

Wisconsin Sites

Silver Mound-A Quarry Site

Silver Mound in Jackson County is a good example of a “quarry site” where people gathered the stones to make their tools. Although the name implies that it contains silver, Silver Mound has no silver. It is a large natural hill made up of a very hard kind of cemented sandstone called quartzite that was excellent for making stone tools. This stone was highly desired by ancient peoples. From the earliest days, people traveled to Silver Mound to collect the stone, and it has been used throughout Wisconsin’s prehistory. People traded or traveled for hundreds of miles to collect this stone. Points of this material have been found as far away as Kentucky. There are quarry pits that were used for thousands of years that had to be dug several feet into the bedrock to obtain the best materials.



Stone tool debris and unworked rocks are scattered on the surface of Silver Mound.



A rockshelter at Silver Mound.

At Silver Mound, a rockshelter, or shallow cave, in the hillside was occupied for short periods of time over the last 10,000 years, probably by the people quarrying the stone. Native Americans who came to the site also set up temporary villages in the fields around Silver Mound. The fields are covered with thousands of flakes from people making stone tools. You can visit the site today, and walk through the woods to see the rockshelter and the ancient quarry pits.

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Old Copper Sites

The Reigh site in Winnebago County and the Oconto site in Oconto county are two cemeteries of the Old Copper Culture. They date to between 3000 to 1500 BC. They were excavated in the 1940-1960's by archaeologists. Many human burials with stone, copper and bone artifacts were found here. Many of the artifacts were used for daily activities, such as points, fishing hooks, and woodworking **adzes** and wedges. But many others were special kinds of artifacts that may have been related to ritual or status. For instance, one whistle was made from the wing bone of a swan. Other copper artifacts include bracelets, rings, pendants, and beads.



From left-chunk of hammered copper, and two projectile points.

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Mound Sites To Visit

There are several mound sites in Wisconsin. Perrot, Wyalusing and High Cliff State Parks all have some mounds as well as Lizard Mound County Park and the Kletzien Mound Group in Sheyboan. Just across the river from Prairie du Chien, Effigy Mounds National Monument has a series of effigy mounds and interpretive exhibits. All of these sites allow people today to appreciate the mounds while protecting them as cemeteries.



A mound at Perrot State Park.

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Nicholls Mound-A Burial Mound In Trempealeau

An example of a Hopewell site in Wisconsin is Nicholls Mound near the city of Trempealeau on the Mississippi River. When archaeologists from the Milwaukee Public Museum excavated the mound in the late 1920 - 1930's they discovered a burial tomb dug into the ground and covered with logs. A 12 foot high mound was built over the tomb. The tomb contained several individuals who were buried with ceremonial items made from exotic materials. Some of the items included large stone knives over 6 inches long made of obsidian from the Rocky Mountains, copper ear spoons, 6 copper axes, marine shell beads, and 20 freshwater pearl beads. You can still visit Nicholls mound from the bike trail just outside Trempealeau.



Nicholls mound prior to excavation.



Some artifacts from Nicholls mound.

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Aztalan-Mississippian In Wisconsin

Aztalan is probably Wisconsin's best known archaeological site. The name implies that the site was occupied by the Aztecs. That, however, is not the case. The site was first occupied by the Woodland people and then people from the Mississippian tradition. A surround may have been for fortification or to control who entered and left the village. Stockades inside the village may have divided different use areas and helped to control who entered these areas. Inside the stockade were three large platform mounds and a natural knoll that was used as a mound. The mounds were used for different activities. One mound contained burials, another had a structure on top. These mounds may have been used for ceremonial activities or as a place for the elite religious or political leaders to live. There appears to have been a plaza area within the stockade surrounded by houses. Some efforts have been made to reconstruct parts of the site. The site of Aztalan is now Aztalan State Park.



Visitors to Aztalan.

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The Gundersen Site

The Gundersen site is right beneath the modern city of La Crosse. On the edge of a terrace over a backwater channel of the Mississippi River, the site today extends over an area encompassing approximately 20 blocks. The modern city has been built on top of the ancient one. Between 1300 and 1600 AD, people lived in villages, probably farming the Mississippi river bottom lands and living on the drier terrace. Excavations were conducted in a portion of the site in 1991 prior to construction of a parking lot. Here, over 700 storage or garbage pits were found in the area of one city block, as well as several cemetery areas within the village. Lines of postholes were found where posts for structures had been placed in the ground. These may have been houses or other kinds of shelters. Many thousands of fish bones were found, indicating that people fished in the Mississippi River. Evidence also suggests that they were growing a lot of corn, beans and squash for their daily food.



Excavations in 1991 at the Gundersen site.

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