McLean County's first corn farmers also mound builders

It's been nearly 200 years since the first Euro-Americans began settling would become McLean County. Those prairie pioneers of the 1820s, though, weren't the first to raise corn around here.

Not by a long shot.

In fact, the county's first known corn farmers date to circa AD 1200—an astounding 600-plus years before the era of white settlement.

This story was uncovered—literally!—by archaeologists excavating the site of a Mississippian village north of present-day Heyworth. The site, known as Noble-Wieting, also includes the only known Native American mound in McLean County.

Archaeological work conducted in the 1970s at Noble-Wieting (named for two families who once owned the property) offers incontrovertible proof of farming in McLean County nearly 300 years before Columbus reached the New World. Archaeologists recovered a shell hoe and shell corn scrapers, for instance, and located several deep pits used for storing corn and other foodstuff. Also recovered and later analyzed were carbonized bits of 800-year-old corn, beans and squash.

Available evidence points to a Mississippian village of some ten houses and 40 to 60 residents, with a duration of occupancy that lasted less than a century, perhaps between 60 to 90 years. The mound, eroded by plowing, rains and the depredations of 19th century "pot hunters" or looters, appears today as little more than a barely noticeable rise in the surrounding landscape.

The site is near Kickapoo Creek and several of its tributaries. The Bishop family began farming there in the early 1840s, and the pre-Columbian village and mound have remained under cultivation up to this day. From the 1880s to the late 1960s, the Noble family owned and farmed the property. A son-in-law, Wallace Wieting, purchased it in 1968.

The rather remote site is no longer in the Wieting family, though it's still privately held and not open to the public.

The center of Mississippian culture was the great city of Cahokia, situated between present-day East St. Louis and Collinsville and across the Mississippi River from St. Louis. At its height the city's population might have reached tens of thousands, as its trade links stretched to the Gulf Coast, Eastern Seaboard, Great Plains and Upper Midwest.

Today, 80 of the city's original 120 mounds are protected and within Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site. Most impressive is Monk's Mound, which is 100 feet tall and covers 14 acres, making it the largest man-made earthen structure north of the great Mesoamerican civilizations of Mexico.

The occupation of Noble-Wieting coincided with the decline in Cahokia's influence and power. By AD 1300 the remaining residents had abandoned their once-great city; its collapse one of many Gordian Knot-like mysteries this pre-literate society left for archaeologists to untangle.

From available evidence, the Mississippians inhabiting the Noble-Wieting site had a wide-ranging diet. They hunted, getting most of their animal protein from elk and deer; farmed corn, beans and squash; fished in streams and rivers; and gathered fruits, nuts and wild plants within or along the edges of the area's wooded groves.

One reason this Mississippian site is of interest to archaeologists is its location within the broad and fluid boundary between Middle and Upper Mississippian traditions. Evidence of this cultural intersection can be seen in the differences in pottery-making techniques and in the shape and design of bowls, jars and other items.

On Oct. 17, 1900, a well-intentioned though decidedly amateur archeological excavation was undertaken under the auspices of the McLean County Historical Society (now the Museum of History). The party of some thirty society members and guests included J.H. Burnham, LaFayette Funk and J.B. Orendorff.

That day, Burnham and Funk estimated that the mound reached two-and-a-half feet in height and encompassed an area 75 feet in diameter. Early settlers to the area maintained that the mound was originally anywhere from six to eight feet tall.

In the upper reaches of the burial mound the excavating party encountered, as expected, a layer of scattered bones. These remains had been previously exhumed and reinterred by an undetermined number of curiosity seekers, including John Noble, the landowner at the time. About two feet below the disturbed layer the party then unearthed bones from seven or eight individuals (most of these were likewise reburied in the mound).

There have been other Mississippian items recovered in scattered sites in McLean County, though nothing hinting at another settlement such as Noble-Wieting. The collections of the McLean County Museum of History include a Mississippian ceramic bowl said to have been recovered from a grave in Lawndale Township.

This ceramic bowl is one of several Mississippian objects on display in the museum's "Making a Home" exhibit. Other Mississippian objects on view include a pottery fragment of local clay tempered with crushed mussel shells, projectile points (once known as arrowheads) and the business end of a hoe made from chert.

In 1966, Fred Brian, an Illinois Wesleyan University art professor, and William Haney from Illinois State University, organized a one-week "dig" at the site. Brian returned in 1968 and 1970, and during the latter excavation he uncovered six burials, with the skulls taken to IWU for analysis and the remains reinterred.

The Noble-Wieting burials show no evidence of socioeconomic stratification, a marked departure from the traditions of Cahokia where ruling figures were sometimes buried with a trove of worldly goods and other status markers.

ISU professor Dr. Edward Jelks led a four-week field school in 1972. Discoveries that summer included the location of a house, as well as numerous trash pits containing shards of pottery and broken pieces of stone and bone tools. There were also blackened bits of vegetable matter, evidence of meals cooked some 800 years earlier. Chemical flotation tests would later show these tiny pieces to be leftovers of beans, squash, black walnuts, wild grape and pawpaw.

And there were 140 fragments of corn—the earliest corn ever found in McLean County! There were two varieties, one with eight-rows of kernels and the other with twelve, though both produced ears not much longer than an inch-and-a-half.

A second field school was held at the site in 1976, and a shortened one followed sixteen years later, in 1992.

ISU's Department of Sociology and Anthropology, in collaboration with the Illinois State Archaeological Survey, is holding a four-week field school at the Noble-Wieting site this year, beginning May 22. This latest field school, led by Dr. Logan Miller and to include 14 undergraduates and upwards of 5 graduate students, will continue to probe the secrets of this 800-year-old Native American village.

In doing so these young archaeologists-in-training will be asking several interrelated questions fundamental to their discipline: Who were these people? What did they believe? How did they reshape the natural world around them?

And in answering these and other questions, one final one, common to all great disciplines, looms the largest: Who then are we?