

Artifacts Unearthed in a 1925 Excavation at Alligator Mound Corroborate a Fort Ancient Culture Affiliation

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Abstract

The Licking County Historical Society has a small collection of ancient Indigenous American Indian artifacts said to have been excavated from Alligator Mound in 1925. The collection includes several artifacts that are typical of the Fort Ancient culture, and which appear likely to constitute a funerary offering. The presence of Fort Ancient culture artifacts buried in Alligator Mound adds further support to the conclusion of Lepper and Frothingham (2003) that it was built in the Late Precontact period. In addition, the possibility that these artifacts were associated with a burial provides evidence for a stronger connection between Ohio and Upper Midwestern effigy mounds, since neither Serpent Mound nor Alligator Mound have previously yielded any evidence for burials; whereas most if not all Upper Midwestern effigy mounds contain one or more burials.

Key words: Late Precontact period, Fort Ancient culture, Effigy mounds, Alligator Mound

Introduction

Alligator Mound (Squier and Davis 1848; Figure 1) is generally recognized to be an effigy mound similar in many respects to the effigy mounds of the Upper Midwest (Birmingham and Rosebrough 2017; Lepper et al. 2026), but with its small, round head and long, curling tail, it is clearly not an alligator effigy. It is, instead, a representation of the Underwater Panther—the ‘Lord of the Beneath World’ in the traditions of many Indigenous American Indian Tribal Nations (Brown and Brightman 1988; Smith 1995).¹

Among the Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) it is known as *Mishebeshu* (Great Panther) and the Miami call it *Lennipinja* (Big Cat). It is an enormous and powerful other-than-human person

that inhabits lakes and rivers and can assume various forms, including a cat-like being with a long tail. The Anishinaabe consider it to be a dangerous spiritual being who may be “entreated for success in fishing, but most frequently he was asked simply to allow humans to travel on the water in safety, for he controls the water itself as well as all creatures which ‘people’ it” (Smith 1995:97).

Alice Fletcher and Francis La Flesche shared the Omaha story of the origins of the Shell society, which included a description of one version of this awesome creature:

... in the mist, as through a veil, they saw the outline of a strange animal. It seemed as big as the great lake. Its skin was covered with hair and was brown like that of the deer. The ridge of its back was serrated with tufts of hair. It had branching horns and hoofs like the deer, and a slender tail with a tuft at the end, which swept toward the sky to the farthest end of the lake. At last, this mysterious shadowy figure melted away and the lake lay quiet... (Fletcher and La Flesche 1992:515).

Birmingham and Rosebrough (2017:138) note that “long-tailed water-spirit mounds are found throughout the effigy mound region but are concentrated in the low-lying eastern part of Wisconsin, where large lakes, swamps and marshes abound.” They agree that Ohio’s Alligator Mound is actually “a long-tailed ‘Underground Water Panther’ or water spirit” (2017:100).

One important difference between Ohio’s effigy mounds and effigy mounds in the Upper Midwest, is that no Indigenous burials have been found in Ohio’s Serpent and Alligator mounds, whereas the Upper Midwest effigy mounds almost always contain the graves of “one or a few people” (Birmingham and Rosebrough 2017:148).² New evidence from a previously undocumented excavation suggests that Alligator Mound may have included at least one Indigenous burial, and the artifacts recovered from the excavation are consistent with a Fort Ancient culture affiliation for the effigy.

A Surprising Discovery

During a recent inventory of collections at the Licking County Historical Society (LCHS), the curatorial staff identified a small collection of nine artifacts said to have been excavated from the right hind leg of alligator mound (Table 1). Based on handwritten labels on two of the artifacts, the excavation took place in 1925. There is potential confirmation of an excavation into the right rear leg of the Alligator in geophysical data collected by Jarrod Burks (Figure 2). The data included a high resistance anomaly in the right rear leg of the Alligator, which may indicate the location of the 1925 excavation—though it also might indicate a concentration of rocks (e.g., Lepper and Frolking 2003:155).

The collection was donated to the LCHS in 2009 by Edson E. Myers. Myers passed away in 2013 at the age of 98, which indicates that he was around ten years old at the time of the excavation. He is described in his obituary as “a well-known Ohio Valley historian” as well as a “machinist ... a blacksmith, knife and axemaker, mentor, inventor, genealogist, storyteller, and author” (*Columbus Dispatch* 15 October 2013). There is no indication in the obituary that he had

any interest in archaeology or artifact collecting. He may have been involved in the 1925 excavation, or he may have acquired the collection from someone else. There are no notes associated with the collection that provide any additional context for the excavation.

Table 1. Artifacts reportedly excavated from the rear right leg of Alligator Mound in 1925.

LCHS catalog number	Description in LCHS catalog	Additional description
0 2009-0004-01	Stone removed from right hind leg of alligator mound (5 1/2" x 4") Opossum Mound written on stone 8-28-1925.	Stone maul Weight: 986 g Maximum length: 14.4 cm
0 2009-0004-02a	Shell designated as "Hoe Blade." Opossum Mound written on shell.	Shell hoe, heavily used <i>Amblema plicata</i> Weight: 68 g Maximum length: 8.7 cm
0 2009-0004-02b	Small shell	Freshwater mussel valve <i>Lampsilis siliquoidea</i> Maximum length: 8.5 cm
0 2009-0004-02c	Small shell	Freshwater mussel valve <i>Strophitus undulatus</i> Maximum length: 8.5 cm
0 2009-0004-02d	Small shell	Freshwater mussel valve <i>Obovaria subrotunda</i> Maximum length: 4.8 cm
0 2009-004-02[e]	Small shell fragment with notch	Freshwater mussel valve, fragment <i>Paetulunio fabalis</i> Maximum length: 2.5 cm
0 2009-0004-03	Small 1 1/2 x 1/2" black object with pointed tip – perhaps obsidian	Cannel coal pendant Weight: 5.0 g Maximum length: 3.5 cm
0 2009-0004-04a	Bone like pieces or turtle shell-like pieces, 2 1/2" x 2" with possible etched design on top side	Fragment of plastron of Eastern Box Turtle (posterior) <i>Terrapene carolina carolina</i> Weight: 26.0 g Maximum length: 8.4 cm
0 2009-0004-04b	Bone like pieces or turtle shell like piece 3" x 3 1/4" with possible etched design on top side	Fragment of plastron of large Eastern Box Turtle (anterior) <i>Terrapene carolina carolina</i> Weight: 12.0 g Maximum length: 7.0 cm

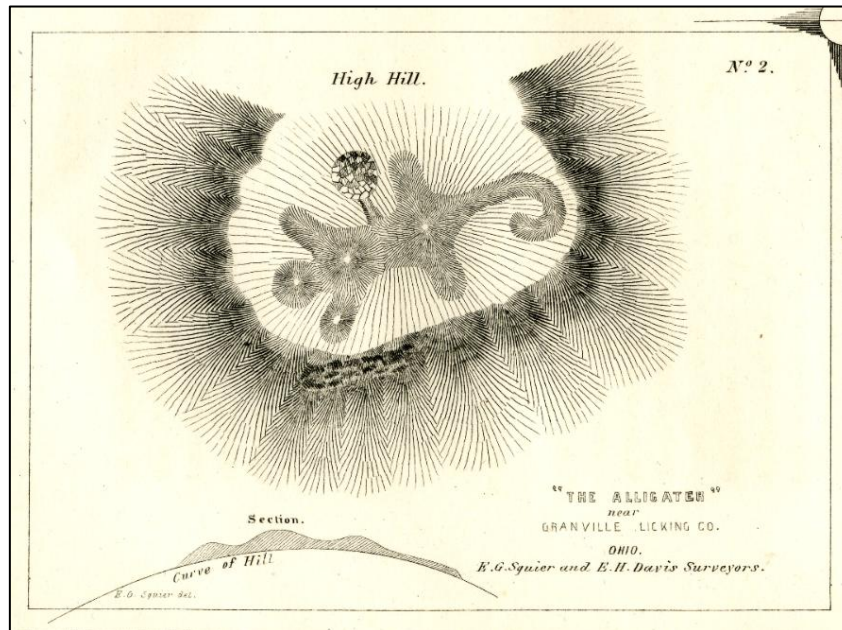


Figure 1. Squier and Davis 1848 map of Alligator Mound.

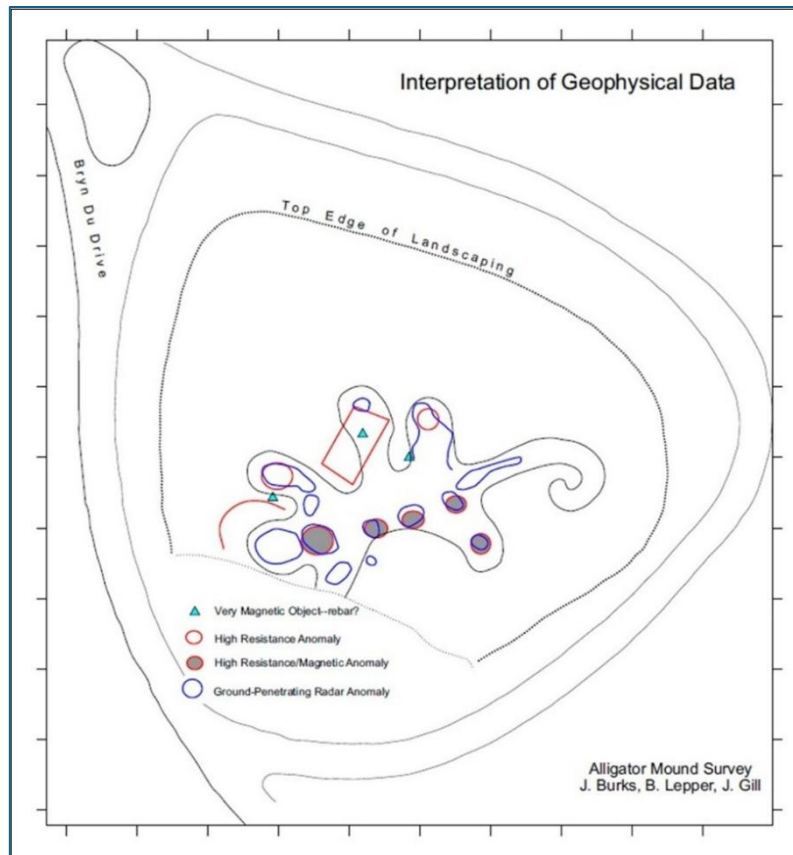


Figure 2. Geophysical survey of Alligator Mound. Courtesy of Jarrod Burks, Ohio Valley Archaeology, Inc.

The LCHS staff cataloged the collection in 2009 (Table 1), placed the small box of material in storage, and then moved on to other responsibilities. Lepper learned of the collection in 2026 from Howard Long, Executive Director of the Licking County Historical Society, after he attended a presentation that Lepper shared on the Hopewell Ceremonial Earthworks at the Octagon Earthworks Visitors Center. Long graciously allowed him to examine the Alligator Mound collection later that same day.

The Alligator Mound Collection

The Myers collection of material from Alligator Mound consists of nine artifacts supposedly excavated from the right rear leg of the Alligator in 1925. There are some difficulties in interpreting the collection, principally because we lack any information regarding the context for the artifacts.

At this point, all we can know is that the late Edson Myers was confident that the artifacts had been excavated from Alligator Mound, that they were important, and that he wanted to ensure that the collection would be preserved in a museum. The artifacts that comprise the Myers collection include a crude stone maul, a shell hoe blade, a cannel coal pendant, three unmodified shells, one fragment of a shell, and two halves of a turtle plastron. The LCHS has reached out to a number of tribal nations to initiate consultation regarding these possible funerary, or otherwise ceremonial artifacts. Out of respect for this process, we have decided not to include images of the potential unassociated funerary objects in this paper.

Stone Maul

The Alligator Mound stone maul is relatively small at 986 g and was crudely made. Most mauls were more carefully shaped with well-defined grooves to allow for a more secure attachment to a handle. Instead, the Alligator Mound maul has only two opposing notches that appear to have been more or less haphazardly chipped into the edge.³ It was evidently an expedient tool made for short-term use. According to Penelope Drooker (1997:316), stone mauls and clubs were “fairly common” at the Madisonville Village site, but surprisingly, they were not found at other Fort Ancient sites for which this information was available. The Alligator Mound expedient maul may have been a funerary offering, but it may simply have been used, discarded and incorporated into mound fill.

Shell Hoe Blade

Drooker (1997:71) observed that “shell hoes were the common agricultural implement throughout the [Ohio River Valley] region” during the Late Precontact period. The shell hoe blade from Alligator Mound was made from an *Amblema plicata* (Threeridge) freshwater mussel. There is heavy wear along the edge. The Ohio History Connection’s archaeology collections include several similar examples from Fort Ancient culture, as well as contemporary northeastern Ohio Whittlesey culture, sites. One example is from the Madisonville Village (see Ohio Memory: A 0246/000010;

<https://ohiomemory.org/digital/collection/p267401coll7/id/834/rec/2>). Given the condition of the Alligator Mound shell hoe, it could be either a funerary offering or a tool that was used in constructing the mound, which, for some reason, was discarded and ended up buried in the mound. Alternatively, as a tool made from a creature of the *Beneath World*, perhaps it was decommissioned and added to the offering.

Cannel Coal Pendant

The cannel coal tooth-shaped pendant does not have a hole at its proximal end. It appears to have been broken at some point and the fractured surface was ground and polished leaving little trace of a drilled hole. Drooker (1997:173) observed that cannel coal pendants of various sorts are well-known from Fort Ancient culture sites as well as neighboring and contemporary Monongahela culture sites.

At least three cannel coal pendants with similarities to the Alligator Mound pendant have been documented from the Fort Ancient culture component at Serpent Mound (A1929/000036.001; A1929/000036.002; A1929/000036.003; see Ohio Memory: <https://ohiomemory.org/digital/collection/p15005coll14/id/50/rec/1>). And similar examples were found at the Feurt Village site (e.g., A 3729/000029.001; see Ohio Memory: <https://ohiomemory.org/digital/collection/p267401coll7/id/856/rec/2>). In addition, Drooker (1997:173) noted that similar tooth-shaped cannel coal pendants were also found at the Buffalo, Fox Farm, Clover and Orchard Fort Ancient culture sites.

Unmodified Shells

There are four apparently unmodified freshwater mussel shells in the collection (Table 1). Three (0 2009-0004-02b, 0 2009-0004-02c, 0 2009-0004-02d) are intact valves and one (0 2009-0004-02[e]) is a small fragment of a valve with a small notch in one edge that is almost certainly a deliberate cultural modification. The shells include the following species: *Lampsilis siliquoidea* (Fatmucket), *Strophitus undulatus* (Creeper), *Obovaria subrotunda* (Round Hickorynut), and *Paetulonio fabalis* (Rayed Bean). With one possible exception, all of these species, including the *Amblema plicata* used to make the shell hoe blade, could have come from Raccoon Creek; and all are known from Raccoon Creek to the present day (Shoobs 2025). *Paetulonio fabalis* has not been reported from Raccoon Creek before, but it was likely present there historically based on its known distribution (Shoobs 2025).

These shells are possible funerary objects that could have been food offerings. A variety of freshwater mussels are listed in a table of faunal remains from the Madisonville Village site (Drooker 1997:109), though none of the shells recovered from Alligator Mound are on that list. Alternatively, they could be containers used to hold some other sort of small, perishable offering, or perhaps they served as tangible links to the *Beneath World*, the realm of the Underwater Panther in whose symbolic body they were placed.

Unmodified Box Turtle Plastron

There are two fragments of what appears to be one Eastern Box Turtle plastron in the Alligator Mound collection. The smaller fragment (0 2009-0004-04b) is the anterior portion, and the larger fragment (0 2009-0004-04a) is the posterior portion (Table 1). Six different species of turtle are listed in a table of faunal remains from the Fort Ancient culture Sand Ridge and Madisonville sites (Drooker 1997:109), so this plastron may be the remains of a food offering or a remnant of a turtle shell rattle but, in either case, it is odd that there is only the one plastron. Moreover, the absence of drilled holes in the plastron weighs against the idea that it was part of some multi-component piece of regalia.

Drooker (1997:231) noted that “Two turtle-shell rattles reported from MLSS-excavated [Madisonville Literary and Scientific Society] burials ... appear to have no counterparts from nonmortuary contexts” (1997:231). Turtles also were denizens of the *Beneath World* with great symbolic power, so this broken plastron also may have been believed to be a potent offering to the Underwater Panther.

Discussion and Conclusion

None of the artifacts in the Myers collection are inconsistent with a Fort Ancient culture attribution; and the cannel coal pendant is virtually diagnostic of the Late Precontact Fort Ancient and Monongahela cultures. This should not be surprising given the age of Alligator Mound as determined by radiocarbon dating of charcoal embedded in the floor of the mound (Lepper and Frolking 2003; Table 2).

There have been a number of excavations into Alligator Mound beginning with Ashel Aylsworth, the owner of the mound when Ephraim Squier and Edwin Davis conducted their survey (Figure 1). In a letter to Squier dated 14 April 1847, Aylsworth wrote that he used a plow to cut into the side of the head and one leg of the “Crocodile” to “examine the materials it was composed of.” In addition, he excavated a 12-foot-long trench from “the left hip & extending to the back & forward” and another “in the right shoulder about two feet deep” (Aylsworth 1847:3).

In 1858, the unreliable William Pidgeon (see Lewis 1886 and Williams 1991) published the *Traditions of De-Coo-Dah and Antiquarian Researches*, in which he claimed to have “examined by excavation” a total of 92 effigy mounds in the Mississippi valley, including the Ohio Serpent and Alligator. He asserted that the “interior structure” of the Alligator was composed of stones and that it was unique among effigy mounds in that the stones showed “marks of order in its arrangement” (Pidgeon 1858:243).

Sometime between 1904 and 1917, Frank Carney, a professor of geology at Denison University, “excavated a long trench along the axis of the mound’s body between the head and tail,” but there are no notes or published report to indicate what he found (Hooge 1993:144). In 1987, William Dancy, an archaeologist at the Ohio State University, excavated a trench through a portion of the altar, or stone platform, which was linked to the Alligator. Paul Hooge

Table 2. Radiocarbon dates obtained from Alligator Mound

¹⁴ C date	Calibrated date	Laboratory number	Material dated	Notes
300 ± 60 BP	1505 – 1595 CE 1620 – 1660 CE	Beta-85517 (AMS)	Particulate charcoal from flotation: wood (ring-porous) < 0.04 g	Sample collected from a depth of approximately 14.0 cm from a profile of left front paw exposed accidentally during restoration efforts. Due to its shallow depth, the sample may have been compromised by more recent contamination.
820 ± 40 BP	1195 – 1260 CE	Beta-134236 (AMS)	Wood charcoal (<i>Quercus</i> sp.) 0.14 g	Sample excavated from the floor of the mound approximately 1.0 m below the surface
840 ± 40 BP	1175 – 1250 CE	Beta-134237 (AMS)	Wood charcoal (ring-porous; probably oak) 0.31 g	Sample excavated from the floor of the mound approximately 1.0 m below the surface
1030 ± 60 BP	980 – 1030 CE	Beta-133667	Soil humates from bulk sediment sample	Sample excavated from beneath a rock within the mound profile at approximately 0.55 m below the surface. Soil humates dates are considered to be unreliable (see Lepper 2020b).

(1993:162) published a map showing the location of the four-meter-long trench in his dissertation; and the Ohio Archaeological Council (1989:5) published a research update in 1989 indicating that Dancey and his student James Foradas were preparing a report on the work. Hooge (1993:156) noted that Dancey found “no large stones in the trench,” which supported a claim that the stones had been removed to contribute to a nearby building (1993:151). And finally, in 1999, Lepper and Frolking (2003) opened a one-by-four-meter trench just behind the left front leg, which is described in their 2003 paper.

What is striking, in the context of this investigation, is that there is no evidence that any of these excavations recovered any artifacts whatsoever. And yet, some unknown individual back in 1925 dug a hole into the right rear leg of the Alligator and recovered this small collection of Indigenous artifacts. One possible explanation for this apparent stroke of luck is that one or more of the objects might have been exposed in the backdirt of a woodchuck burrow. Indeed, in 1974, Donald Valdez of Denison University and Jack Bernhardt of Baruch College in New York observed numerous fragments of “cut sheet mica” in just such a burrow on the right side of the effigy just behind the right front limb (Bernhardt 1976:52; Stallings 1981). According to Bernhardt, the mica was mixed with “diffuse fragments of charcoal and firecracked rock” (1976:52). Bernhardt concluded that the presence of mica in the effigy “tentatively identifies the mound as Hopewell” (1976:52); but, as Lepper and Frolking (2003:150) noted, mica continued to be used in ritual contexts throughout, at least, the Late Woodland period (Seeman and Dancey 2000:599), and was identified with the spiritually-charged scales of the Underwater Panther and Great Serpent by the historic era Huron-Wyandot and Seneca tribes (Hamell 1998:271).

Some of the artifacts in the Myers collection, such as the maul and shell hoe, might have been fortuitously included in mound fill. The other items however, including the mussel shells, turtle plastron, and cannel coal pendant, are much more likely to have been ceremonial offerings. And given that the several previous excavations in other parts of the mound appear to have yielded no artifacts whatsoever, this concentration of items, in what was likely a relatively confined area, stands out as a remarkable anomaly. We suggest that if, as seems likely, these artifacts represent a discrete offering, then a plausible extrapolation based on the limited evidence is that this was an intentional ceremonial, and possibly a funerary deposit.

Birmingham and Rosebrough (2017:149) observed that “very few nonperishable objects were placed with the deceased in [Upper Midwestern] effigy mounds, and most burials lack identifiable grave offerings of any sort.” When objects were buried with individuals they tended to be “sparse and simple” (Birmingham and Rosebrough 2017:105). For example, a burial within a turtle effigy mound at the Nitschke Mound Group in Wisconsin included “two perforated shell beads and several gastropod shells” (Cornelison 2013:125). Alternatively, the Alligator Mound collection of artifacts might represent the contents of a non-funerary ceremonial bundle. Without more information about the archaeological context of the offering, however, it may be impossible to make a reliable determination of its purpose.

If this offering is associated with a Fort Ancient culture burial, then Alligator Mound would share another key attribute with Upper Midwestern effigy mounds. And regardless of whether the artifacts are or are not funerary objects, the presence of Fort Ancient culture ceremonially significant artifacts buried in Alligator Mound provides additional evidence for the Late Precontact age of the effigy.

William Romain and colleagues (2017:217) claimed that Alligator Mound might not be an effigy mound at all, but merely “a set of connected fire-burned mounds perhaps used for signaling, connected by a ‘linking parapet.’”⁴ But when one compares the early maps of Alligator Mound (Figure 1), which were created when the mound was still largely intact, with aerial imagery (Figures 3 and 4) and especially photogrammetric imagery (Figure 5) that is less subject to the subjective interpretations of a surveyor, it is abundantly clear that Alligator Mound is, indeed, a Late Precontact period effigy mound with important similarities to effigy mounds in the Upper Midwest (Birmingham and Rosebrough 2017; Lepper et al. 2026). Thus, the proposition that the Upper Midwestern Effigy Mound “culture” might have influenced Late Precontact groups in Ohio cannot be dismissed with the blithe assertion that the idea is somehow comparable to “the arguments employed by ancient alien theorists” (Romain and Herrmann 2017:85).



Figure 3. Aerial photograph of Alligator Mound, c. 1928. This is the earliest documented aerial photograph of Alligator Mound. It was taken by Warren Weiant, Jr of Newark, Ohio. Photograph courtesy of Warren Weiant, III.



Figure 4. Aerial photograph of Alligator Mound in 2008. Photo by Timothy E. Black/Newark Earthworks Center.

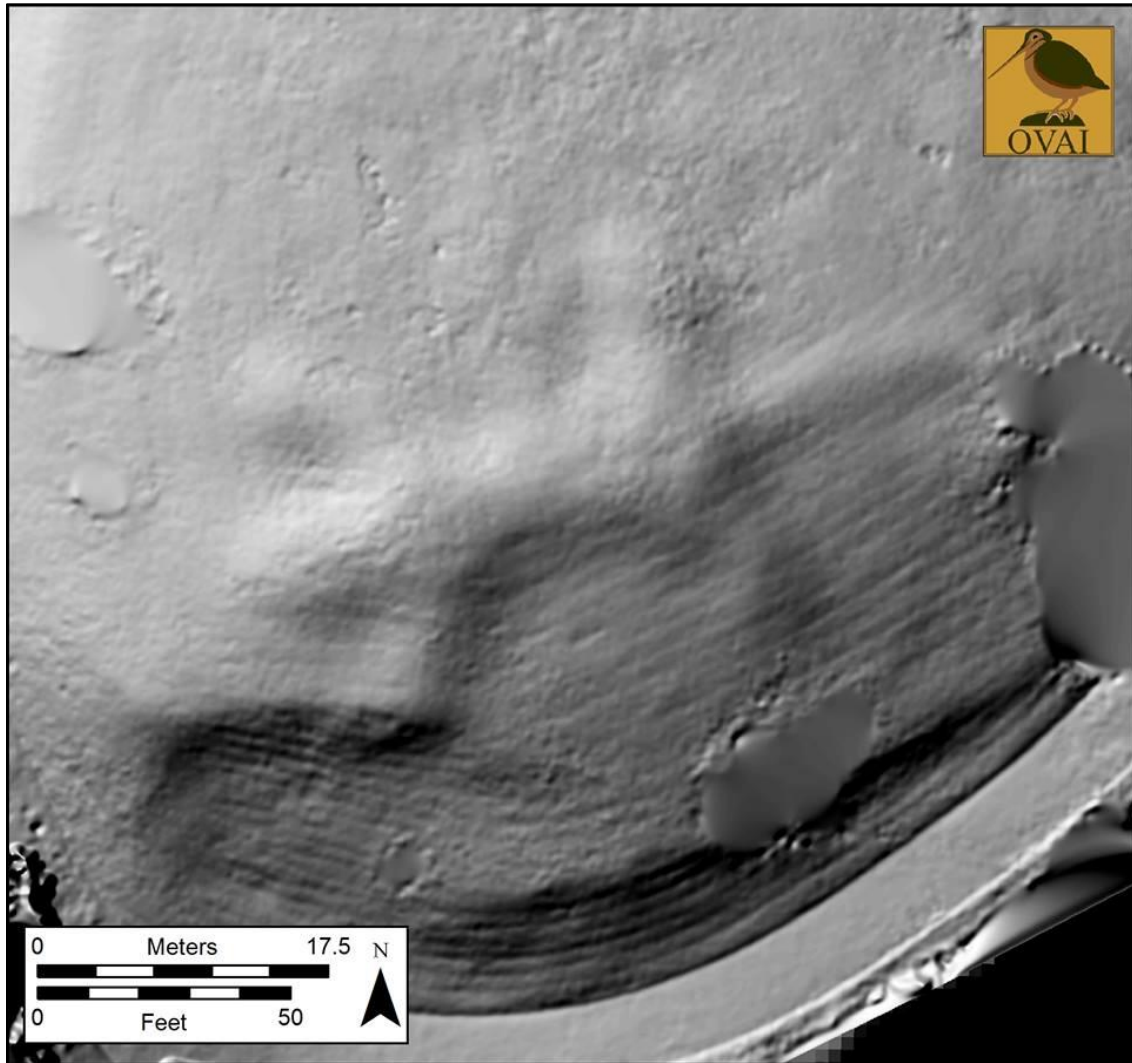


Figure 5. Photogrammetric imagery of Alligator Mound. Image courtesy of Jarrod Burks and Ohio Valley Archaeology, Inc.

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Endnotes

¹ Alligator Mound has had different names over the years. It has been called Opossum Mound as well as Panther Mound. We agree that the mound is not an effigy of an alligator. Indeed, we think there is wide agreement now that the mound depicts the Underwater Panther of Indigenous American Indian traditions. Nevertheless, we think the name is appropriate for reasons that Lepper articulated in a previous paper:

“The name historically associated with ‘Alligator’ mound may contain a clue to the identification of the creature represented by the effigy. Few people who have viewed the mound and who possessed even a passing familiarity with the appearance of alligators have been persuaded that the mound was ever intended to represent an alligator. The effigy mound’s relatively small, round head and the curling tail practically preclude such an identification. However, if early European American settlers had asked locally resident Native Americans what the mound was intended to represent, and if they had indicated the effigy represented the Underwater Panther, how might the European Americans have interpreted the bizarre notion of a panther that lives underwater? George Nelson, an early fur trader who worked among the Canadian Cree and Ojibwa and who took a remarkably sympathetic interest in their religious beliefs, found the Native American term for this manitou more than a little obscure: Nelson variously translated *Michi-Pichoux* as ‘Water Lynx’, ‘Tyger’, ‘water-Cat’, and ‘water-dog’, ‘prefiguring difficulties experienced by many others in rendering the name and the concept intelligible in English’ (Brown & Brightman 1988:108–9). When the salient attributes of the Underwater Panther were described to a European American, that is, a monster with big teeth and a long tail who lives in the water and occasionally eats people, might not these characteristics have suggested an alligator? And subsequent residents of the area would have been assured of the correctness of this identification because, regardless of how

imperfectly the mound resembled an alligator, the descendants of the people who created the effigy said, or had been interpreted to have said, that this was what it represented. This entirely speculative scenario offers one possible explanation for why such a manifestly inappropriate name has clung so tenaciously to this effigy. In this context, it is interesting to note that some Maliseet-Passamaquoddy in northeastern North America now identify a traditional underwater spirit-creature with the alligator (Erikson 1978: 133).”

² “A minority [of the Upper Midwestern effigy mounds] appear at first glance to include no burials at all, but whether this phenomenon is the result of a true lack of burials or the more likely explanation of poor bone preservation, incomplete excavation, or use of excavation methods that miss highly fragmented or cremated bone is unclear” (Birmingham and Rosebrough 2017:148).

³ Given the crudeness of the “maul,” it is possible that it is a geofact – a naturally battered stone that just happens to have some of the features of a maul but given its apparent association with the other artifacts, we presume it is a minimally modified expedient tool.

⁴ In support of their assertion, they cited an early paper by Richard Stallings (1981), published in the amateur magazine *Ohio Archaeologist* (Romain et al. 2017:217). Stallings, however, does not appear to dispute the fact that the “Alligator” is an effigy mound. For example, he stated that “The small round head helps support the observation of many archaeologists that this mound represents an opossum or lizard rather than an alligator or crocodile” (1981:13). And his survey (1981:15) clearly shows the unambiguous outline of a four-legged creature with a long tail and not some fortuitous aggregation of “fire-burned mounds.” Romain and colleagues’ dubious claim was part of an acrimonious debate about the age of Serpent Mound (see Lepper 2018, 2020a, 2020b; Lepper and colleagues 2026).