

# SCD ROOTS

SUSSEX COUNTY



FEBRUARY 19, 1954



PEATY MUCK SOIL



MARTINSBURG FM.

## Frozen in Time: The Ohberg Mastodon Discovery

On a cold February day in 1954, an extraordinary chapter in New Jersey's Ice Age history was unearthed beneath a quiet pond in Vernon Township. While expanding a pond on his property near Highland Lakes Road, local resident Gus Ohberg and contractor Archibald McMurtry made a discovery that stunned scientists and captured national attention: the remains of a mastodon, an elephant-like creature that roamed North America over 10,000 years ago.

### From Tree Stump to Ice Age Giant

What first appeared to be an old tree stump turned out to be a massive skull, complete with large, fist-sized teeth. Recognizing the significance of the find, Ohberg contacted state police, who in turn notified geological experts. Officials from the New Jersey Geological Survey (NJGS) and the New Jersey State Museum (NJSM) quickly confirmed the remains belonged to a young adult female Mastodon that once stood nearly eight feet tall.



Scientists digging through the excavated materials for mastodon bones. From left: Frank Nobori Goto (Princeton), unknown, Kemble Widmer (NJGS), unknown, Meredith Johnson (NJGS), Frank Markewicz (NJGS), Jim Minard (USGS), and Glenn Jepson (Princeton), NJGWS Archives.



Mr. & Mrs. Ohberg posing with their discovery. Photo by S. Novak, NJGWS Archives.

### Soils & Sediments

The mastodon remains were recovered from a pond-bottom environment where approximately four feet of clay and humus overlay soft peat sediments. This wetland setting is typical of Vernon Township and provided the low-oxygen conditions necessary for long-term preservation. Beneath the sediments lies weathered shale and siltstone from the Martinsburg Formation, a geologic unit dating to the Cambrian-Ordovician period. Surrounding upland areas are characterized by soils such as Alden silt loam and Pompton sandy loam, which have developed over similar bedrock. This combination of waterlogged soils and fine-grained sediments helped protect the bones from decay for over 11,000 years.

## A Dig That Made History



Archibald McMurtry (left), Gus Ohberg (right) holding newly unearthed mastodon bones on February 19, 1954, NJGWS Archives.

The excavation continued through early April 1954, drawing support from the NJGS, NJSM, the United States Geological Survey (USGS), Rutgers University, and Princeton University. The collaborative effort led to the recovery of New Jersey's most complete mastodon skeleton. Among the dig team were notable geologists such as Jim Minard (USGS) and Glenn Jepsen (Princeton), all working elbow-deep in muck to recover Ice Age bones.

Eventually, Ohberg donated the full skeleton to the New Jersey State Museum, where the bones were stabilized, cataloged, and placed on exhibit. For 50 years, from 1954 to 2024, the Ohberg Mastodon greeted museum visitors and stood as a symbol of New Jersey's prehistoric past.

From pond-bottom bones to a museum centerpiece, the Ohberg Mastodon reminds us that even in quiet corners of New Jersey, our ancient past is never too far beneath the surface.



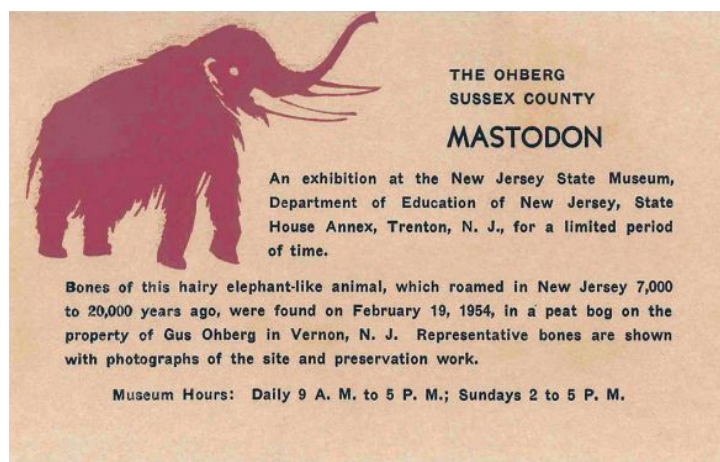
Ohberg's mastodon on display at the New Jersey State Museum, 1954, NJGWS Archives.

## Dating the Discovery

Carbon-14 testing of the surrounding peat determined the site was roughly 11,000 years old, placing the mastodon's life near the end of the Pleistocene epoch. Its well-preserved condition allowed researchers to study its anatomy in detail, including the unique ridged molars that distinguish mastodons from their mammoth cousins.

## Legacy in Storage, and Hope for Revival

Today, the Ohberg Mastodon rests in NJSM collections storage. While no longer on public display, interest in reviving the exhibit remains high. Museum officials have hinted at plans to secure funding for conservation, restoration, and a new exhibit that will once again share this Ice Age giant with the public.



NJSM advertisement featuring the Ohberg Mastodon exhibit [NJSM 11907], circa 1950s, NJGWS Archives.