaboard began to settle in the vast Mississippi Valley

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region extending from the Ohio territory to the Mississippi River. Strikingly, the vexed matter of ethnogenesis (the creation of a homogeneous national identity) was in great part a consequence of undefined borders and rapid westward expansion, conveniently framed by the ideology of Manifest Destiny. Armed with the popular conviction of continental determinism, settlers and immigrants were willfully blinded to the remarkable evidence of the vast sculptured ruins of an aboriginal civilization that only a few intellectuals and travellers of the period began to herald as a unique heritage of American antiquities.

In his important address “The Significance of the Frontier in American History”, delivered at the international Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner famously defined American character and American democracy in terms of a moving contact zone, the frontier, where self-reliant settlers faced and fought the indigenous peoples whose land they usurped through treaty or war. In Turner’s words, «American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line» (2). He then adds, «In this advance, the frontier is the outer edge of the wave – the meeting point between savagery and civilization» (3). Given the blinkering effect of this binary version of American nation-building and ethnogenesis, the native peoples were seen merely as a temporary bother to be swept implacably aside by whatever means. Their villages, hunting grounds, customs and culture were unilaterally reduced to the label of «free land», or, in Turner’s words, «inanimate nature» (7). According to the address’s summary notation, «The farmers met Indians armed with guns» (13). Thanks to a myriad sharpshooting Daniel Boones, Indian trading posts gave way to farming villages and a surrounding agrarian paradise. But as revisionist historians from the 1970s have noted, a lot was left out of this version of American continental expansion, namely everything pertaining to the life and destiny of the indigenous peoples, not to mention the unique heritage of so-called American antiquities.

One of the startling aspects of Turner’s address is that it refuses to pause even once to mention the remarkable mounds, effigies, forts, temples, platforms, and tumuli scattered abundantly across that rich terrain of the Mississippi Valley. And yet, as Turner confesses, he himself lived among those pioneers of the old Northwest Territory. Indeed, he once excavated a burial mound in Wisconsin in 1886 and subsequently developed an interest in mound-builder archaeology (Hawley 271-82). To be sure, Turner above all wanted to narrate the social processes of American ethnogenesis: «In the crucible of the frontier the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics» (23). The frontier brought with it individualism, democracy, and nationalism. In his view

the national quest for a usable past that went beyond the secondary effects of antebellum sectionalism and the vexed matter of slavery did not include the contributions of the continent's first peoples. Ultimately, these peoples and the effects of their civilization were rendered invisible by a more central value: «[N]ever again will such gifts of free land offer themselves. [...] There is not *tabula rasa*. The stubborn American environment is there with its imperious summons to accept its conditions» (37-8). With this astonishing remark, Turner joins the company of Robert Frost and his poem "The Gift Outright".

A little more than a hundred years earlier (Wilson 98-133), also Thomas Jefferson excavated an aboriginal burial mound near his Monticello mansion and provided an extended commentary on it in "Query XI" of his important book *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787). Describing the mound as a spheroidal "barrow", he noted that «many are to be found all over this country» (223). Jefferson attributed these mounds to «the Aboriginal Indians» (223) and pioneered the methods of trenching and stratigraphic observation to report on the mound's contents. What he found were «a thousand skeletons» and noted that such mounds were «of considerable notoriety among the Indians» of his day (225). Although the mound was once twelve feet high and forty feet in diameter, cultivation had reduced it to a height of seven and a half feet. Evidently, the other mounds suffered a similar fate, for he says of two others in the vicinity, «[they] are much reduced in their height, and spread in width, by the plough, and will probably disappear in time» (226). Although Jefferson was awarded the title of «father of American archaeology» (Hantman and Dunham 46), he was also one of the initial promoters of the spirit of western expansion and the ideal type of the American yeoman.

In Jefferson's day it was the Department of War that managed Indian Affairs. While Jefferson wholeheartedly encouraged westward expansion, he also stated as a corollary that the indigenous peoples had to abandon their nomadic ways and become farmers or pay the consequences. He articulated this policy in a private letter to Governor William H. Harrison written on February 27, 1803: «When they withdraw themselves to the culture of a small piece of land, they will perceive how useless to them are their extensive forests» (Jefferson 1118). In Jefferson's view the indigenous races had two choices, «they will in time either incorporate with us as citizens of the United States, or remove beyond the Mississippi» (1118). On the other hand, «Should any tribe be fool-hardy enough to take up the hatchet [...] the seizing the whole country of that tribe, and driving them across the Mississippi [...] would be an example to others, and a furtherance of our final consolidation» (1118-1119). At the time of writing this letter, Jefferson feared that the French, whom the indigenous peoples favored over the Americans, were about to occupy New Orleans. He closes his letter to

Harrison with these words: «I have given you this view of the system which we suppose will best promote the interests of the Indians and ourselves, and finally consolidate our whole country to one nation only» (1120). There was little room and little time to fuss over the amenities of extensive negotiations. Jefferson was privately commissioning Harrison, Governor of Indiana and later famous 'Indian fighter,' to handle the local tribes briskly, for «[t]he crisis is pressing: whatever can now be obtained must be obtained quickly» (1120).

While Jefferson expressed early scholarly interest in the languages, origins, and material culture of the first Americans, as President he passed up a unique opportunity to make the acquaintance of the brilliant French surveyor, architect, and cartographer Barthélemy Lafon and his remarkable plan to map American antiquities throughout the nation. Jefferson knew of Lafon through his frequent correspondence with the surveyor William Dunbar (Dunbar letter to Jefferson, July 6, 1805) and later from his friend Benjamin Latrobe (Kennedy 209-217), both of whom appreciated the Frenchman's rare skills; but he chose not to reply to a letter Lafon wrote him from New Orleans on April 11, 1805 (Lafon to Jefferson). In this letter Lafon presented himself as Louisiana's surveyor general and sought employment in this role, at a time when Jefferson urgently wanted a boundary line drawn between American and Spanish territory in western Louisiana-Texas. A few months after his letter to the President, on August 19, 1805, Lafon wrote to William Dunbar, «[W]ould it not be [...] useful for the perfect knowledge of the epoch at which great nations inhabited these vast countries that there should be established an ancient map of America, that is to say a map on which would be represented all the ancient monuments, their positions and their extent» (Rowland 181).

In the early months of 1805 Lafon was still working on his unrivaled map *Carte Générale du Territoire d'Orléans Comprenant aussi la Floride Occidentale et une Position du Territoire du Mississippi*, printed in 1806, when he wrote to Dunbar expressing his intense interest in the American antiquities he had surveyed in Louisiana: «You have doubtless seen the monuments of Catahoula. The pyramid is remarkable for its height and indicates to me that the peoples who used to inhabit that country were more numerous and more powerful than those who inhabited the lower part of the Mississippi River» (Rowland 181). During his surveying work he also identified another important group of mounds which he mentions in the same letter: «One league from Pointe à la Hache one finds some of these monuments scattered throughout the entire interior of North America». After providing their precise dimensions, he mentions Lepage Duprat's famous history in which he raises a question for which Lafon believes he has found the answer: «On our arrival in this country», says he [Duprat], «the river was called Mississippi as far as New Orleans, but the

in two different places: one at the fork of R. du Ouatchita and R. aux boeufs; and another in much larger type above *L. Anderson*, on *Baiou Tensas*.

Part II

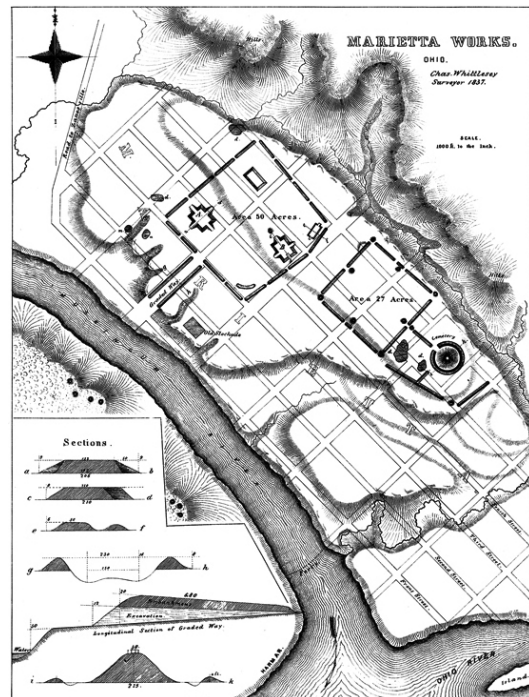
Lafon's ambitious project led the way for later antebellum scholars eager to map a number of major mound sites in the Ohio Valley before they disappeared under the plough of the nation's advancing army of farmers. As Kennedy ruefully notes in his historical overview of American antiquities, «America's ancient past was being obliterated at a pace which, by 1948, had reduced by ninety percent the earthen architecture available to Squier and Davis a century earlier» (239). It is in vain that we seek evidence of equivalent mound sites in Jedidiah Morse's authoritative *The American Geography; or A View of the Present Situation of the United States of America*, published in 1792. In his section devoted to the "Western Territory", Morse spends these spare words on American antiquities: «The number of old forts found in the Kentucky country are the admiration of the curious, and a matter of much speculation. [...] When, by whom, and for what purpose, these were thrown up, is uncertain. They are certainly very ancient, [...] and the oldest natives have lost all tradition respecting them» (463). Attributing these structures to a lost race, he also notes, «At a convenient distance from these always stands a small mount of earth, thrown up in the form of a pyramid, and seems in some measure proportioned to the size of its adjacent fortification» (463). When the tumuli were excavated, bones and skeletons were discovered.

Morse has no more to say about the unique wonders of the Territory's «Antiquities and Curiosities» (463). On neither of his two large maps charting the nation's rapid growth does he identify the presence of the massive clusters of earthworks in the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys. On the other hand, his focus is irremediably on the expansive energies of the American yeoman: «[I]t is well known that empire has been travelling from east to west. Probably her last and broadest seat will be America. [...] Elevated with these prospects, [...] we cannot but anticipate the period, as not far distant, when the AMERICAN EMPIRE will comprehend millions of souls, west of the Mississippi» (469). As John Stilgoe has pointed out, the orthogonal grid imposed by the Land Ordinance of 1785 on the western territories «determined the spatial organization of two-thirds of the present United States» (99). Both the grid and the vision of a yeoman empire sprung from Thomas Jefferson's enlightened mind. In their classic study *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley* (published in 1848) Ephraim Squier and Edwin Davis published a set of remarkable topographical plans of several of the major mound complexes in Ohio as a paper record

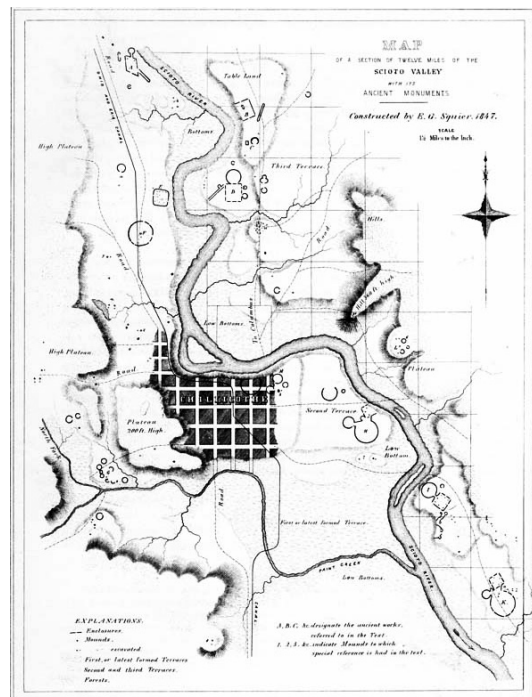
shored up against their rapid disappearance. In the topographical view of figure 3 the mounds of Marietta, Ohio, the town's grid has completely invaded the ancient site.

Writing from Columbus, Ohio, in 1833, Caleb Atwater wrote in the preface to his *Writings on the earth sculptures of the Mississippi Valley*, «All the most important Ancient Works are either entirely or partly destroyed, and will soon be gone. No other accurate surveys were ever made of these works, but mine, and it is too late now for any to be made hereafter» (6). His «Description of the Antiquities Discovered in the State of Ohio and other Western States» was first published in 1820 as Volume 1 in the American Antiquarian Society's *Transactions and Collections*. In his book *The Mapping of Ohio*, Thomas Smith rightfully refers to Atwater's work as the first systematic study of Ohio's prehistoric mounds (33). Atwater's pessimism was confirmed a decade later in the incredible drawing by Ephraim Squier (figure 4) of the town of Chillicothe, Ohio, as it threatens one of the most sublime constellations of the Mound-builders' earth works.

Looking over the town's advance, Atwater lamented «the destroying hand of man» (20). But it is Squier and Davis, writing from Chillicothe in 1847, who best explained the precarious destiny of the Mississippi Valley's greatest assemblage of American antiquities: «The operations of the elements, the shifting channels of the streams, the levelling hand of public improve-



3. View of Marietta, Ohio, from Squier and Dais.



4. View of Chillicothe, Ohio, by Ephraim Squier.

ment, and most efficient of all, the slow but constant encroachments of agriculture, are fast destroying these monuments of ancient labor, breaking in upon their symmetry and obliterating their outlines» (xxxix).

Travellers to the West in the early nineteenth century were astounded not only by the dimensions and variety of the Mound-builders' monuments but also by something else. As Caleb Atwater noted in 1820, «It is a circumstance which has often elicited remark from those who, as tourists, have visited St. Louis, that so little interest should be manifested by its citizens for those mysterious and venerable monuments of another race by which on every side it is environed» (155). In his travelogue *The Far West* (1838), Edmund Flagg also visited this gateway city and reacted to its prehistoric works in typical fashion:

It is in the northern suburbs of the city that are to be seen those singular ancient mounds for which St. Louis is so celebrated; and which, with others in the vicinity, form, as it were, a connecting link between those of the north, commencing in the lake counties of Western New-York, and those of the south, extending deep within the boundaries of Mexico, forming an unbroken line from one extremity of the great valley to the other (I: 152-153).

Throughout his travels Flagg dedicated much of his time to describing and wondering over American antiquities along the Mississippi Valley's major waterways, but he could not understand why the locals uniformly failed to share his interest. At one point he explodes,

It need not be said that such indifference of feeling to the only relics of a by-gone race which our land can boast, is not well in the citizens of St. Louis, and should exist no longer; nor need allusion be made to that eagerness of interest which the distant traveller [...] never fails to betray for these mysterious monuments of the past, when, in his tour of the Far West, he visits St. Louis (156).

For Flagg and other literati who took an interest in archaeology or America's 'prehistory,' the young nation's antiquities were as sublime and inspiring as «the castled crags of the Rhine» (I:156). A true romantic, Flagg enthused, «It is the mystery, the impenetrable mystery veiling these aged sculptures, which gives them an interest for the traveller's eye. They are landmarks in the lapse of ages, beneath whose shadows generations have mouldered, and around whose summits a gone eternity plays!» (156). Without mentioning Micah Flint's name, Flagg then cites these lines from the author's poem "The Mounds of Cahokia":

Ye mouldering relics of a race departed,
Your names have perished; not a trace remains,
Save where the grass grown mound its summit rears
From the green bosom of your native plains (Flint 57).

For reasons of health, Flint's family had moved to Cahokia, Ohio, where he lived and died in the shadow of the town's prehistoric city and drew his themes from it. In a memorable poem titled "The Prairies", written in 1832, William Cullen Bryant revisited Flint's romantic perspective in lines that have now become famous:

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 rivers, 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 [...]
All is gone –
All – save the piles of earth that hold their bones – (Bryant 163).

Towards mid-century, as is well-known, such musings encouraged a number of American Renaissance writers (Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Margaret Fuller, Herman Melville, and others) to focus on native themes but not on the Mound-builders. As Caroline Kirkland declares in her important preface to Mary Eastman's book *Dacohatab; or, Life and Legends of the Sioux around Fort Snelling* (1848), «In the history and character of the aborigines is enveloped all the distinct and characteristic poetic material to which we, as Americans, have an unquestioned right» (vi). To argue her point and give it cultural respectability, she joins writers like Thoreau in appealing to European and classical culture, «Here is a peculiar race, of most unfathomable origin, possessed of the qualities which always prompted poetry, and living lives which are to us as shadowy as those of the Ossianic heroes» (vi). So, she asks almost plaintively, «Why is it that we lack interest in things at home» (vi)?

Known for such popular frontier works as *Forest Life* (1844) and *Western Clearings* (1845), Kirkland then explains why: «[O]ur neglect of Indian material in particular may be in part accounted for, by our having become acquainted with the aborigines after the most unpoetical fashion, in trying to cheat them out of their lands, or shooting them when they declined being cheated» (vii). Alluding to American authors' lingering sense of cultural inferiority with respect to England, she huffs, «If we had only read about the Indians, as a people living in the mountain-fastnesses of Greece, or the broad plains of Transylvania, we should without difficulty have discovered the romantic elements of

their character» (vii). Kirland here touched upon a raw nerve that still pulsed painfully through the work of writers such as Cooper, Hawthorne, and even Henry James. But she refused to back away from this major poetic flashpoint of her day: «we neglect the new and grand material which lies all around us, in the sublime features of our country» (vii). Having lived for a spell in the frontier town of Detroit, Michigan, she authoritatively claimed that the native «has as many qualifications for the heroic character as Ajax, or even Achilles» (ix).

James Hall, a western writer who spent much of his life in Illinois, expressed some interest in American antiquities in his volume *Letters from the West* (1828), but only as it concerned the vanishing red men: «[O]ur uncultivated predecessors have left so few memorials behind them, that the rudest and frailest of their monuments arrest attention» (134). Unwittingly, western travellers often revealed another form of antiquarian nostalgia among the Mississippi Valley settlers, namely their choice of place-names lifted from Europe's past. Thus, during his travels Hall casually mentions passing through Ohio towns with names such as Troy, Athens, and Gallipolis. It should be said, however, that these same high-sounding names became part of a toponymic brew that included countless indigenous names providing us with a descriptive vocabulary of a now lost landscape. "Galliopolis", Hall tells us, is perched on the banks of the "Kenhawa River". In Hall's day it was a town made up of a hundred French families (Hall 134), thus the name Gallipolis or (in Greek) "city of the French". As for "Kanawha", in the Iroquois tongue it means "canoe way".

In his short story "The French Village" (1829), Hall provides a snapshot of life in a frontier village, where both nation-building and ethnogenesis help to shape the story's major theme – the incorporation of their town into the American nation as an inevitable result of the Louisiana Purchase. In his travelogue *The Far West*, Edmund Flagg speaks of visiting a French town in Illinois named «*Prairie de Rocher*, a little antiquated French hamlet, the scene of one of Hall's Western Legends» (101). In Hall's short story, an American traveller (a thinly disguised Judge Hall) happens to stop at the village towards evening and is immediately welcomed by the entire town, whose people are in the midst of a quaint French festivity called Carnival. As the traveller-narrator notes, «The little colony was composed partly of emigrants from France, and partly of natives – not Indians, but *bona fide* French, born in America, but preserving their language, their manners, and their agility in dancing [...]» (99). The story closes with the traveller returning to the same village years later and finding that it has changed considerably as a result of the effects of Americanization.

The bulk of the story concerns the narrator's account of how pleasantly and happily these French villagers live. They are on friendly terms with the Indians, with whom they regularly trade, to the benefit of both peoples. When they

need supplies, they float down to St. Louis, where they bring their furs and farm products. At the center of the story is a certain French personage named Monsieur Baptiste Menou, a soldier and traveller, whom the narrator befriends and enjoys for his conversation and good cheer. Menou has «accompanied the friendly Indians on several hunting expeditions [...] and had made a trading voyage to New Orleans» (101). There are other characters in the story, in particular the equally important Mademoiselle Jeannette Duval, who agrees to marry Menou at end. Together, they epitomize the village's culture and French spirit. But what is especially interesting in Hall's story is the casual way in which the village's surrounding environment envelops and interdefines the everyday life and customs of the inhabitants. For besides trading with the Indians, cultivating their crops on the village commons, making occasional runs down to St. Louis and New Orleans, and enjoying their gay festivities, the villagers live in close symbiotic relation with the territory. And this milieu, the reader learns, includes the presence of American antiquities: «I visited the mounds where the bones of thousands of warriors were mouldering, overgrown with prairie violets and thousands of nameless flowers» (108).

Little more is said about the mounds, except this further fact: they serve the traveller and the villagers as a source of orientation and a site of memory in the landscape. Above all, the narrator implicitly makes it a point to say that he visited them, as part of the region's and the nation's heritage. As such, they are simply there, as an integrating element of the milieu under the stewardship of the French villagers. When the narrator returns several years later, things have drastically changed: «The roads were crowded with the teams, and herds, and families of emigrants, hastening to the land of promise. Steamboats navigated every stream, the axe was heard in every forest, and the plough broke the sod whose verdure had covered the prairie for ages» (108-109). The implications are clear enough. The halcyon scenario of the village and the landscape, including the still-point of the mounds, were being upended by the march of Progress. As an old settler tells the narrator at the very end of the story, «Dis come for have d' Americain government to rule de countrie» (112). The village, the mounds, and the surrounding territory will never be the same again.

As John Louis O'Sullivan, creator of the ideology of "Manifest Destiny", proclaimed in the first issue of the *Democratic Review* (October 15, 1837): «There is an immense field open to us, if we would but enter it boldly and cultivate it as our own. All history has to be re-written» (14). Hall's story "The French Village", evidently confirms that O'Sullivan's notion of 'field' was meant to be twice true, both literally and metaphorically. In his novel *Behemoth: A Legend of the Mound-Builders* (1839), the literary nationalist Cornelius Mathews deployed this twice-true 'field' to rhapsodize over America's extinct

creature the Mastodon, the last example of which was killed by the Mound-builders in defense of their civilization. Although Mathews ignored the findings of archaeology, he did want to use native materials in his attempt to boost a specifically national literature. Accordingly, «His [the author's] main design was to make those gigantic relics, which are scattered throughout this country, subservient to the purposes of imagination» (iii). And he himself confesses, «In describing the Mound-builders no effort has been made to paint their costume, their modes of life or their system of government» (iv).

Motivating his choice of theme was certainly a strategy to advocate for native subject matter. This meant that he would have to win over all those fellow citizens who doted on English literature and spurned their own authors at home. In an attempt to anticipate his reader's demands, Mathews cautioned,

It is enough for us to know [...] that they [the Mound-builders] existed, toiled, felt and suffered; that to them fell, in these pleasant regions, their portion of the common heritage of our race, and that around those ancient hearth-stones, washed to light on the banks of the far western rivers, once gossiped and enjoyed life, a nation that has utterly faded away (iv).

And then, sounding a theme dear to Caroline Kirkland, he reaches for what had by then become a standard way of arguing: «A green forest or a swelling mound is to them [reader and author] as glorious as a Grecian temple» (v). Mathews's third-person narrator then continues this analogy in the novel's incipit,

Still we can gather vaguely, that the Mound-builders accomplished a career in the West, corresponding, though less magnificent and imposing, with that which the Greeks and Romans accomplished in what is styled by courtesy the Old World. The hour has been when our own West was thronged with empires (2).

In 1851, the amateur archaeologist Montroville Wilson Dickeson commissioned John Egan to create the spectacular "Panorama of the Monumental Grandeur of the Mississippi Valley", which included twenty-five scenes dealing with different aspects and subjects of Mound-builder culture. Egan's creation, which was approximately two meters high and over one-hundred meters long, was actually a diorama, or moving panorama (Griffiths 1-37). The diorama drew from the sketches Dickeson made while excavating a number of tumuli along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers from 1837 to 1844 (B.L.H. 349-54; Veit 20-31). Unique in kind, this early version of a 'travel movie' is now preserved at the Saint Louis Museum of Art and can be viewed on its internet site. It is fitting that Egan and Dickeson chose to create a cinematic presentation that corresponded to the nervous procession of emigrants and easterners to the Western lands on both sides of the Missis-

sippi. While these farming settlers worked in the fields from dawn to dusk and ploughed up everything in their way, they probably enjoyed being amused by scenes of the precious aboriginal civilization that they were so indifferently erasing from the nation's memory. What must have counted most to them was the present and the future, although we know that the past is never really past.

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