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Piketon's Graded Way Was Graded Away

No vestige remains of Piketon's famous, controversial "graded way." Once touted as the most remarkable aboriginal earthwork of its kind, this ancient roadway has, ironically, been graded away by gravel operations, highway expansion, and building construction.

Where Caleb Atwater, more or less the father of Ohio archaeology, once imagined stately processions of prehistoric mound builders passing between these two parallel walls of earth moving to an "ancient place of sepulture," one now sees only heavy automobile and truck traffic speeding along the four-lane, latter-day counterpart of the old Chillicothe and Portsmouth Turnpike (U.S. Route 23). (The turnpike passed between the walls, whereas today's highway passes completely over the site.) Though completely destroyed and largely forgotten, it is interesting to consider how various archaeologists have interpreted Piketon's celebrated earthworks.

Atwater, the first to describe and illustrate the Piketon Graded Way—twenty feet of earth piled high on either side—clearly thought that it was entirely man-made. He also thought that the Graded Way lead directly to a group of conical burial mounds which are still preserved in Mound Cemetery at the south edge of Piketon. Atwater noted that the walls were "so high and so wide at their bases, that the traveller would not, without particular attention, suspect them to be artificial." He concluded, however, that "It is easy to discover that these walls are artificial, if careful attention is bestowed on them."

Atwater's crude diagrammatic map scarcely did justice to the site and later elicited an unkind footnote in Ephraim G. Squier and Edwin H. Davis' classic *Ancient Moundments of the Mississippi Valley*. It is these two worthies who provide us with the earliest (1848) known illustration of the Graded Way, and an impressive view it is, with the northern end of the earthworks dwarfing a horse-drawn coach that is about the enter the "Way." The Squier and Davis "view"



Few actual photographs of the Piketon Graded Way are known to exist, but several previously unpublished views of the northern end are located in the files of the Society's Department of Archaeology. The two shown here are not dated, but probably were taken around 1890.

was reprinted hundreds of times, the exaggerated impressiveness of the earthworks in this drawing doing much to reinforce the romantic speculations that had begun with Atwater. Squier and Davis provide a much more accu-

rate map of the Graded Way, based on surveys by Col. Charles Whittlesey; it appears that Whittlesey at least realized that much of the "Way" was a natural formation. It was also Squier and Davis

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Graded Way

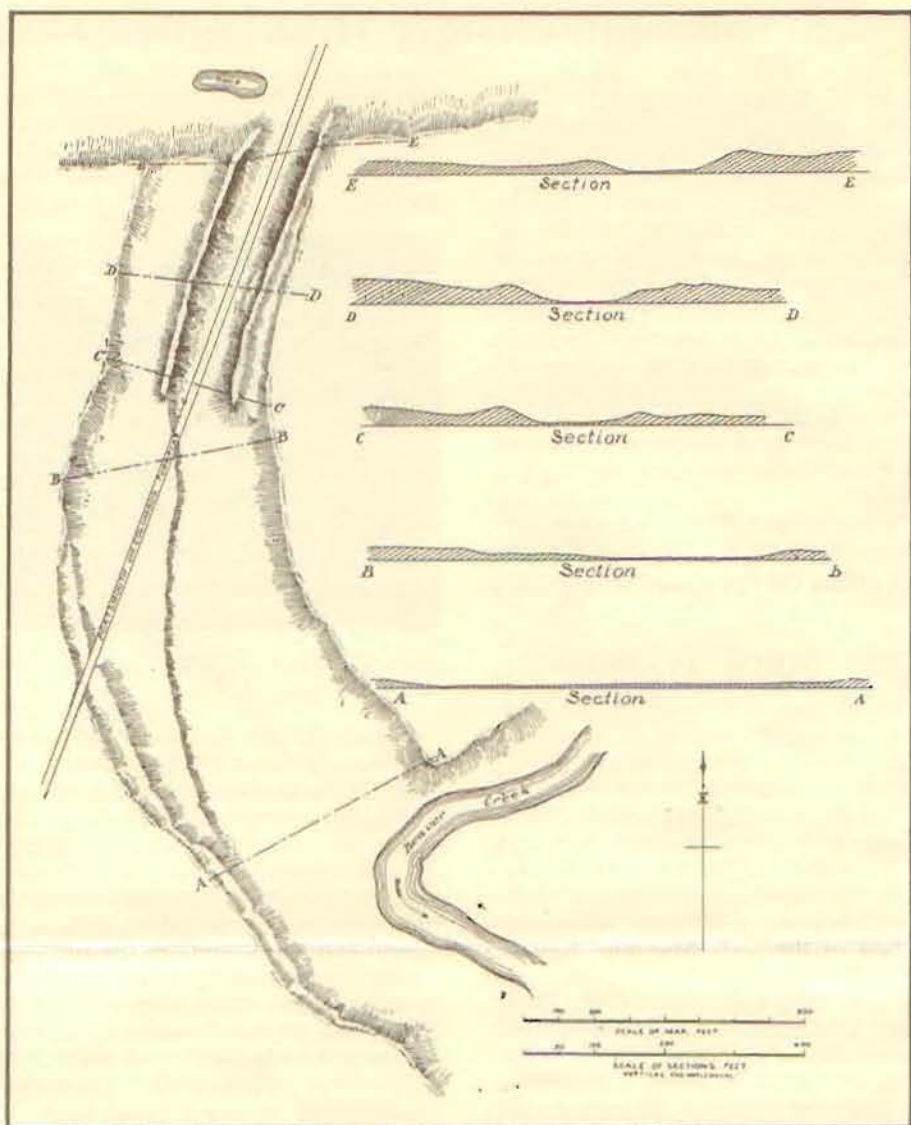
who coined the term "graded way" as one of their "classes" of earthworks, and it was they who termed the Piketon Graded Way the most remarkable example of its kind. They described it in some detail, noting that the Way was 1080 feet long and 203 to 215 feet wide. Squier and Davis also noted that the walls

"... resemble parallel natural hills, and probably would be regarded as such by the superficial observer. Indeed, hundreds pass along without suspecting that they are in the midst of one of the most interesting monuments which the country affords, and one which bears a marked resemblance to some of those works which are described to us in connection with the causeways and aqueducts of Mexico."

Despite their willingness to compare the Piketon Graded Way to Mexican causeways, Squier and Davis considered it "useless to speculate upon the probable purpose of this work," trusting instead that future investigations, carefully conducted, would solve problem of its purpose and its origin.

Another forty years were to pass, however, before such carefully conducted investigations were made. In 1887 James Middleton and Gerard Fowke, working for the Smithsonian Institution, re-examined the Piketon Graded Way. The published report by Cyrus Thomas was the first to note that the graded way was built along an old watercourse or stream channel, probably an abandoned cut-off through which the waters of Beaver Creek sought a shorter path to the Scioto River during times of flood. Thomas' account is also the first to note that the walls of the Graded Way were gradually being destroyed by gravel operations.

As a result of his observations at the Piketon Graded Way, Gerard Fowke, the *infant terrible* of turn-of-the-century Ohio archaeology, delivered an attack on previous accounts of the Graded Way that interpreted it as an artificial excavation. Squier and Davis in particular were criticized for their "negligent, slipshod manner" and their perverted account impressing readers with erroneous ideas. Fowke, who had a considerable interest in geology as well as archaeology, correctly surmised that the Graded Way had been excavated by the hand of Nature and merely improved upon by the hand of prehistoric man.



Gerard Fowke was one of the first archaeologists to realize that the Graded Way was in large part a natural formation. His map shows the true nature of the "Way" as it appeared at the turn of the century.

Or, as Fowke put it, with characteristic if justifiable sarcasm: "When Beaver creek carved out its present channel, the old thoroughfare remained practically unchanged for an unknown number of centuries, until the Mound Builders came along and built their little walls on either side, all unconscious of the trouble they were making for future archaeologists." Fowke continued to debunk other "graded ways" throughout Ohio in his *Archaeological History of Ohio* (1902).

By the early 1950s, little remained of the Piketon Graded Way. In August 1952, William H. Sassaman undertook an archaeological survey of the Waverly-Piketon area for the Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society. According to his field notes, the entire eastern wall had been practically obliterated by a State Highway Department gravel pit and would soon be nonexistent. The 870-foot-long western wall had also been damaged by gravel

operations. The Highway Department gravel pit destroyed the Graded Way, giving Sassaman an excellent opportunity to study the structure of the parallel ridges. He found "sand of several kinds, gravels, pebbles of numerous colors and sizes... mixed with practically no stratification" and interpreted this mixture as glacial till deposited in the form of an esker. There was no evidence of prehistoric artifacts, "let alone artificial construction of the 'Way.'"

Sassaman was probably the last person to give the Graded Way any detailed examination. With continued gravel operations and expansion of U.S. Route 23 to a four-lane highway, every trace of Piketon's once famous Graded Way has disappeared. It is memorialized only in the name of an "Indian Ridge" apartment complex on the site of the western wall.

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