



July 5, 2016

Dear Commission and Council Members:

I am writing on behalf of Mike Tompkins, who as you know is working on plans for a development west of Scott Boulevard, at the end of West Smith Drive. To me, one very exciting feature of the planned development is the incorporation of a large prehistoric mound — in all likelihood a burial “mound” — into the project. The mound dates to around A.D. 450–750, what archaeologists refer to as the “Late Woodland” period. I base this assessment on radiocarbon dates that have been run on charcoal from similar mounds in and around central Missouri. The age of the mound predates European contact by many centuries, so we have no way of knowing who the prehistoric people were who were responsible for the mounds.

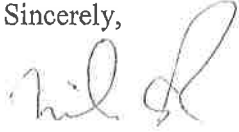
I put quotes around the word mound when I referred to it as a burial mound because that is not quite what this and similar structures were. The mounds actually contain limestone slabs that served as walls and caps of burial crypts. Sometimes one crypt would be added alongside an older one, or sometimes a newer one would be built on top of another one. Through time, the assemblage of crypts would grow, but after a while, they no longer served a burial function, and the walls and tops would collapse; vegetation would cover them; the vegetation would decompose; and over time, the structures became mounds of dirt, with the slabs and human remains sealed inside.

The existence of the mound in question has been known for a long time. I think the first written documentation for it occurred when the University of Missouri conducted the survey and excavation of archaeological sites in connection with the Perche and Hinkson Outfall Sewer Project back in 1980 and 1981 — a project that I directed. Given that it was in no danger of being damaged or destroyed, we left it untouched.

At one time — probably a century ago — every bluff in Boone County contained one or more mounds, but development and land clearing have taken their toll. It is extraordinary that a mound of this size — apparently untouched — is still in existence. What Mike has planned for the mound — incorporating it into a green area within the development — is an excellent opportunity to ensure its preservation. We did something similar with some of the artifacts from excavations along Perche and Hinkson creeks. Ray Beck was public-works director back then, and he and I had display cases built at the sewage-treatment plant in which to exhibit them. I think this speaks highly of Columbia’s interest in cultural preservation, and I see Mike’s efforts

as simply another step in that direction. Other communities —Baton Rouge, La., for example — have actually used mounds as a means of educating the public about prehistoric Native American lifeways, and Columbia could do the same. I would say that is a pretty exciting prospect.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Michael J. O'Brien".

Michael J. O'Brien
Dean and Professor of Anthropology