



The Dickson Mounds Museum in Lewistown, Illinois Sky Hopinka for ProPublica

For decades, Dickson Mounds Museum in Illinois displayed the open graves of more than 200 Indigenous people. Thirty years after a federal law required museums to begin returning remains, the statewide museum system still holds thousands.

“The Repatriation Project,” an ongoing investigation by ProPublica and NBC News, has found that some of the nation’s most renowned museums have exploited loopholes in the law to hold on to Native American human remains and related items.

D. Rae Gould, executive director of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Initiative at Brown University and a member of the Hassanamisco Band of Nipmucs of Massachusetts, said it’s common for institutions to say they can’t figure out who they should return remains and items to. Gould said such institutions often “use arbitrary analysis they call science to say there’s no cultural affiliation with modern day tribes.”

Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko, who until her death earlier this month was the director of the Illinois State Museum, said that using the year 1673 to decide

The Repatriation Project, January 2023

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whether tribes have connections to the human remains and can reclaim them is “not OK.” Many museums, including ISM, “have been superb at avoiding the spirit of the law,” she said.

A new generation of leadership at the museum aims to reverse its abysmal repatriation record. Curator of Anthropology Brooke Morgan said the institution no longer privileges archaeological and historical evidence over tribal knowledge. She and Pappenfort hope to set a new precedent for how the museum handles repatriations — one that relies less on finding a scientific link to prove a tribe’s cultural connections to ancestral remains.

“Cultural affiliation is kind of a moot point,” said Pappenfort, who joined Dickson Mounds Museum as a curator of anthropology in 2021 and now serves as its interim director. “The reality is many tribes can lay claim to affiliation.”



Logan Pappenfort, a member of the Peoria Tribe of Indians of Oklahoma and interim director at the Dickson Mounds Museum, is part of a group of people who have started to confront the history of the museum, including its lack of repatriations. Sky Hopinka for ProPublica

Pappenfort is the first tribal citizen on the museum’s payroll and a member of the Peoria Tribe of Indians of Oklahoma, which includes descendants of more than a dozen tribes that collectively were known as the Illinois.

Growing up in Kansas City, Kansas, Pappenfort said kids teased him when he would tell them he was Native American. He could not be an Indian, they would say, because Indians are extinct.

In college, he came across a photograph in a textbook of the exposed burials at Dickson Mounds Museum. He realized the kids who taunted him in grade school had something in common with the Dicksons: “They weren’t actually looking at my ancestors as people.”

That was on his mind as he drove across the state line into Illinois.

“My ancestors put me here,” Pappenfort said. “They came from Illinois, and it’s my responsibility to do everything I can to get them where they’re supposed to be again.”

The Land and Its History

High on a limestone bluff overlooking the Mississippi River, two painted monsters stared down at the Frenchmen below. Jesuit priest Jacques Marquette described them in his journal as having men’s faces, with horns on their heads, scales on their bodies and long tails that ended in fins.

“These two monsters are so well painted that we cannot believe that any savage is their author; for good painters in France would find it difficult to paint so well,” Marquette wrote upon arriving in what he called the Illinois Country in 1673.

Marquette and fur trader Louis Jolliet had entered a land that Indigenous people had inhabited for more than 12,000 years. More than 30 federally recognized tribes can trace their ancestry or cultural connections to the land that is now the state of Illinois. At the time of the Frenchmen’s arrival, though, most of that land was under the control of nearly a dozen tribes — including the Kaskaskia, Cahokia, Michigamea, Peoria and Tamaroa — who lived along the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers.

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Some of these tribes accommodated Marquette and Jolliet as the pair traveled through the Mississippi and Illinois River valleys in the summer of 1673 aiming to introduce Indigenous people to Catholicism and expand the French trading empire.

Marquette and Jolliet would have passed what today is called Dickson Mounds. There, a winding little tributary called the Spoon River floods into the slow waters of the Illinois and transforms the prairie into a Midwestern Everglades, teeming with life.

Marquette and Jolliet left no records of people who may have lived or camped at that spot in 1673, but archaeological research indicates that between 1100 and 1350, thousands of people lived in the Central Illinois River Valley — many in a large town near Dickson Mounds and others in smaller communities nearby.



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The burial mounds that remain are testament to their lives, explained Pappenfort. A massive network of Indigenous communities stretched from Florida to Michigan's upper peninsula. They shared similar ways of life, such as

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trading and farming, and traditions that included burying the dead in large earthen platforms. The mounds were built by moving thousands of pounds of dirt, basket by basket, often over many generations, said Pappenfort.

Between 1350 and 1450, something changed. Groups began to move out of centralized communities, including the area around Dickson Mounds. About 150 miles to the south, Cahokia, a multicultural metropolis that's sometimes called America's first city, also experienced relatively fast population loss. Archaeologists have estimated that at its peak, around the year 1200, more than 20,000 people lived in Cahokia and its outskirts.

Recent research suggests a changing climate that made growing maize difficult might have forced people to leave Cahokia. But there's no widely accepted explanation for why they left or where they went.

In the 1800s, a racist myth that the mounds were too sophisticated to have been built by the local Indigenous people led some to theorize that an extinct race of "mound-builders" had once inhabited the area. Though it was disproved as early as 1884, the remnants of that myth, in tandem with the unexplained depopulation of Cahokia, gave rise to an oft-repeated story that the people responsible for the mounds throughout Illinois had "vanished" or that their culture "ceased to exist."

Then Marquette and Jolliet showed up in 1673. That summer, Marquette chronicled the locations and customs of various tribal groups, including the Peoria and Kaskaskia. Archaeologists and anthropologists rely on the information in Marquette's journals, but the missionary didn't record the histories of any tribe he encountered. More than 300 years later, in 1995, some tribes would tell the Illinois State Museum curators that their oral histories describe their ancestors as mound-building people. But because that history wasn't written down, the museum dismissed it.

The year 1673 also marked the beginning of the end of tribally held lands in what is now the state of Illinois. By the 1830s, after Indigenous people were

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devastated by warfare and disease brought by Europeans — and after some tribes resisted ceding the land of their ancestors — the U.S. government gave Native people in Illinois two options: move or perish.

White settlers soon arrived in larger numbers. Some, like the Dicksons, dug up burial mounds and speculated about who had built them. Amateurs were later joined by professional archaeologists and anthropologists.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Fay-Cooper Cole and Thorne Deuel of the University of Chicago set up a field school just north of Dickson Mounds on land owned by Joy Morton, the founder of Morton Salt. Cole and Deuel lamented that many mounds had been leveled and looted in Fulton County. “Nearly every village had its local collection from the ‘Mound Builders,’” they wrote. “Mounds were looted and valuable data relating to the prehistory of the state were destroyed.” They still surveyed roughly 900 archaeological sites in the area, prompting their development of a cultural classification system that archaeologists still use today.

“Their field school at the Morton site is often referred to as the ‘Birthplace of American Archaeology,’” wrote a former Dickson Mounds Museum curator, Alan D. Harn, in a 2010 paper.

Federal records show that the remains of at least 15,461 Native Americans were excavated in Illinois, more than in any other state. Most are still in the state, and many are property of the Illinois State Museum.

When the Illinois State Museum opened its Dickson Mounds branch in 1972, an elevated pathway guided guests around Don Dickson’s excavation. Below, exposed and broken, were the remains of a fetus with a shell pendant on her chest; two men in their mid-40s lay beside her. A woman, about 20 years old, rested with her left hand on her pelvis. She once wore a necklace of shells, but at some point it was stolen. Someone misplaced her mandible. A man lay with two fishing hooks made of bone, and another had five arrows between his knees. A 2-year-old child was buried with a rattle made of mussel shells, but that, too, was lost.



Pappenfort stops at the Ogden-Fettie Mound, a burial site near the museum. Sky Hopinka for ProPublica

Inviting Tribes Back to Illinois

In the fall of 1995, the Illinois State Museum invited tribes from across the Midwest to discuss the remains in its possession. The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act required institutions receiving federal funds to inventory their Native American holdings by the end of that year; they were then to consult with tribes about how to return the material to the appropriate groups.

Leaders of tribes in Oklahoma, Wisconsin, Michigan, Kansas, Nebraska and Iowa were invited to Dickson Mounds Museum. Some tribal members were returning to Illinois for the first time since their ancestors had been forcibly relocated.

Archaeologist Duane Esarey, who retired from the museum in 2021, said he remembers many on staff felt nervous before the meeting because it would be their first time speaking with the tribes.

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Johnathon Buffalo, historic preservation director of the Sac & Fox Tribe of the Mississippi in Iowa, was skeptical that the museum actually wanted to return anything to the tribes. Images of the Dickson Mounds burial exhibit and the controversy over its recent closure were fresh in his mind.

The museum had preemptively designated the rest of the remains — at least 5,450 ancestors excavated from at least 55 counties in Illinois — as culturally unidentifiable. All of them were dated to before 1673.

Bruce McMillan, director of the Illinois State Museum from 1977 to 2005, told ProPublica the museum did that because “it’s very difficult — regardless of what the NAGPRA regulations say — to trace things prehistorically,” meaning before there are written records. He said that during the prehistoric era, between roughly 1450 and 1673, many Native groups in the Illinois region were “fissioning, coalescing, and migrating” because of war and disease, and that they were constantly reorganizing.

“We wanted to make sure that if remains and associated objects prior to the time [were going to be repatriated], that we had some kind of written records,” McMillan said. “We wanted to make sure that they were going to the correct group or tribe.”

At least two tribes claimed during the 1995 consultations that oral histories traced their ancestry in Illinois to mound-building cultures. And Robert Warren, the museum’s curator of anthropology at the time, wrote in a report to the National Park Service that the museum was open to evidence that might counter its previous conclusions. But when the museum finished its four months of consultations with six tribal nations, curators did not change a single determination of cultural affiliation.

No tribe formally requested the return of remains that dated to before 1673. Many of the tribes invited to the museum viewed the ancestors as their collective responsibility. Connecting the remains to a specific tribe mattered less than ensuring they were reburied in the areas they’d been taken from. Every tribal leader told the museum that their ancestors should be reburied in Illinois.

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Johnathon Buffalo holds a photograph of a group invited to the museum's 1995 consultations with tribes. Sky Hopinka for ProPublica

The conversations did lead to the Illinois State Museum returning the remains of at least 117 ancestors to the Peoria Tribe of Indians of Oklahoma. The museum also transferred ownership of more than 32,000 funerary objects to the tribe, though the museum continues to hold the objects on the tribe's behalf. (At the time of the repatriation in 1997, the tribe lacked the resources to appropriately store the objects.) Those human remains and funerary objects had been excavated from several sites throughout the state, not including Dickson Mounds, and all dated to after 1673.

The Illinois State Museum submitted reports to the National Park Service and, with that, it had complied with the law. (The museum later submitted a grant proposal to the park service to help fund a reburial facility, but funding was denied.)

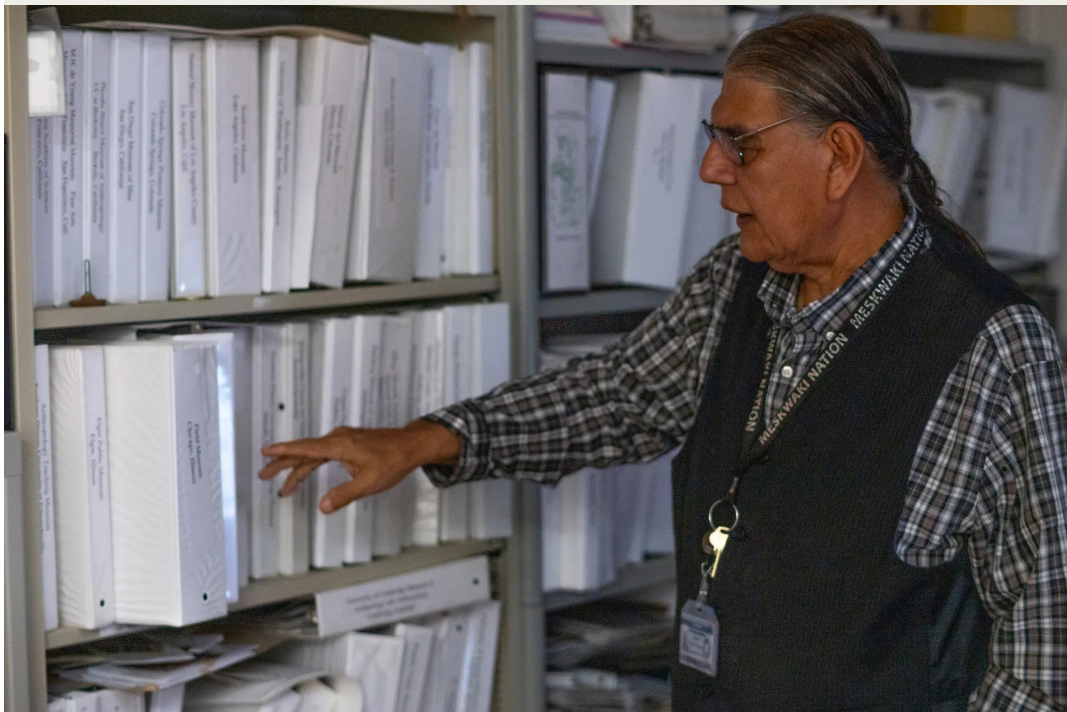
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Buffalo points to binders containing information on museums whose inventories he believes include ancestors of the Meskwaki Nation, also known as the Sac & Fox Tribe of the Mississippi in Iowa. Sky Hopinka for ProPublica

“They show us their stuff — our stuff — but it’s a ‘look at it but don’t touch it’ kind of thing,” Buffalo recalled of those early consultations. “And then that’s it. When they close, we leave and we never hear from them again.”

Research Instead of Repatriation

In the late 1960s, the state excavated more human remains from Dickson Mounds to make way for the museum. Archaeologists found at least 10 burial mounds and two cemeteries, unearthing the remains of more than 800 people.

All of them were sent to Massachusetts. George Armelagos, a new assistant professor recruited by the University of Massachusetts, Amherst to help start its anthropology Ph.D. program, had requested them for research.

Anthropologists hoped that the remains, which were on loan from the Illinois State Museum, would offer a window into how people who lived for hundreds of years in roughly the same spot adapted to the expansion of agriculture and population growth.

After the passage of NAGPRA, the museum continued to allow scientific research on human remains it had deemed culturally unidentifiable. The law does not prohibit it, nor does it require that tribes consent.

ProPublica obtained records showing the museum approved almost every request to research its Dickson Mounds collections from 1990 to 2018. Museum leaders hoped studies would lead to groundbreaking findings and bring prestige to the institutions.

So, when the museum received a request in 1991 from Anne C. Stone, a Ph.D. student at Pennsylvania State University, the institution’s leadership was interested. Stone wanted to extract DNA from the ribs of 43 people excavated from Dickson Mounds and compare it to another group buried nearby. The process, according to her proposal, would require freezing bone samples to -112 degrees Fahrenheit, crushing them and soaking the powdered bone in an enzyme.

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The museum approved Stone's request.

Stone kept the remains for seven years. The museum approved her requests to experiment with different DNA extraction methods, and even to travel abroad with the samples. But none of the methods she tried were successful.

In an interview, Stone, who now runs an anthropological genetics lab at Arizona State University and is a member of the National Academy of Sciences, explained that at the time, methods of extracting ancient DNA, or aDNA, were fairly new and far more destructive than current methods.

Today, she said, any of her research that involves destructive analysis is done in consultation with descendant communities.

In 2010, a new rule was added to the federal repatriation law that created a pathway for tribes to bring their ancestors home without establishing a cultural affiliation. It also required institutions to consult with tribes about "culturally unidentifiable" remains. Professional organizations, including the Society for American Archaeology, opposed the rule, as did the Illinois State Museum.



A sign at the Ogden-Fettie Mound warns that visitors are banned from digging and collecting artifacts. Sky Hopinka for ProPublica

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“The Rule would deprive the entire world of valuable scientific knowledge and historical information on biological and cultural heritage, diversity, and change,” wrote Bonnie Styles, then-director of the Illinois State Museum, in [public comments](#).

Under Styles’ leadership, from 2005 to 2015, records show that the Illinois State Museum repatriated the remains of only seven Native Americans. Records show she allowed Dickson Mounds remains to be loaned to various institutions and approved destructive analysis requests from her own staff until as recently as 2014.

In a written statement, Styles said that during her tenure “these actions were not disallowed by NAGPRA and its associated rules” and that the museum followed its board-approved policies on collection management, the treatment and disposition of human remains, and destructive analysis.

“The Illinois State Museum did not willfully ignore NAGPRA and associated rules in order to hold onto collections of culturally unidentified human remains,” said Styles.

“Home No Matter What”

In a wooden crate from Piggly Wiggly, Pappenfort keeps letters written by his great-great-great-grandfather George Washington Finley. Finley was Piankashaw, an Illinois people with roots in the Miami tribe that merged with the Wea, Peoria and Kaskaskia in the 1850s.

Finley’s first language was his native one, Pappenfort said, and he was one of the few survivors of removal to record some of the [Miami-Illinois language](#) and oral histories his parents and elders shared with him. As Pappenfort deliberated in the summer of 2021 whether to accept the job as curator of Dickson Mounds Museum, he thought about what Finley would want him to do. He read the letters to help him decide.

Accepting the job would mean moving to a place where the scars of forced

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removal are still visible on the land: dozens of burial mounds, many of them excavated or disturbed, surround the museum. But leaving Oklahoma would also mean reconnecting with a place he felt he'd lost.

"Two hundred years," said Pappenfort from his desk at Dickson Mounds Museum, "that's how long it took to have more of an active voice in Illinois."

For the first time in more than 25 years, the museum has again entered formal consultations with tribes about repatriation. This time, the museum is asking different questions. Instead of trying to answer who, exactly, is the right tribe to repatriate to, the museum is asking tribes to lead in deciding what's the best way to right a wrong.

"Our institutional will is to get the ancestors home no matter what," Pappenfort said.

So far, conversations with tribes have led to reuniting many ancestors' remains with the belongings they were buried with — a task that required a recall of all loans and a moratorium on new research and imaging.

Then Dickson Mounds began cleaning up its own house.

In September 2021, the museum closed its most popular archaeology exhibit. For weeks, Pappenfort worked with the museum's then-director Esarey and anthropology curator Morgan to disassemble each display case and remove funerary objects that tribes had requested not be displayed. When they were finished, about 40% of the exhibit was gone.

Pappenfort and Morgan found solace in the work. To Esarey, who earlier in his career had excavated some of the human remains and pulled out funerary objects to put on display, it was the bittersweet dismantling of a world he helped build.

The objects from 75 years of Illinois excavations had guided visitors through a categorized chronology as archaeologists understand it: from the archaic

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arrival of Europeans in 1673, the historic. Archaeologists can spend decades seeking to connect the past and the present, Esarey realized, but they'll always find more questions than answers. Doing the work of repatriation required a willingness to let go: Finding the "right" answer mattered less than doing what is right by tribal nations.

"There's nothing special about 1673," said Esarey. "It's all history."



An exhibit at the Dickson Mounds Museum shows spaces where some objects have been removed from view. Sky Hopinka for ProPublica

The museum intends to repatriate about 1,100 ancestors from Dickson Mounds, including those excavated in the 1920s whose gravesites are still covered by cedar planks in the south wing. If the effort is successful, the remains will be reclaimed by a coalition of more than two dozen tribes with ancestral lands in Illinois. It would be the largest repatriation in the state's history.

Until then the door to the south wing is locked.