

ALIENS

In Montgomery County?

**“It was like
you found an alien.
It *wasn't*
supposed
to be here!”**

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Dr. Saunders remembers the day well. It was May 6, 1980, when Dr. Leo Carson Davis literally picked up the fossil from a gravel bar he was standing on as they were preparing the site to excavate a mastodont. The partial skeleton of the mastodont that included a knee cap attached to the femur, a tusk and other pieces was exciting. But the piece that they thought could only be a fragment of a plastron or belly plate of a giant tortoise (along with a few other fragments) was record setting in paleontological journals. Fillmore, Illinois is the farthest north that any signs of Ice Age giant tortoise have been found. The team dated the tortoise to the Sangamon Interglacial Period—approximately 124,000 years ago. The theory is that gulf coast winds converged more northerly to create a microclimate that suited the giant tortoise. A re-creation of the tortoise and its habitat is on display at the Changes exhibit in the Illinois State Museum, located at the intersection of Spring and Edwards streets in Springfield.



In this view of the fossil, the anterior is to the bottom and posterior is to the top. The tortoise is the extinct species *Hesperotestudo crassiscutata*.

The fossil represents a juvenile tortoise, perhaps 18 years of age at its death. Today's giant tortoises are known to have lived for up to 250 years and the extinct species from Hopwood Farm may have as well.

In addition, the fossil is representative of one of the largest species of giant tortoise, with carapace shells exceeding 1500 mm (5 feet) in length.

The giant tortoise discovery specimen, a partial left xiphiplastron, was found in May 1980 by Dr. Leo Carson Davis on the gravel bar shown in the foreground at the base of the exposure shown to the right. The creek runs through Hopwood Farm north of Fillmore, Illinois in Montgomery County.

