

*Pieces of Iowa's Past*, published by the Iowa State Capitol Tour Guides weekly during the legislative session, features historical facts about Iowa, the Capitol, and the early workings of state government. All historical publications are reproduced here with the actual spelling, punctuation, and grammar retained.

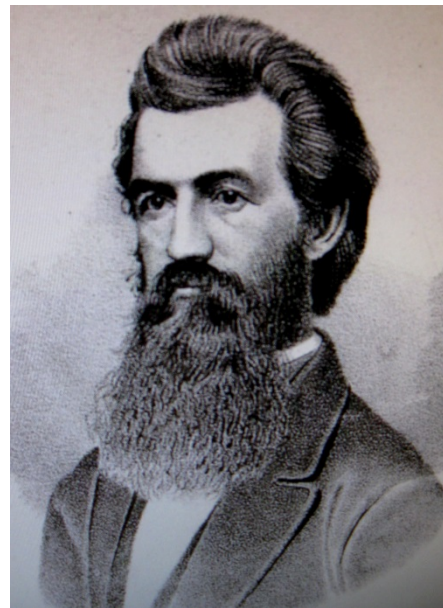
**March 27, 2013**

## **THIS WEEK: History of Iowa from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century**

### **BACKGROUND: BENJAMIN F. GUE**

BENJAMIN F. GUE was born in Greene County, New York, on December 25, 1828. His education was acquired in the public schools, with two terms in academies of Canandaigua and West Bloomfield. He taught school in the winter of 1851 and early in March 1852, came to Iowa, and bought a claim on Rock Creek in Scott County. He was an abolitionist and took a deep interest in the antislavery movements of that period.

Gue was one of the delegates sent from Scott County to the convention, which assembled at Iowa City on February 22, 1856, to organize the Republican party of Iowa. In 1857, he was chosen by the Republicans as one of the Representatives in the Seventh General Assembly. He was one of the authors of the act to establish a State Agricultural College and was selected to fight the bill through the House against an adverse report of the committee of ways and means. He was reelected at the expiration of his first term and in 1861 was elected to the Senate for four years. In that body, he was the author of two important bills: to prohibit the circulation of foreign bank bills in Iowa, and the law devised to



secure an immediate income from the Agricultural College Land Grant, without sacrificing the lands. By the adoption of this plan, Iowa secured for all time a larger income for support of the college than any state having the same amount of land.

At the close of his term in 1884, Gue moved to Fort Dodge and purchased the only newspaper establishment there. In 1865, he was appointed postmaster of Fort Dodge but resigned in the fall of that year, having been nominated by the Republican State Convention for lieutenant governor.

In 1866, he was elected president of the Board of Trustees of the State Agricultural College and for several years gave a large portion of his time to the building and organization of the college. He carried a proposition through the board for the admission of girls as students, against strong opposition. As a member of the committee on organization, he visited the agricultural colleges of the country and was instrumental in selecting President Adonijah Welch and the first corps of professors. Gue took a deep interest in the growth of this college and by voice and pen defended and supported it through all of the years of its existence. In 1872, he moved to Des Moines and became editor of the *Iowa Homestead*. Receiving the appointment of United States Pension Agent of Iowa and Nebraska from President Ulysses S. Grant, he gave his entire time to the duties of that position for eight years. Upon retiring in 1881, he again became editor of the *Iowa Homestead*. For more than fifteen years he took an active part in the political campaigns as a public speaker for the Republican party. He was one of the founders of the Iowa Unitarian Association and the Pioneer Lawmakers' Association, and was author of *History of Iowa*.

## **History of Iowa from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century**

(Volume 1, Chapter II, *History of Iowa*)

### **By Benjamin F. Gue**

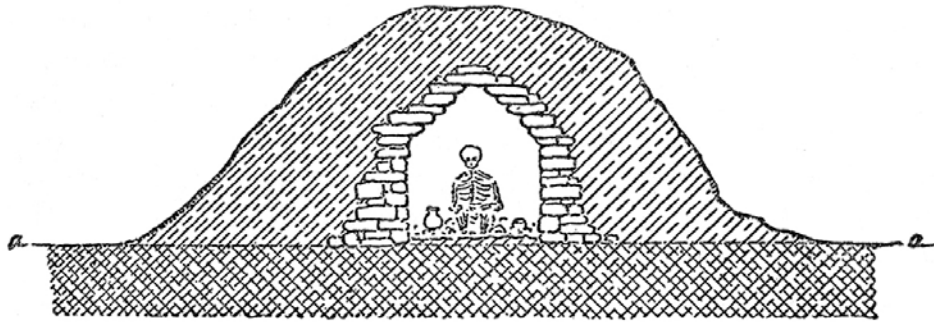
During the period of melting glaciers the surface of the earth was again occupied by plants and animals. Soon after these appeared we find the first evidences of man's advent upon this portion of the earth. Professor Aughey's discovery of arrow points in undisturbed beds of loess at various places in Iowa and Nebraska, indicates with certainty the presence of man soon after the melting of the glaciers. Horses appeared about this time and were used for food, as is clearly shown by the finding of skulls crushed in a manner that could only come from the blows of an implement similar to a stone ax. These axes are found in the same deposit with the skulls, both in this country and Europe, showing that man appeared on both continents during the same geological period.

What sort of people were the first inhabitants of Iowa is a question that must ever be of interest. It is generally believed by archaeologists that remains of two distinct prehistoric races have been found in the Valley of the Mississippi.

The first human skulls discovered resemble those of the gorilla, having thick ridges over the eyes and an almost total absence of forehead, indicating a low degree of intelligence. Similar skulls have been found throughout the different countries of Europe, indicating that the first inhabitants of the earth known to ethnologists were low-browed, brute-like, small-bodied beings, who were but a grade above the lower

animals. Skulls of this type have been found in Illinois, Wisconsin, as well as in Johnson, Floyd, Chickasaw and Dubuque counties of Iowa.\*

The first inhabitants of Iowa and the Mississippi Valley of which we have any evidence are called the "Mound Builders." Stone and copper implements found indicate that they had made progress in the scale of intelligence. Whether they cultivated the soil, erected comfortable dwellings and built towns is not known; but that they made cloth is proven by samples found in mounds, strangely preserved through the innumerable ages that have elapsed. The numbers, color, habits, customs and forms of government of these people, as well as the manner in which



their mounds were constructed, the purpose for which these enduring earthworks of various forms were used,

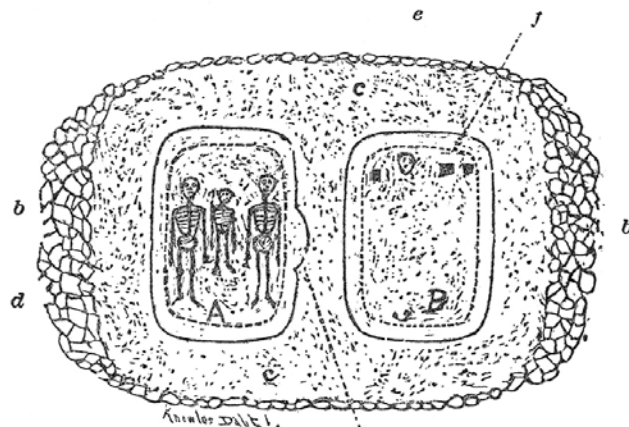
**Mound opened on the bank of the Iowa River in which was found a stone vault containing the skeleton of a "Mound Builder" with a pottery vessel by him.**

and a thousand interesting details of the history of these inhabitants of Iowa must forever remain unknown. Whence they came, how long they possessed the land, from what cause they were exterminated, are problems that will never cease to have an absorbing interest to succeeding races and generations. We can only call them the "Mound Builders," in absence of almost all knowledge of their history.

Evidences of the work of these people are found in many of the eastern states and as far south as Tennessee in great abundance. The mounds are numerous along the Mississippi Valley in Iowa, extending from Dubuque at intervals through Jackson, Clinton, Scott, Muscatine, Louisa and other counties. Many of these when opened are found to contain skeletons partially preserved, with various implements, vessels, pipes and ornaments. One opened near Dubuque disclosed a vault divided into three cells. In the central cell was found eight skeletons sitting in a circle, while in the centre of the group was a drinking vessel made of a sea shell. The whole chamber was covered with logs preserved in cement.

\*Several skulls of this low type may be seen in the collection of the Academy of Science at Davenport.

Some very interesting mounds were found on the Cook farm, near Davenport, which were opened by Rev. Mr. Gass in 1874. There were ten mounds in the group, about two



**Mound opened on the Cook farm near Davenport.**

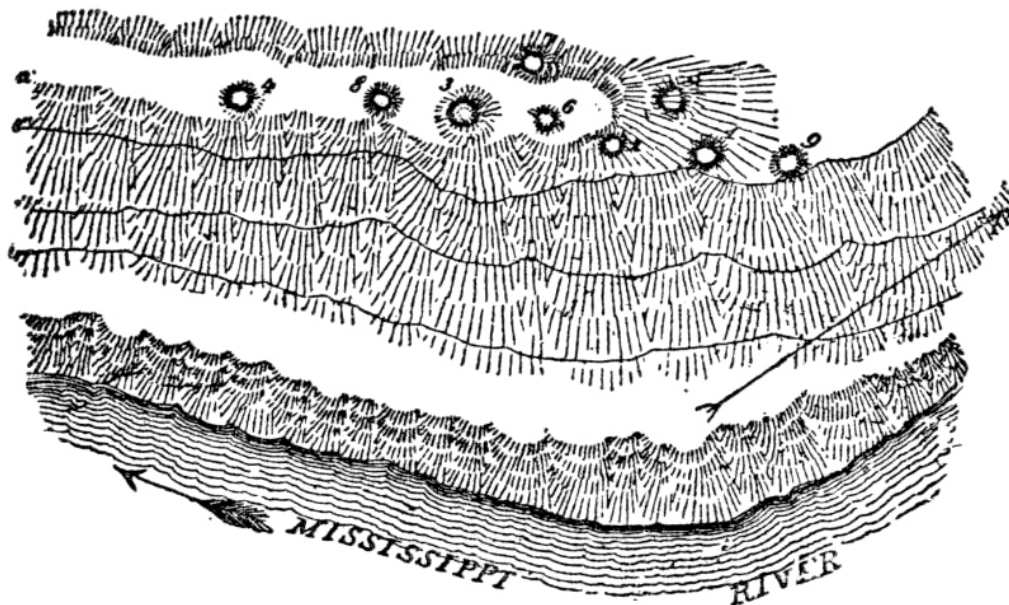
hundred and fifty feet back from the river. Several of them were opened and found to contain sea shells, copper axes, hemispheres of copper, stone knives, pieces of galena, mica, pottery and copper spools. Many of the axes were wrapped with coarse cloth, which had been preserved by the copper. The pipes were of the Mound-Builders' pattern, some of which were carved with effigies of birds and animals. One bird had eyes of copper, another had eyes of pearl, showing much delicacy of manipulation and skill in carving. Twenty copper pipes and eleven copper awls were taken from these mounds.

All the mounds contained skeletons and ashes; two contained altars of stone. In one, tablets were found upon which were hieroglyphics representing letters and figures of people, trees and animals.

In the mound represented in the accompanying illustration, not far below the surface, two skeletons were found. Below these were layers of river shells and ashes several feet in thickness. Beneath this three mature skeletons were lying in a horizontal position, and between them was a skeleton of a child. Near them were five copper axes wrapped in cloth, stones forming a star, carved pipes, several bears' teeth and a broken lump of ochre.

In a mound opened by Rev. Mr. Gass west of Muscatine slough, in 1880, there was found a carved stone pipe, a carved bird, a small copper ax and a pipe carved in the shape of an elephant. Another pipe was discovered in that vicinity shaped to represent a mastodon.

The section of a map here presented shows the location of the mounds on the Cook farm where these interesting relics were discovered.



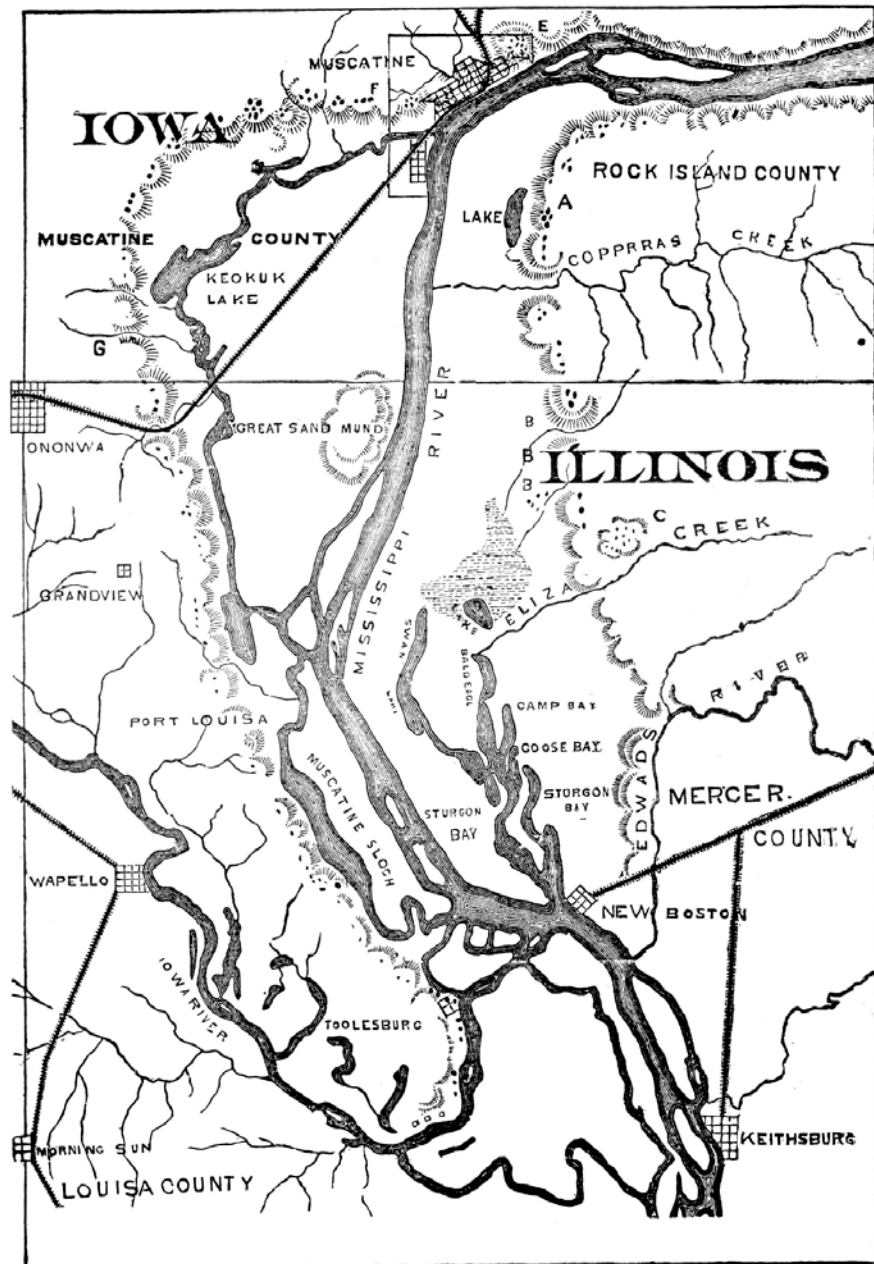
**Map of section of Cook farm**

Similar evidences of the ingenious and skillful work of that prehistoric race have been found over a wide range of country, showing conclusively that these first inhabitants of Iowa, of which anything is known, must have made considerable progress in some of the arts of civilized people.

Their mounds extend as far west as the Little Sioux River, and the Des Moines Valley is especially rich in these evidences of occupation by the "Mound Builders." At one point a few miles above the city of Des Moines, on a bold bluff of the river, are many acres covered with their mounds.

At other points are found well preserved earthworks laid out on high bluffs, evidently for defense. There is, near Lehigh, in Webster County, an elaborate system of these earthworks commanding a view of great extent.

The lines of these works can be easily traced and in many places huge trees have grown up in them. There are evidences that these people cleared forests, graded roads, wove cloth, made stone and copper implements, exhibiting great skill in these works which have survived them. If they were of the same race with the inhabitants of Central America, who erected the massive structures found in ruins on that portion of the continent, their civilization must have become well advanced.



**Map of mounds in Eastern Iowa  
(Work of the ancient Mound Builders)**

It is not improbable that as these antiquities are further explored, additional light will be thrown upon the history of this race of people who preceded the Indians in America. That they existed in great numbers, and through a period of many thousand years, cannot be doubted. That they were assailed by warlike invaders coming upon them from the north and west is generally believed. That the earthworks found along the rivers were erected as protection against enemies there can be little doubt.

How long they resisted the invaders can never be known. The terrible conflicts may have lasted through several generations, as they were gradually dislodged from their strongholds and forced southward. They may have slowly perished before the resistless onslaught of the invaders until remnants of the once numerous race became the hunted "cliff dwellers," who sought a last refuge in the sides of deep gorges where some of the cliff houses have been preserved. It is generally believed that the remote ancestors of the North American Indians were the conquerors of the "Mound Builders."

**\*Many of the artifacts mentioned in this chapter can be viewed at the Putnam Museum in Davenport, Iowa.**

Note: The Putnam Museum was founded in 1867 as the Davenport Academy of Natural Sciences. This early focus is still evident in the natural science collections, many of which date from the days of the Academy. In 1927, the Davenport Academy of Sciences ("Natural" had been dropped earlier) became the Davenport Public Museum. Later the "Public" was eliminated, more closely reflecting the private funding and operation of the institution. In 1974, the Museum took on the Putnam name to honor the family which had supported it during its founding years.

