

History of the Pope Hill-Stead Mastodon: A Case Study

In 1913 a group of workmen were excavating on the Pope Estate in Farmington, Connecticut when they accidentally discovered many large bones. At first, they mistook the bones for a large tree stump and immense root system. As a result, they destroyed a large portion of what turned out to be an animal skull. When the overseer of the estate came to check on the progress of the work, his twelve-year-old son commented that the 'roots' looked like bone. Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History in New Haven was called to investigate. After an extensive excavation, the most complete mastodon skeleton ever found in the Northeast (at the time) was uncovered. Visitors flocked to see the excavation in progress and newspapers from as far away as Maine reported the discovery.

The bones were wrapped in a plaster 'jacket' and shipped to Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History in New Haven for further study. In April 1914 a preliminary report was published in the *American Journal of Science*, although at the time many of the bones were still encased in the plaster used to transport them.

The Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History already had a mastodon on display and was not interested in displaying another, so the specimen was shipped back to the Pope Estate in Farmington. For a time, it disappeared into storage. When she died in 1946, Theodate Pope-Riddle bequeathed the mastodon to the foundation overseeing Avon Old Farms School. They later donated the bones to the Connecticut State Geological and Natural History Survey, which contained many other animal specimens, all requiring different types and levels of care.

In 1975 Richard Davis became the Director of the Institute for American Indian Studies (then known as the American Indian Archaeological Institute) in Washington, Connecticut. Soon after, Davis hoped to enhance the museum's new Paleo-Indian exhibit with the mastodon skeleton. Davis had been Headmaster at Miss Porter's School in Farmington and remembered seeing the bones stored in crates. He set about tracking them down. After considerable effort, Davis was able to reach an agreement with the Connecticut Geological and Natural History Survey to display the mastodon.

Extensive restoration and conservation were needed before the bones could be properly displayed. This work was performed by a preparator from Yale, assisted by staff and volunteers from the Institute for American Indian Studies and was funded by the State and the Institute for American Indian Studies. The mastodon was on display at the Institute for American Indian Studies from 1977-1989. In 1989, the exhibit containing the mastodon was taken down and the mastodon was briefly housed at Yale before being transferred to the Connecticut State Museum of Natural History at the University of Connecticut in Storrs.

In the spring of 2015, the Office of the State Archaeology had a tusk fragment from the mastodon radiocarbon dated. The test indicated an age of about 14,500 years, making it the oldest known mastodon in the Northeast. In 2015 the bones returned—once again—to the Institute for American Indian Studies. The years and time spent in various storage locations and environmental conditions (temperature, humidity, etc.) had taken a toll on the specimen. Large cracks had developed and some of the bigger bones were beginning to collapse. In 2016, the Connecticut State Museum of Natural History and the Institute for American Indian Studies began developing a plan to preserve the mastodon skeleton for future generations.