

## **THE MOUNDBUILDER MYTH**

### **In Joseph Smith's Day It Was Widely Believed That A More Civilized Race Must Have Been Exterminated By The "Savage" Native American Indians Who Remained**

By Joseph Smith's early years the origins of the Native Americans were frequently being hypothesized about. Most of these hypotheses stemmed from racist ideas and religious ideas, and revolved around what is now often called the "Moundbuilder Myth." Numerous complex burial mounds (think dirt pyramids) had been found all over the Eastern United States—including there in the Great Lakes area. Although there were some differences in the various hypotheses about the origins of the Indians, it seemed that everyone agreed about one thing: The current Indians they were seeing around them (generally thought to be dumb, lazy, uncivilized, and savage) couldn't possibly have been responsible for these impressive structures—or those being discovered in Mexico and Peru. Therefore, they concluded that there must have been a "lost race" of more civilized people who had built these structures, and who had eventually been exterminated through long wars with the more savage group of Indians they were now seeing.

Here is just a small taste of countless examples of these very common sentiments—and we'll get more in sections that follow:

Jeremy Belknap to Massachusetts Historical Society in Boston in 1792 (excerpts):

The "mounds and fortifications... indicate the existence of a race of men in a stage of improvement superior to those natives of whom we or our fathers have had any knowledge.

They were "more patient of labour, and better acquainted with the art of defense..."

They were either "driven away or destroyed by a more fierce and savage people...or voluntarily migrated to a distant region."

New York Governor Dewitt Clinton to the New York Historical Society in 1811:

“Previous to the occupancy of this country by the progenitors of the present nation of Indians, it was inhabited by a race of men, much more populous, and much further advanced in civilization.”

“The numerous remains of ancient fortifications, which are found in this country, ...demonstrates a population far exceeding that of the Indians when this country was first settled.”

Note: Clinton actually hypothesized that both groups originally migrated from Asia. However, he also speculated that the more savage Indians had destroyed a more civilized group who had built the mounds.

Palmyra Newspaper in 1818:

The Mound Builders “*had made much greater advances in the arts of civilized life*” than the Indians.

Palmyra Newspaper in Feb 1823:

The Indian Mounds had to be “*the work of some other people than the Indians*”

Ethan Smith in his 1823 book “*View of the Hebrews*”:

“It is highly probable that the more civilized part of the tribes of Israel, after they settled in America, became wholly separated from the hunting and savage tribes of Israel, after they settled in America, became wholly separated from the hunting and savage tribes of their brethren; that the latter lost the knowledge of their having descended from the same family with themselves; that the more civilized part continued for many centuries; that tremendous wars were frequent between them and their savage brethren, till the former became extinct. This hypothesis accounts for the ancient works, forts, mounds, and vast enclosures as well as tokens of a good degree of civil improvement, which are manifestly ancient...”

“These partially civilized people became extinct. What account can be given of this, but that the savages extirpated them after long and dismal wars? .... No other hypothesis occurs to mind, which appears by any means so probable. The degrees of improvement, demonstrated to have existed among the authors of these works,

and relics, who have ceased to exist, far exceed all that could have been furnished from the north-east of Asia, in those ancient times.”

The *Archaeologia Americana*, 1820 (also quoted in *View of the Hebrews*):

“which comprehends those belonging to that people who erected our ancient forts and tumuli; those military works, those walls and ditches cost so much labour in their structure, those numerous and sometimes lofty mounds, which owe their origin to a people far more civilized than our Indians..” (pg 120)

An 1832 poem about the imagined extinct Moundbuilders, their advanced civilization, and their decimation at the hands of “the red man.” “The Prairies” by William Cullen Bryant:

As o'er the verdant waste I guide my steed,  
Among the high rank grass that sweeps his sides  
The hollow beating of his footsteps seems  
A sacrilegious sound. I think of those  
Upon whose rest he tramples. 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 to forms  
Of symmetry, and rearing on its rock  
The glittering Parthenon. These ample fields  
Nourished their harvest, here their herds were fed,  
When haply by their stalls the bison lowed,  
And bowed his maned shoulder to the yoke.  
All day this desert murmured with their toils,  
Till twilight blushed, and lovers walked, and wooed  
In a forgotten language, and old tunes,  
From instruments of unremembered form,  
Gave the soft winds a voice. The red man came—  
The roaming hunter tribes, warlike and fierce,  
And the mound-builders vanished from the earth.  
The solitude of centuries untold  
Has settled where they dwelt. The prairie-wolf

Hunts in their meadows, and his fresh-dug den  
Yawns by my path. The gopher mines the ground  
Where stood their swarming cities. All is gone;  
All—save the piles of earth that hold their bones,  
The platforms where they worshipped unknown gods,  
The barriers which they builded from the soil  
To keep the foe at bay—till o’er the walls  
The wild beleaguerers broke, and, one by one,  
The strongholds of the plain were forced, and heaped  
With corpses. The brown vultures of the wood  
Flocked to those vast uncovered sepulchres,  
And sat unscared and silent at their feast.  
Haply some solitary fugitive,  
Lurking in marsh and forest, till the sense  
Of desolation and of fear became  
Bitterer than death, yielded himself to die.  
Man’s better nature triumphed then. Kind words  
Welcomed and soothed him; the rude conquerors  
Seated the captive with their chiefs; he chose  
A bride among their maidens, and at length  
Seemed to forget—yet ne’er forgot—the wife  
Of his first love, and her sweet little ones,  
Butchered, amid their shrieks, with all his race.

Thus change the forms of being. Thus arise  
Races of living things, glorious in strength,  
And perish, as the quickening breath of God  
Fills them, or is withdrawn...

It is notable that in an 1834 letter to Emma, Joseph equated the Nephites with the “Moundbuilders.” He reported that he was:

*“wandering over the plains of the Nephites, recounting occasionally the history of the Book of Mormon, roving over the mounds of that once beloved people of the Lord.”*

### **Racism & Religious Beliefs About Scattered Israelites Led Many To Assume That This Supposedly Superior And Exterminated Moundbuilder Race Must Have Been White**

John P. Campbell in 1816 Philadelphia Port Folio (a magazine):

“It is a very general opinion, prevailing in the western country, that there is ample proof that the country in general was once inhabited by a civilized and agricultural people...

...Again, it is the current opinion, that the first inhabitants of the western country were white people, and therefore cannot be denominated Indians....It is hence not indispensable that the Aborigines should be a white people, strictly speaking, in order to account for their improvements, or their knowledge of the arts.”

“We likewise suspect that the Aborigines were denominated white people by the present race of Indians, solely or principally, in consequence of that distinction which they possessed in the view of the Indians, by their works, or the knowledge and skill displayed in these works...The Indians universally disclaim these ancient works and monuments...and allege that they were erected by white people.”

“Kentucky had once been inhabited by white people, but that they were exterminated by the Indians.”

John Yates & Joseph Moulton in their book: History of the State of New York (1824):

Note: Yates & Moulton believed the mounds were made by a white race whom the Indians had destroyed. As further evidence, they also claimed that there were still light complexioned Indians in Central and South America, and gave many supposed evidences and traditions of extinct “white Indians.”

Yates and Moulton believed this white civilization had been a “civil, enterprising, and industrious people, who were totally destroyed, and whose improvements were taken possession of by the Senecas.”

“And to these aboriginal whites perhaps the Mexicans, etc, were indebted for their knowledge and refinement.”

“The traditions of other Indians ascribe the construction of these works to whites.”

“An exterminating war appears to have taken place between the barbarous natives...and their more refined and civilized neighbors, ending in nearly the total destruction of the latter.”

Henry Murtrie: Sketches of Louisville & Its Environs (1819):

“Hence arose a race of light complexioned men, distinguished from their savage brethren, not more by a difference of colour, than by a refinement of intellect, and a knowledge of the arts.”

“If, then there once existed in this country a people so far advanced in the arts of civilized life, as these relics indisputably prove to have been the case, the question very naturally arises, what has become of them?...

“About the time when general Clarke first visited this country, an old Indian is said to have assured him, that there was a tradition to this effect—“

“that there had formerly existed a race of Indians whose complexion was lighter than that of the other natives, which caused them to be known by the name of white Indians; that bloody wars had always been waged between the two, but that at last the black Indians got the better of the others in a great battle fought at Clarksville, wherein all the latter were assembled.”

“that the remnant of their army took refuge in Sandy Island, whither their successful and implacable enemies followed and put every individual to death.”

Joseph’s narrative of “*white and delightsome*” Nephites being exterminated by the more savage dark skinned Indians who remained fits nicely with these traditions.

Some may have believed that only the lost (white) race were Israelites. But many others believed that ALL the natives were Israelites, and used this to argue for better treatment of these people, and tried to convince Christians of their duty to “gather” or “Christianize” these natives in accordance with their belief in the “literal gathering of Israel.” But of course, given that in their eyes Israelites were “white,” this latter group had to explain why the remaining natives were no longer white.

James Adair had proposed that their way of life had caused their skin to darken over time. Their lack of civilized life had darkened their skin due to exposure to “ parching winds, and hot sun beams.” He proposed that over time, their offspring would even have dark skin from the time of birth:

“Many incidents and observations lead me to believe, that the Indian color is not natural; but that the external difference between them and the whites, proceeds entirely from their custom and method of living, and not from any inherent spring of nature....That the Indian color is merely accidental, or artificial, appears pretty evident.”

John P. Campbell seems to have had similar views:

“There cannot be a doubt but that the same country, at different, and very distant periods of time, may...produce a race of people differing very materially in colour. The climate, and local or physical causes, may be so changed in the term of a thousand years, as to produce several degrees of shade upon the human countenance.”

The Book of Mormon solves the perceived problem of the current Indians being dark skinned in a different way than James Adair did. The Book of Mormon instead seems to appeal to a common (and false) biblical interpretation of the time—suggesting that black people arose either through the “curse of Cain” or the “curse of Ham.” Many feel that the Book of Abraham revealed by Joseph Smith also perpetuated this false interpretation—directly stating that the “curse” was preserved in the land through Ham.

Anyway, the Book of Mormon explains the dark skin of the Indians in a similar manner—with the Lamanites at one point in the narrative being “cursed” with dark skin:

“The Lord... caused the cursing to come upon them, yea, even a sore cursing, because of their iniquity...wherefore, as they were white, and exceeding fair and delightsome, that they might not be enticing unto my people the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them...and cursed shall be the seed of him that mixeth with their seed; for they shall be cursed even with the same cursing” (2 Nephi 5:21,23).

In this way, the darker skin of the remaining Natives could be accounted for while still preserving a belief that they were all Israelite descendants.