

The future of the Florence Mound

Opening essay by Anita Flanagan

Photos by Abraham Rowe

Before Alabama became a state, the Tennessee Valley was part of a vast indigenous cultural landscape occupied by numerous Native nations over thousands of years. The area now known as Florence, Sheffield, Muscle Shoals, and the surrounding Tennessee River Valley lies within the ancestral homelands of Cherokee people and other Southeastern indigenous nations.

For Cherokee people, the land itself is not merely geography; it is a living network of relationships connecting ancestors, communities, waterways, mountains, animals, and spiritual beings. Sacred among this landscape is the Florence Mound. Standing approximately forty-three feet high, it is one of the largest surviving platform mounds in the Tennessee Valley.

Built between approximately 500 and 1000 CE, the mound predates the historic Cherokee Nation. However, across the Southeast, Cherokee towns frequently incorporated older mound sites into ceremonial and political life, demonstrating continuity between ancient sacred places and later indigenous communities.

Many scholars and Cherokee cultural interpreters view ceremonial mounds as symbolic mountains.

The mound rises from the earth toward the sky:

Its base is rooted in the earth.

Its summit reaches toward the Upper World.

Ceremonial fires connect the community to spiritual forces.

The mound serves as a sacred center connecting earth, sky, water, ancestors, and community.

From a Cherokee homeland perspective, the Florence Mound is more than an archaeological monument. It is part of a living indigenous landscape shaped by thousands of years of human experience, ceremony, and connection to place. It reminds us that the Tennessee Valley was — and remains — a homeland where culture, history, spirituality, and geography are inseparable.

Anita Smith Hargett Flanagan, of Tuscumbia, is an enrolled member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. Born on the Qualla Boundary in North Carolina, she moved to Alabama as a child. Today, she is vice president of the Alabama chapter of the Trail of Tears Association.

Grantee Spotlight:

AHA-funded symposium sparks a conversation on caring for one of Alabama's most sacred indigenous sites

In February of 2026, the Alabama Humanities Alliance provided a grant in support of a public symposium, "Generative Care at the Florence Mound: New Practices for Land-Based Relations." The gathering convened knowledge keepers, mound caretakers, scholars, archaeologists, and designers in conversations about the past, present, and future of the Mound. Auburn University's School of Architecture, Planning, and Landscape Architecture was the organizing partner for the event.

What follows is a roundtable conversation between several organizers of the symposium and members of the Florence Mound and Museum's advisory committee.

the common goal of sharing the truth about the site, and are committed to preserving it and respecting the indigenous people who are connected to it....It was refreshing to have the broader community remind us that we are not alone; others will support us in sharing the truth of the site and sharing in the care of the site.

ISAAC COHEN & SARAH COLEMAN, assistant professors of landscape architecture, Auburn University: Our biggest takeaway was the sheer range of perspectives and the depth of investment in the care of sites like the Florence Mound. It is rare to have the opportunity to convene individuals across such different fields, positions, and relationships to a place, including members of descendant indigenous communities, museum professionals, archaeologists, designers, and local stakeholders. What felt most significant was not just the diversity of voices, but a shared willingness to be in dialogue with one another.

Throughout the conversations, there was a clear recognition that "care" is not a neutral or universally agreed-upon term. Acts of physical maintenance or preservation that are understood as responsible stewardship within one framework can be at odds with the values or priorities of another. The symposium made space for these tensions to be acknowledged openly....We will carry forward this model of sustained, careful dialogue — an approach that does not assume consensus, but instead builds relationships that can support mutual learning.

This year, there are many explorations of America's (and Alabama's) founding history during the country's 250th anniversary. How do you see the Mound's history within that narrative?

LADONNA BROWN, director of anthropology, Chickasaw Nation: We mention in our presentations how pre-contact history in the U.S. is also American history. It is American history because it is tied to this land where our ancestors first lived. The civilization that was created and sharpened here helped to define the beginning structure of political organization for the United States. We are very much a part of the U.S., with an older story to tell.

What was your biggest takeaway from the Symposium as, collectively, everyone works toward the best ways to preserve, honor, and interpret the Florence Mound and Museum?

ADRIANA PEEPLES, museum educator, Florence Arts and Museums: I was so inspired by the sense of community that I felt even from people who had never attended our museum or the Florence Mound site before. It was inspiring to see that everyone had



Workshop participants share ideas about care for the Florence Mound.



An AHA-funded symposium and workshops brought together knowledge keepers, mound caretakers, scholars, archaeologists, and more to consider the long-term stewardship of the ancient Florence Mound.

BRIAN MURPHY, director, Florence Arts and Museums: Indigenous sites like the Florence Mound are a reminder that the concept of “America” is much older than two hundred and fifty years. It is a reminder that other civilizations have thrived in the same exact spaces that America now occupies.

ISAAC & SARAH: We see the Mound as expanding the narrative of America’s founding. It not only brings deeper histories into view but also asks us to reconsider how we care for the places we use to mark history. Work at the mound encourages us to see these sites not as inert relics, but as active and ongoing, places that shape how the past is understood and put to work in the present.

Ten years from now, what is your biggest hope for how people will encounter and experience the Florence Mound and Museum?

ADRIANA: My biggest hope is that the Florence Mound and Museum will represent resilience when people encounter the entirety of the site. I hope people think of the civilization who originally built the mound and the fact that it’s still with us today. It’s a lesson that, though obstacles and problems always arise, through the struggle comes growth. Sustainability is possible.

BRIAN: I hope the city and region can invest in preserving the site as a cultural center by connecting it to other resources in the area. As it stands, the mound is cut off from the river, from walkable trails, and from nearby cultural attractions. Reconnecting the site to the city and the river would help people understand the significance of this place.

ISAAC & SARAH: We also hope the city more visibly demonstrates its commitment to the site through broader acts of care, including how the surrounding floodplain is considered and maintained. Restoring the mound’s relationship to the river — essential to how it would have been seen, understood, and utilized — is an important part of that commitment.

LADONNA: Our dream is that, ten years from now, most people will understand what a mound is, who built them, and why. We hope they will understand that mounds are America’s monuments. Where Egypt has the pyramids and South America has the stone temples, the U.S. has these ancient mounds. Also, the artwork from the Mississippian period is as wonderful as items from Europe, the Middle East or even the Far East. I hope that people will visit the Florence Mound with the same intention of wanting to see pyramids or castles elsewhere.

What does it mean to you, personally, to be a steward of this sacred and historic site?

LADONNA: We realize that our own relatives could have easily assisted with building the mound, designing it, stewarding it, or any other aspect that took place with the mound. When our people encounter such a place that our ancestors could have had a hand in developing, it is our obligation to take care of it. I am grateful to have this experience. I am also very appreciative that the staff of the museum and local, caring people are stewards of this major monumental earthwork.

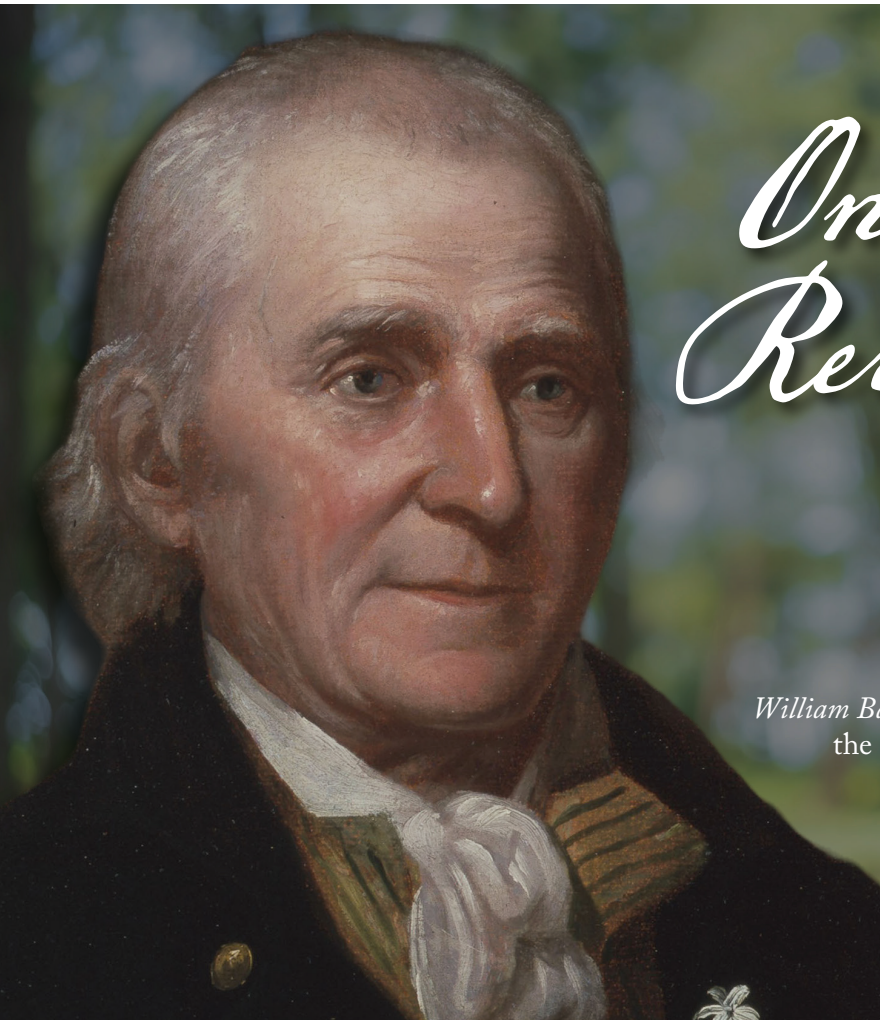
BRIAN: It is an obligation to protect and care for the site not only for the city, but for the tribes whose homeland it is on. It is also imperative that we are in connection with other sites, museums, and tribes so that this network informs the work we do.

ISAAC & SARAH: It's both an honor and a humbling responsibility to be in conversation about a place with this kind of cultural and historical significance. As landscape architects, we find it meaningful to think about the mound not as an isolated site, but as part of a broader network of related sites, threaded together by cultural practices, histories, and ecological systems.

What did AHA's grant allow you to do that you might not have been able to otherwise?

ISAAC & SARAH: The support from the Alabama Humanities Alliance was critical in allowing us to convene a broader and more diverse set of voices than we otherwise could have. In particular, bringing in scholar Chadwick Allen, whose work frames contemporary indigenous scholarship on earthworks, helped establish a shared intellectual framework for the conversations.

The Florence Mound is not analogous to an old building whose materials simply need repair; it is formed from the medium of the land itself: soils, trees, grasses, and the movement of people and animals. It is inseparable from the indigenous knowledge systems that shaped it and continue to give it meaning. The grant gave us the space to begin shifting that understanding, bringing together Tennessee Valley Authority staff, archaeologists, community members, museum professionals, and designers to develop a more expansive, shared framework. That has been essential in opening up a conversation that understands the mound not as a relic, but as an active cultural landscape requiring ongoing, relational care. ■

A detailed oil painting of William Bartram, an older man with a receding hairline, wearing a dark coat and a white cravat. He is looking slightly to the right with a thoughtful expression.

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