

Explore the Site

Marksville's story did not end in pre-history. The site also played a role in modern U.S. history. The city of Marksville bought the site in 1933 and invited the Smithsonian Institution to come investigate it. The Smithsonian sent Frank Setzler to serve as lead archaeologist for this project, along with his assistant, James Ford.

This was during the Great Depression, and many people were eager for a paycheck. Crews of local people dug under professional supervision at this site in 1933 and 1939. This was the first large-scale excavation funded by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). In many ways, it served as a test case for future federally funded digs around the country during the Depression.

Now it is your turn to experience Marksville for yourself. Read about the features of the map to learn more about the site and the people who built it.



Embankment

A massive 3,117-foot-long ridge, or embankment, encircles six mounds and almost 40 acres at Marksville. That is the size of nearly 20 soccer fields! A ditch runs along the outside of the embankment, marking the area where people took soil to build the embankment. People passed in and out of the enclosed area through three small gaps. Two of these gaps lie close together on the south side of the embankment. They lead to a causeway across the ditch and to the Outer Circle.

The embankment stands nearly 10 feet high at its peak and under 2 feet at its lowest point. Why does its height vary so much? It varies because the embankment was built in relation to the natural ground

surface. The embankment is lowest where the ground surface is highest, and it is tallest where the ground level is lowest. Building it this way means the top of the embankment is at the same elevation all around the site.

It is clear that people built the site with a plan in mind. The embankment is a part of that plan. People may have used the embankment to help track the movement of the sun, moon and stars, perhaps to plan ceremonial events. This interpretation is difficult to prove, though. To date, no data have been found at the site to suggest this is clearly the case.



Mound X

It is hard to tell what Mound X looked like when American Indians first built it. Sadly, the mound has been greatly altered by development and farming. Today, it is triangular in shape and just over 3 feet tall.

All of the other mounds have numeric designations (i.e., Mounds 2, 3, 4, etc.). Why is this mound different? As it so happens, an early researcher counted 27 mounds in the Marksville area when he did a survey of the site in 1926. However, because Mound X is so low and has an odd shape, archaeologists did not identify it as made by people until 2000. By then, giving the mound a number (Mound 28) would have caused too much confusion.



Sometimes, important archaeological discoveries are hidden in plain view. Mound X, indicated by the arrow in the image above, went unnoticed by archaeologists for nearly 80 years!



Mound 2

Development and farming have damaged Mound 2 over time. In spite of this damage, the mound is still visible. Today, it stands 13 feet tall and is 295 by 263 feet wide at its base. As part of the site plan, a line between this mound and Mound 6 forms a line parallel to the bluff's edge. Builders made the mound out of earth found near the site, including at least one layer of black clay dug from the nearby river bank. This mound also has an odd shape whose meaning and purpose is unclear.

People may have used Mound 2 for important rituals. Near the mound are the remains of a rectangular structure with a sunken floor. Dug into this floor was a large rectangular pit filled with charcoal from one or more large fires. Very few artifacts were found in the structure leaving few clues to the activities that took place in and around it. Artifacts and [features](#) are scarce on the west and south sides of the mound, while artifacts and [features](#) are common between the mound and the bluff edge.



Mounds 3 and 5

Looking at Mounds 3 and 5, it is clear that the people who built the site had a plan in mind. The two mounds are in a direct north-south line. Mound 5 lies east of Mound 4 while Mound 3 lies west of Mound 2. Each mound is low and dome shaped, over 65 feet in diameter and roughly 3 feet high. These two mounds are unique at the site because each is built entirely of white-colored earth.

Civilian crews dug at Mound 5 during the 1933 project. They cut one trench through the mound, which people can still see today. A large depression is also visible in the center of Mound 3. It is the result of an excavation in 1926. This dig found no artifacts in the mound.



Mounds 3 (below) and 5 (above).



Mound 4

Mound 4 is the site's only burial mound. It is also the only mound at the site to be completely excavated. It was originally 20 feet tall and 100 feet wide at its base, and it had a conical shape. The mound contained the remains of at least 34 people and two dogs. Some burials included decorated ceramic pots and pipes. After workers finished excavating the mound in 1933, they rebuilt it.

Mound 4 began as a 5-foot-high, rectangular platform of earth. A line of wooden posts stood along two sides of the platform, and a large burial chamber was in the center. This tomb was 8 by 12 feet in size and 3 feet deep. People laid several bodies along with artifacts in this tomb. Then they covered it with logs and mats of woven cane. Several smaller tombs were on the platform around this large grave.

The builders covered the entire platform with a pile of earth and added more burials. Then, they topped the mound with a second layer of earth to give it the final conical shape.

This mound was reserved for the burial of important people from the community. Children buried in the mound may have been members of their families. This kind of treatment was unusual during the [Middle Woodland period](#) in this region.

Archaeologist Gerard Fowke started work at Mound 4 in 1926. He only dug a portion of the mound, though. In 1933, civilian crews dug the entire mound under the direction of archaeologist Frank Setzler.



Mound 6

This is the largest of the site's mounds. Although the original shape of Mound 6 is not easily visible today, it once had two tiers, or levels, with flat tops. The lowest level is now largely buried below the modern ground surface. Archaeologists think that this mound may also have originally had a dome-shaped mound on its top. Farmers probably removed it in the historic era so they could plant crops there. Today, the mound is 13 feet tall and 312 feet in diameter.

This mound stands out because of how people made it. They built it using mixed soils, except for the mound's outer layer, which is mainly yellow clay. The kind of soil people used to make the mounds clearly mattered a lot. The use of clayey dirt would have helped the mound keep its shape and resist erosion. What the different colored soils meant is open to debate. Native Americans built this mound and Mound 2 in a line parallel to the edge of the bluff on which the site sits.



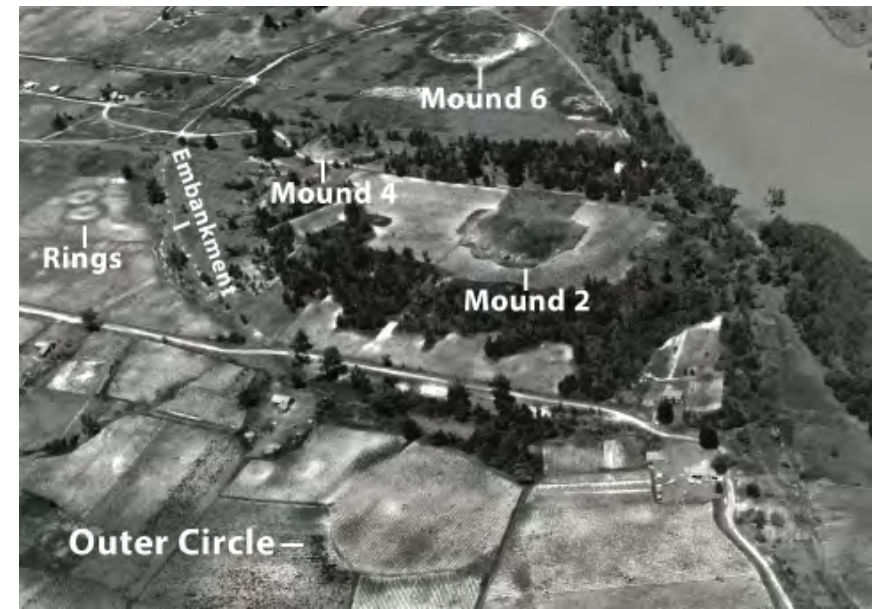
(Above) Archaeologists making a map of Mound 6.



Outer Circle

The Outer Circle lies just south of Marksville's embankment. The circle is barely noticeable today. Most of it stands only an inch or two above the surface. Its shape is easier to see below the ground, where it shows up as a dark stain in the soil. Originally, the circle may have stood up to 2 feet tall with walls that were 20 feet wide. It measures about 320 feet in diameter, and it is surrounded by a ditch.

Archaeologists think a small causeway, or raised path, may have connected the circle to Marksville's plaza. This path would have been almost due north of the center of the circle. Archaeologists have excavated in this area, from just inside the Outer Circle to just inside the site's enclosure. They found only a handful of artifacts. To date, researchers do not know how or why the Outer Circle was used.



(Above) Black and white photo of the site, courtesy of LSU Museum of Natural Science.

(Below) Detail from painting of the site by Martin Pate.



Rings

The rings are among the first [earthworks](#) that American Indians built at the site. These features vary in size from 30 to 100 feet in diameter. Each ring is less than 4 feet high and is surrounded by a ditch on its outside edge. Inside each ring is a shallow basin, up to 3 feet deep. In the center of each basin is a deep pit, some up to 10 feet across and over 6 feet deep. People built a fire in the deepest pit and cleaned it out after each use.

It is unclear what kinds of rituals people held at these rings. The earthen ring would have made it hard for people outside of it to see what was taking place in the basin and pit. Small groups probably

met for ceremonies, lighting a fire inside the pit. Eventually, people stopped using each pit and filled it with dirt. They left the ring surrounding each pit intact. After the ritual use of the pit ended, people could still see where each one had been.

Most telling, perhaps, is the fact that all but one of these rings are outside of the embankment. If these are ceremonial places, then the ceremonial landscape includes much land outside the embankment. This means that the sacred landscape extended beyond the embankment and mounds.

