South Charleston Mound

The South Charleston, or Criel, Mound is one of the largest extant burial mounds in West Virginia, second only to Grave Creek Mound in Moundsville. The mound is located in what was the Criel family farm, now downtown South Charleston. Standing about 33 feet tall, South Charleston Mound was once surrounded by extensive earthworks that stretched for several miles on both sides of the Kanawha River. South Charleston Mound, like many conical-shaped mounds, is a prehistoric burial place. Archeologists have determined that mounds such as this were constructed by people, generally referred to as the Adena, who lived along the Ohio and Kanawha drainage systems between 1000 and 200 B.C.

South Charleston Mound was first investigated by Col. P. W. Norris of the Smithsonian Institution as part of an extensive effort to identify the builders of the numerous earthworks located west of the Appalachian Mountains. Beginning in November 1883, Norris opened a 12-foot wide shaft on top of the mound and began excavating down to the original ground surface. At depths of three and four feet, human remains were encountered in the center of the shaft. Although prehistoric artifacts found with these upper burials indicated that they were not of Adena origin, but rather were made by later people.

Nothing more was encountered until excavators dug down 31 feet into the mound where the original interment, consisting of 11 individuals, was discovered. All of the bodies were found lying on a bark bed that had been blanketed with ashes. A second layer of bark covered the remains. Ten of the individuals surrounded the 11th, suggesting to Norris that all 11 people had been buried at the same time and that the central figure may have been someone of importance. Artifacts found only with the central figure, including shell beads and the copper remains of a headdress, further support this idea. Despite rumors that a seven-foot “giant” had been uncovered, Norris reported that all individuals buried in the mound were adults of medium size. All burials and artifacts excavated from the mound were taken to the Smithsonian Institution where they remain today.

South Charleston Mound has survived numerous historic modifications since its construction more than 2,000 years ago. Sometime prior to the Smithsonian excavations the top eight to ten feet of the mound was removed, reportedly to make room for either a bandstand or judge’s stand to accompany the racetrack that once circled the mound. Erosion of the mound was hastened during its use as pasture and agricultural field in the 1800s and from episodic tree planting in the 1900s. Attempts to improve the mound include the construction of a below-ground storage facility and a sidewalk to allow visitors to reach its peak. Despite these alterations, the South Charleston Mound stands as a grand reminder of the peoples who inhabited the Kanawha Valley several hundreds of years before the arrival of Europeans. In recognition of its historic significance, South Charleston Mound was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1970.

Read the National Register nomination.

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Sources


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Read South Charleston Mound from WV Encyclopedia

Answer the following:

1. What is the second largest mound in West Virginia?
2. How tall is the mound?
3. What people constructed the mound?
4. Who first investigated the mound?
5. Despite rumors of a seven foot giant, what did Norris report about the individuals found in the mound?