

EXCAVATION OF INDIAN GRAVES IN WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS

By HARRIS HAWTHORNE WILDER

During the previous autumn (Oct.—Nov., 1904) excavations of Indian burial-sites were made in two places along the east bank of Connecticut river, one under the auspices of Smith College, the other by Amherst. As both were successful in finding well-preserved skeletons, a brief account of the results may be of interest, especially since little seems to have been recorded concerning the mortuary customs of the Indians of this locality.

The Smith College excavations were carried on between Oct. 1 and 15 at North Hadley, on the spot indicated by the accompanying map (figure 14). The northwestern portion of the town, including the branch road running northward, is situated on a level sandy plain, the bottom of the post-glacial "Hadley lake," and this formation is prolonged into the bend of the river where it forms a rectangular field, the burial site. About this the land slopes down abruptly to the lower level of the present river-meadows. Almost continuous with the northwest curve of this is a rectangular knoll 300 to 400 feet across, which is probably not a farther continuation of the lake-bottom plateau, but a sand dune, or drumlin. Local tradition locates here an Indian settlement, and although this knoll has been under cultivation for years and is now covered with a crop of clover, we were able to pick up on the surface several potsherds and a broken quartz arrowpoint, confirmatory indications of the truth of the tradition. At the present time the river lies at some little distance from both the village and the burial sites, except on the north, but as the bed of the river at this place has been the scene of repeated changes, as is evidenced by the traces of several ox-bows to the west, it is probable that at the time of the Indian occupancy the water came to the foot of the terraces, thus enclosing the knoll and the plateau on three sides, and giving the site an exceptional location, with an open prospect both up and down the

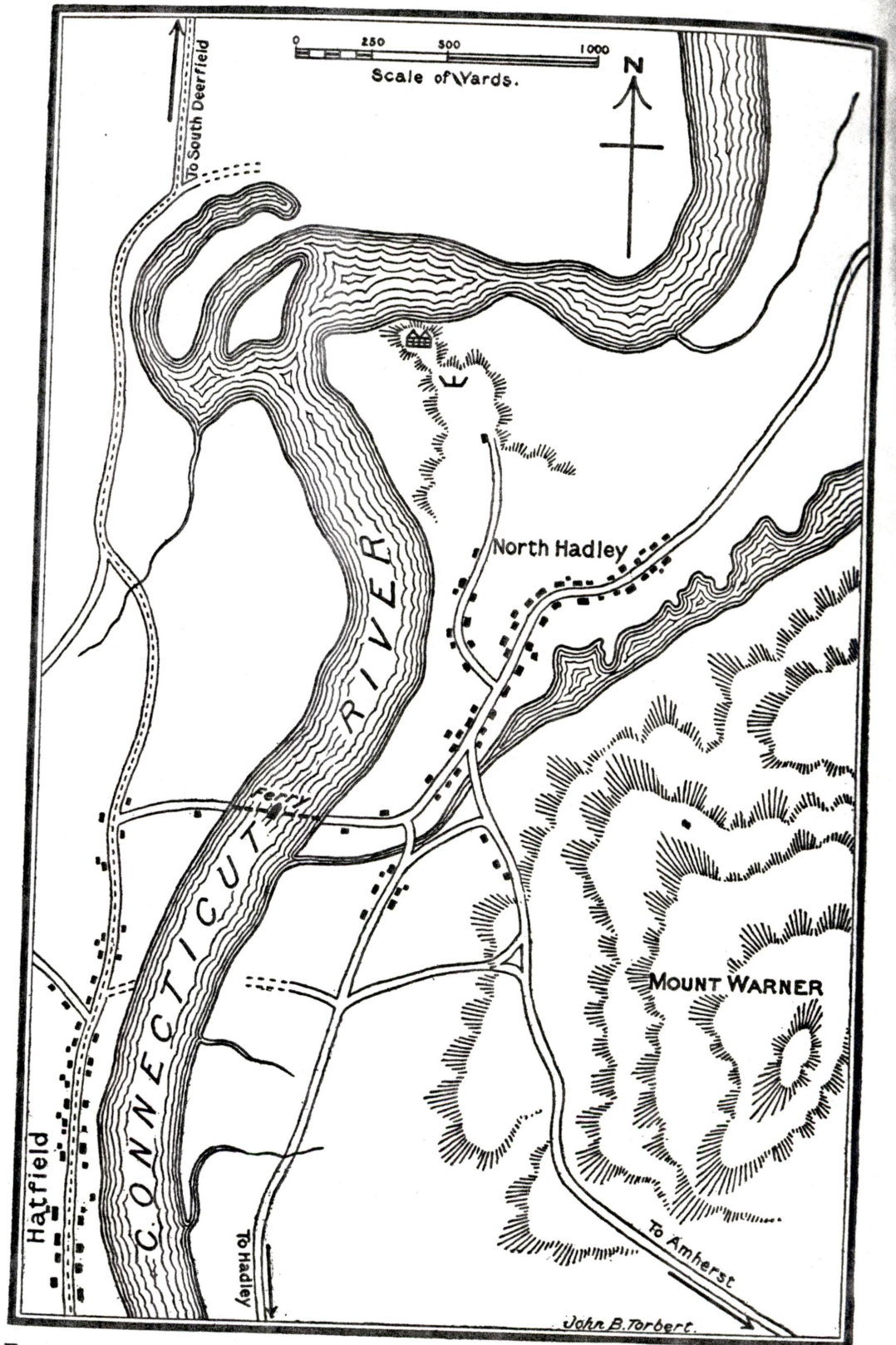


FIG. 14.—Map of North Hadley, Mass., showing site of aboriginal village and burial-place.

river. It had long been known that there was an aboriginal burial site somewhere in this vicinity, but the exact locality had become lost, and was rediscovered the previous spring (1904) by the chance plowing up of some bones near the northern edge of the rectangular field. The northwest corner of this field was almost immediately excavated by a representative of the Peabody Museum of Harvard University, who found there the skeletons of two adults and a child of six or seven years. The right to dig in the remainder of the field was then granted by Mr L. P. Bullard, its owner, to the Smith College authorities, who located a claim along the northern side, adjacent to that of the Peabody Museum, but postponed the actual excavation until after the summer vacation.

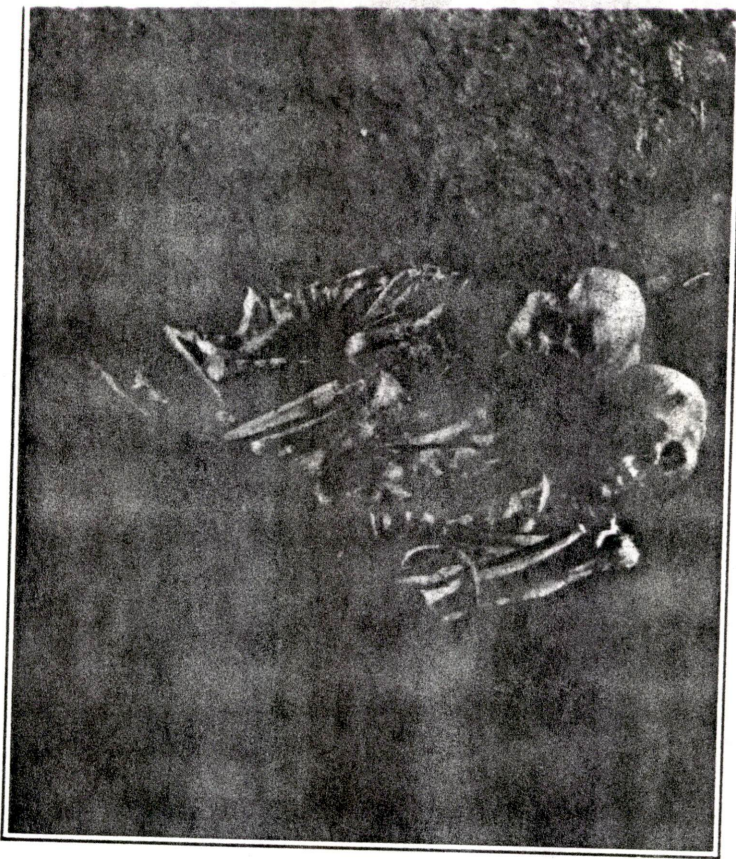
The burial site, where these excavations were made, is now a cultivated field, planted with tobacco. The field is covered with a brown surface loam, 14 to 16 inches thick on a level, below which lies a compact yellow sand of unknown depth. The skeletons occurred in this latter formation, their highest parts not more than 4 to 6 inches below its surface, or 18 to 22 inches from the top. As the color contrast between the brown surface loam and the yellow sand is a marked one, and as the top soil is very mellow from long cultivation, it was possible to scrape the loam into heaps with a two-horse road scraper, leaving about an inch over the sand, and then dig over the territory thus uncovered with spades. Although the depth thus reached was sufficient to disclose the skeletons, the chief reliance was placed upon the mixture of the two colors of earth which necessarily occurred over each grave, a point which could be easily determined by watching the cuts made by the sharp spades. In each case the mixed earth formed an approximately circular area about three feet in diameter, the more superficial portion strewn with pieces of charcoal much mixed up by the years of cultivation to which the field had been subjected.

In this way a fairly large area was thoroughly searched, resulting in the discovery of two skeletons in good preservation. In five or six other instances there were uncovered the characteristic areas of mixed earth with pieces of charcoal, but with no trace of either bones or teeth, although in every such case the earth was excavated to a considerable depth, and careful search made. Whether these

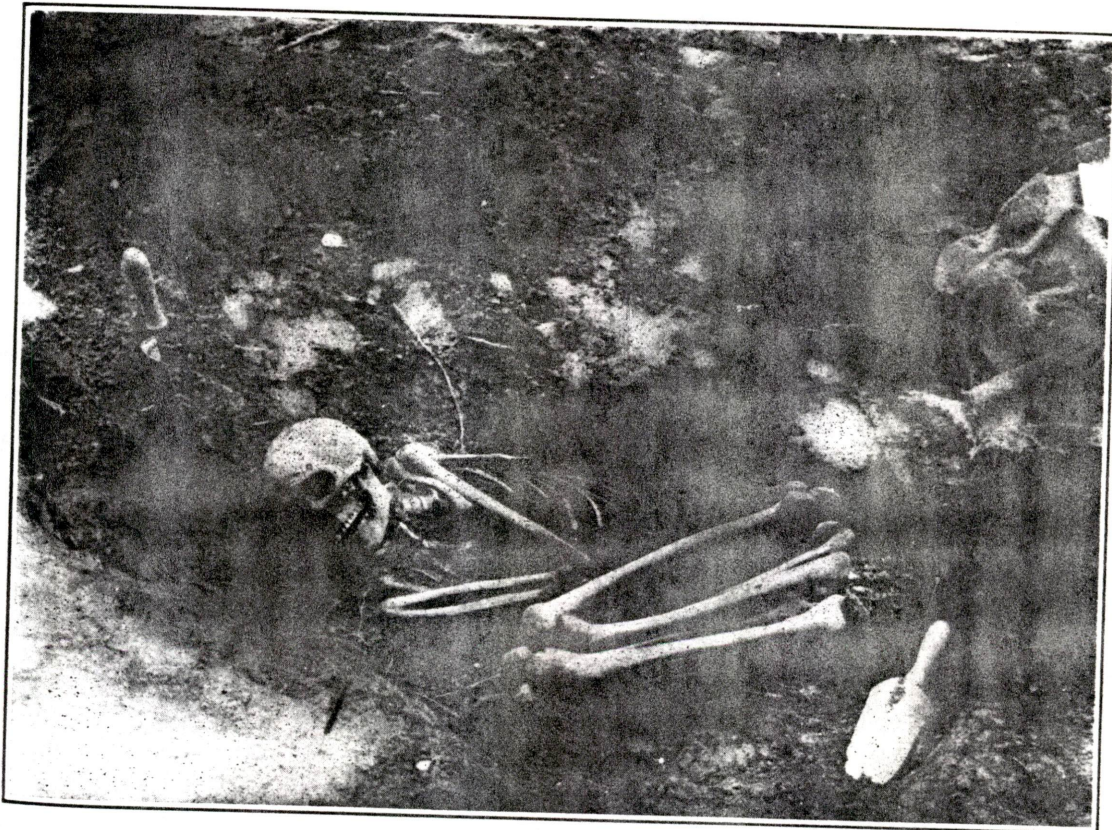
spots indicated graves from which all traces of the human remains had disappeared, or had been caused by the uprooting of ancient trees, we have been unable to decide, as their exact similarity to the actual graves points to the one conclusion while the entire absence of remains suggests the other.

The first of the skeletons found is shown in the accompanying photograph (plate XXIII, 2). The sand, at the time of the excavation, was moist from recent rains, and held the bones well in place, and the skeleton was prepared for the photograph by removing the sand from above bit by bit, allowing the bones to remain absolutely undisturbed. The only bones which had been moved before the photograph was taken were the tarsal and other bones of the feet, which are seen lying upon a piece of burlap at the right of the figure, and the right tibia and patella, which became accidentally loosened during the removal of the sand, but were exactly replaced in their former position. In taking the photograph the camera was placed at the edge of the excavation, standing perhaps a foot above the highest level of the bones, and was pointed almost directly downward, so that the photograph must be held nearly horizontally to reproduce the exact relationship.

It is shown by this that there had been some change in the original position of the bones prior to the excavation, due probably to such various causes as the action of water, earthworms, and the growth of roots. Thus the bones of the hands had wandered from their original position and were found at various depths in the vicinity of the head, some not being recovered at all. The bones of one entire finger were firmly imbedded in the earth that filled the cranial cavity and came to light when the skull was cleaned in the laboratory several days later. This dislocation of parts, especially of the smaller bones, which must have occurred long after burial, leads one to be cautious in drawing sweeping conclusions concerning the original disposal of the limbs when in the flesh, although the retention of the natural relationships of the larger bones assures us that the shifting of position of the limbs as a whole could have been but slight, as for example, a possible dropping of the knees from a more upright original position. It is thus sufficiently clear that the body was buried with its arms and legs folded up, the hands about the



1. INDIAN SKELETONS IN DOUBLE GRAVE AT HADLEY, MASS.
(Photographed in place, with camera almost directly above)



2. INDIAN SKELETON (MALE) FOUND AT NORTH HADLEY, MASS.
(Photographed in place with camera directed obliquely downward)

head, and the knees close to the body. This is the *Höckerstellung* of German archeologists, and may be interpreted as an intentional symbolism, referring to a second birth, the position being similar to that of the child in the womb. The skeleton was headed almost due east, as shown by a compass, the face being to the north. The body lay upon its right side. A later examination of the pelvis showed that the skeleton was undoubtedly that of a man, and the sutures of the skull indicated that he was probably between 20 and 30 years of age. The length and breadth measurements of the skull, 182 x 135.5 mm., give a cephalic index of 74.45.

The excavation of the second skeleton was not quite as successful, owing in part to a somewhat deeper burial and in part to the fact that the bones were smaller and more fragile. This skeleton was that of a small aged person, with a lower jaw of the extreme senile type, and showing but two stubs of teeth, besides two other alveoli nearly filled with bone substance. The general position was similar to the first, that is, it was doubled up with the knees close to the chest, but it seems to have been cast into the grave with but little care, as the face was directed downward. It lay upon its left side, with the head directed nearly to the south.

No implements or utensils of any kind were found in connection with these skeletons, but the field has yielded an abundance of arrow-points for many years, and it is at present plentifully bestrewn with flint flakes. Baking stones, reddened by heat and often cracked or split, were found here and there in the soil, especially in the vicinity of the spots of disturbed earth; these were rendered conspicuous from the fact that the soil, owing to its formation, is naturally without stones of any kind.

The Amherst College excavations were conducted a few weeks later by Dr Edward Hitchcock. These were also on the east bank of the Connecticut, but about six miles farther south by the road, or double that distance along the windings of the river, at a well-known locality between Hadley and South Hadley, where skeletons and utensils have been obtained in the past. The spot is known locally as "Indian Hill," the name being applied to a low ridge of sand, the longer axis of which runs approximately east and west, at right angles to the river bank. Its southern slope is abrupt, but its northern

dips gradually into the surrounding level. The east bank of the river at this place is apt to be undermined by the action of the spring freshets, and it is reported locally that this action once disclosed a skeleton which was seen protruding from the cut section of the bank. In the spring of 1900 the washout included the highway, which ran near the river bank at this place, necessitating the construction of a new highway some distance farther east; and in the cut which was made through the ridge for this purpose parts of five skeletons were found at that time, together with a number of stone implements, variously interpreted as hoes, hatchets, and gouges. It thus seems probable that the entire ridge was used by the Indians for burial purposes, and as little of the ground has been dug over it is to be expected that the ridge still contains considerable material. The ground is unbroken and covered with sod, and no excavation on a large scale has ever been attempted. In the course of the present investigation two finds were made, both upon the east side of the new cut. One of these was that of a child of twelve, the other a double grave containing two adults, lying side by side, with their limbs entwined. This find is of so unusual a nature that a photograph of it, given me by Dr Hitchcock, is here reproduced (plate XXIII, 1).

As will be seen, the photograph was taken in strong sunlight, and with the camera pointed almost directly downward, as in the other case. The skeletons lay with their heads to the south and facing west. No utensils or charcoal were found in connection with either grave, although, as stated above, many stone implements were discovered with the bones found four years ago in excavating the cut for the highway, the edge of which was but eight feet from the double grave. The relation of these implements to the skeletons does not seem to have been recorded.

SMITH COLLEGE,
NORTHAMPTON, MASS.