



POVERTY POINT

1700 B.C. – 1100 B.C.



The unusual artifacts and earthworks of Poverty Point kindle the imagination. Understanding the site takes more than imagination, though. Archaeologists use the tools and methods of science to interpret the site and make sense of the things people left behind.

Photo © Jenny Ellerbe
Painting by Martin Pate

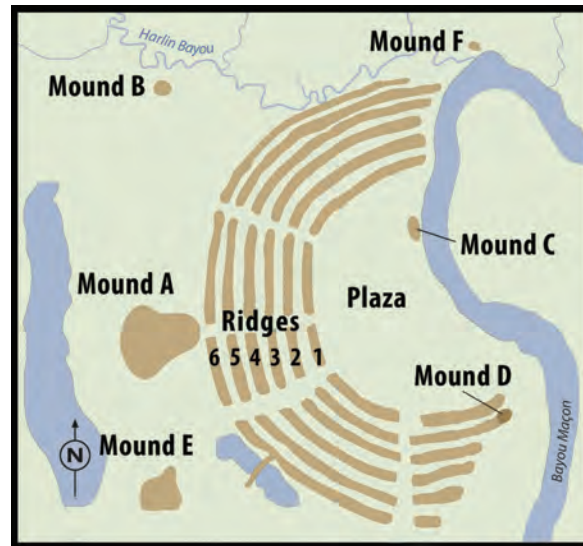
Poverty Point became a World Heritage Site in 2014. That honor goes only to the most exceptional places around the world. Built by American Indians 3,400 years ago, Poverty Point is unlike any other site. Its design, with multiple mounds and C-shaped ridges, is not found anywhere else. In its time, it had the largest [earthworks](#) in the Western Hemisphere. Many people lived, worked, and held special events at this huge site over hundreds of years. This has led some to call it North America's first city.

Archaeologists have found out that this community achieved things once thought impossible in its day and age. For example, it was at the heart of a huge trade network, the largest in North America at that time. The trade and site design are more unusual because the people did not grow crops or raise animals for food. No other hunting and gathering society made mounds at this scale anywhere else in the world. Now it is your turn to discover more about this one-of-a-kind site!

Time and Place

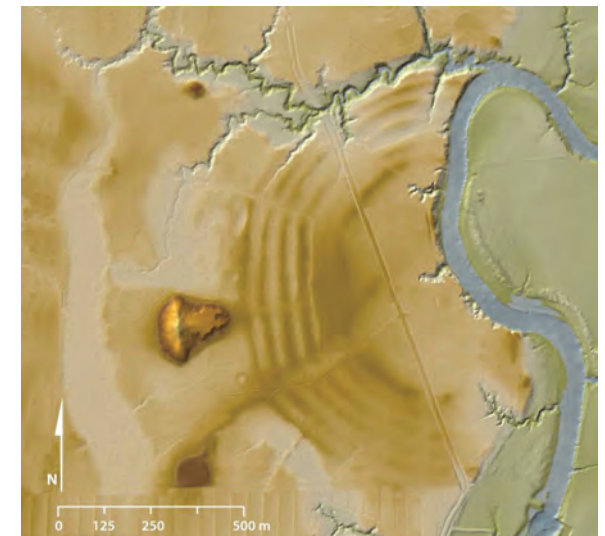
Poverty Point was built between 1700 B.C. and 1100 B.C. There was a lot going on around the rest of the world at this time. In Egypt, Queen Nefertiti and the boy pharaoh, Tutankhamen, ruled. In Britain, Stonehenge was being finished. In China, the Shang Dynasty was flourishing. In Mexico, the Olmec were rising to power. In India, the Rig Veda, the oldest of Hinduism's sacred books, was being written.

At the same time, most American Indians north of Mexico lived in small, mobile bands of hunters and gatherers. Things were different at Poverty Point. Although the people were hunters and gatherers, they lived year-round in a large community. They built earthworks and made tools and decorative objects with rocks and minerals brought from afar. Nearby sites, and even some more distant ones, from the same time period as Poverty Point reveal a strong cultural influence coming from Poverty Point.



The Poverty Point site (near left) is located near Epps, Louisiana, in West Carroll Parish. Poverty Point was the “cultural capital” of the region (far left). Other people in the region shared the Poverty Point culture, but they lived at smaller sites, built smaller mounds, and had fewer fancy artifacts than at Poverty Point.

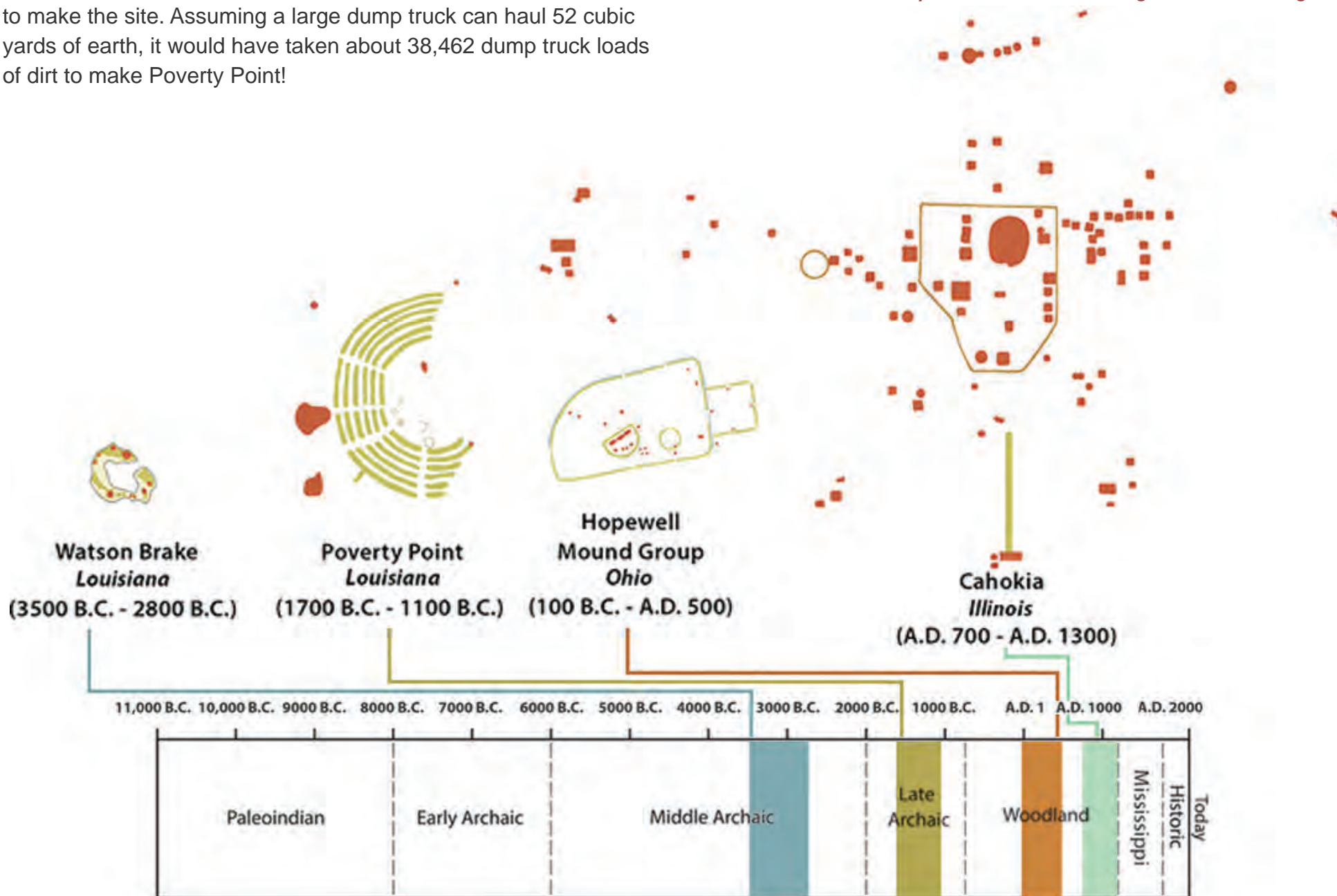
The site map to the right was created using LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging), which is used to make highly detailed maps. This method of mapping, often done from an airplane or satellite, uses pulses of light to measure distances with great precision.



American Indians made the site's first mounds around 1700 B.C., during the **Late Archaic period**. This started an earthwork tradition at the site that lasted for about 600 years. That amounts to what we would think of today as nearly 25 generations.

In that time, people moved nearly 2 million cubic yards of earth to make the site. Assuming a large dump truck can haul 52 cubic yards of earth, it would have taken about 38,462 dump truck loads of dirt to make Poverty Point!

*Early on, archaeologists were not sure how Poverty Point fit into South-eastern prehistory. Now, archaeologists know that the site is simply extraordinary for the **Late Archaic period**. The site serves as proof that mound building in the eastern United States did not just develop from simple to more complex. The timeline below shows how the size and design of Poverty Point compares with other important mound sites in the United States. The brown shapes are mounds and the green ones are ridges.*



Like any big settlement, people likely came to the site for different reasons. Some came to exchange goods and news or to meet people. Others were attracted by the site's natural resources. Still others came to create the site's mounds and ridges or to take part in ceremonies. Most probably had deep family ties in the area.

It is easy to see the site today and forget that people built it over several centuries. The people who made the first of the site's mounds probably could not have guessed how the site would look 600 years later. View the images below to learn more about how the site developed. Illustration credits: Herb Roe

Whatever their reasons, those who took part in life at the site would have been transformed by their time there. They were in touch with people, things, and ideas from faraway lands. They also witnessed what people could achieve when they worked together.



1. Mound B is the oldest earthwork at Poverty Point. The mound even predates the site's most unique features, its C-shaped earthen ridges. At this time, people were living in the area on which they later built the ridges.



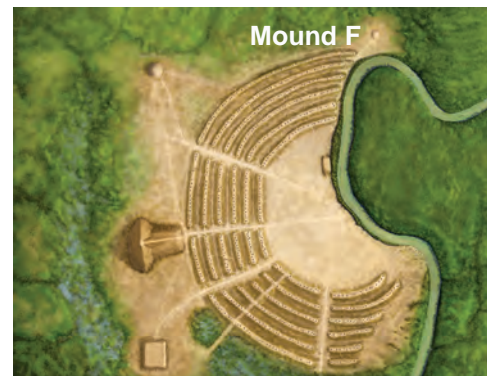
2. American Indians built Mound E shortly after finishing Mound B. They also started building the site's ridges. In the northeast part of the plaza, people started using the space where they would soon build Mound C.



3. By the time people built Mound C, trade and ceremony at the site were well under way. Upkeep of the site would have been an ongoing task.



4. American Indians built Mound A around 1350 B.C., making the mound in three stages. Mound A was the largest of the site's mounds, requiring millions of baskets of dirt to make.



5. American Indians built Mound F sometime around 1200 B.C. It was the last mound built at the site during the Late Archaic period.



6. American Indians built Mound D around A.D. 700. It was nearly 2,000 years since the last mound was built at the site. The people who built Mound D were probably the descendants of the earlier earthwork builders.

Trade and Travel

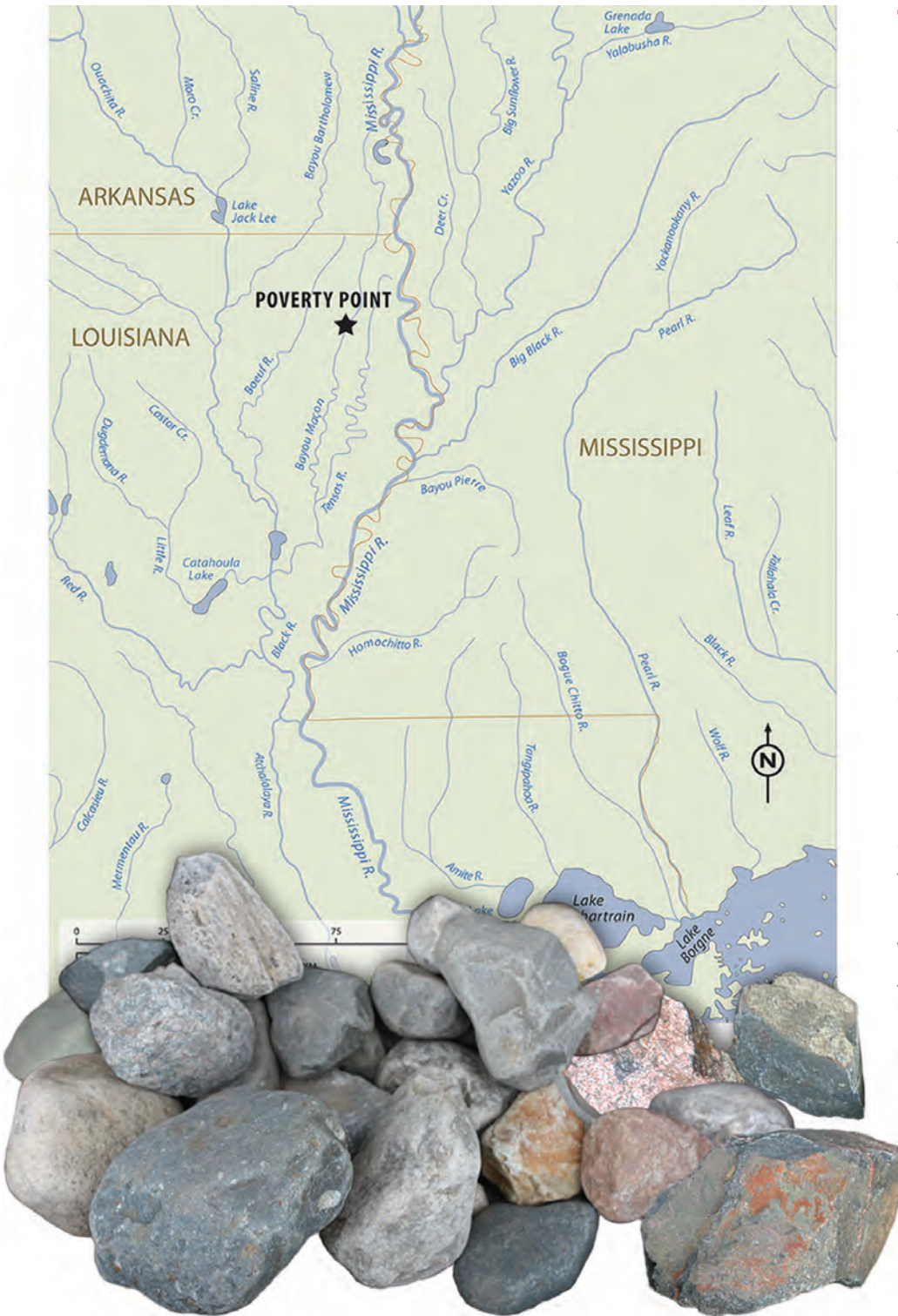
Poverty Point was at the heart of a huge exchange network. This was in no small part due to its location. American Indians built the site on Macon Ridge in northeast Louisiana. This ridge, which is naturally elevated, is surrounded by many rivers. The largest of these is the mighty Mississippi River. Directly along the eastern edge of the site flow the waters of Bayou Maçon.

Given the risk of flooding, it may seem foolish for people to have built the site near so many rivers. In reality, the elevation of Macon Ridge kept the site safe from floods. Plus, rivers were the highways of the ancient world. People used them to trade, travel and share news.

The only major drawback to living at Poverty Point was that there were no rocks near the site. This would have been a problem for people who relied on stone tools. Without trade or travel, people at Poverty Point would not have been able to make the things they needed to survive.

Archaeologists are not really sure how things like stone arrived at the site. People either brought items to the site for trade or went from the site to get them. Perhaps they did both. In any case, Poverty Point may have received over 70 tons of rocks and minerals! These materials came from as far north as Iowa and as far east as the Appalachian Mountains.

Many rivers surround Poverty Point. This would have made trade fairly easy for the people of Poverty Point. Rivers enabled them to carry things, especially heavy things like rocks, more quickly by water rather than by land. People used dugout canoes to travel and haul their goods along these waterways.



People used some of the rock from trade to make stone spear points. They also used stones and minerals to make decorative items, like the objects seen below made of lead ore called galena. They made some tools, like very small hand tools called microliths, from stone found closer to home. Soapstone bowls, however, were made elsewhere before arriving at the site. They were carved at the quarries in Georgia and Alabama before shipment.

During this time period, many people used stones for cooking. They made these stones hot in a fire and then used them as a heat source in earth ovens. Without rock, the people of Poverty Point had to come up with other ways to cook their food. One solution to this problem was right under their feet.

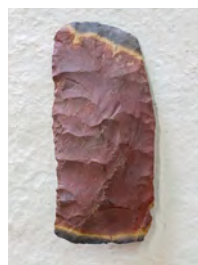
People used the soil on Macon Ridge to make the site's most common artifact: Poverty Point Objects (PPOs). They used these shaped wads of fired mud for cooking in earth ovens. Researchers have found PPOs as far away as Florida's Atlantic coast and throughout the Southeast. Archaeologists have traced the soil used to make some of these distant PPOs directly to Macon Ridge. People must have either gotten these items in trade or while visiting the site.



Pendant, button and cube; galena



Projectile point; gray northern flint



Tablet preform; Pickwick chert



Projectile point; Mill Creek chert



Microlith; Citronelle gravel



Atlatl weight; Catahoula sandstone



Atlatl weight; soapstone



Projectile point; Tallahata quartzite



Plummet; magnetite



The raw materials used to make many of the artifacts found at Poverty Point came from far away. The map above shows where some of these materials came from. Scroll over the red dots to see examples of artifacts made from some of these resources.

Artifacts not to scale. All artifact photos © Jenny Ellerbe

Food

One reason people built the site where they did was because food was so abundant nearby. Natural wetlands, grasslands, woods and rivers surround the site. These areas offered people a rich and varied diet.

Archaeologists have found charred pieces of different kinds of plant foods at the site. Among other things, people gathered persimmons, pawpaws, muscadine grapes, and nuts such as pecans and black walnuts. They probably used many different kinds of herbs, too.

The soils at Poverty Point do not preserve bone well. As a result, archaeologists have not found many animal bones at the site. Those they have found show that people ate deer and lots of small animals like fish, squirrel and turtle. Overall, researchers have found more fish bones at the site than any other kind of bone. They probably used bones to make tools, but archaeologists have only found a few of them.



Painting by Martin Pate



Plummets, teardrop-shaped stone weights found at the site, may have been important fishing gear. People could have used these as weights on fishing nets. Net fishing would allow even small groups of people to catch lots of fish. Photo © Jenny Ellerbe

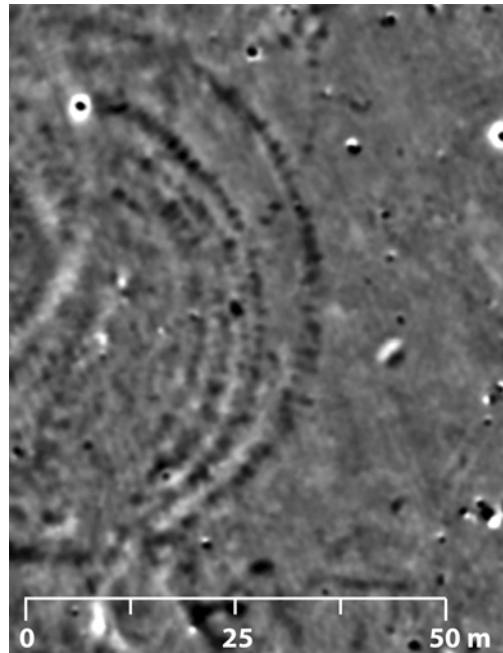
Ceremonial Life

Archaeologists know people lived at the site, but did it have a ceremonial use, too? The site's mounds, plaza and ridges offer researchers clues about ceremonial life at Poverty Point.

Many people probably assume the mounds were used for burials, but this is not true. Archaeologists have not found any prehistoric graves at the site. What they have found within some of the mounds are the remains of fire pits and possible **postholes**. These could be the remains of buildings or ceremonies that people held on the mounds.

Sometimes, clues can be where you least expect them. Though it is flat and even, the plaza offers one of the best looks at ceremonial life at the site. Here, under the plaza's surface, are hundreds of big **postholes**. American Indians once placed posts in big circles in the plaza, with some circles measuring more than 200 feet across. Some of these posts were over 2 feet in diameter.

Many of the ring-shaped features (near right) that archaeologists have found in the plaza seem to overlap. This might mean that the posts were not meant to be permanent. People seem to have pulled old posts from the ground rather than letting them rot in place.



Map credit: R. Berle Clay and Michael Hargrave

Archaeologists have not found any objects at the site that were clearly used just for ceremonies. Yet, they have had a hard time interpreting some of the things they have found, and ceremonial use cannot be ruled out. The best example of this may be the small, clay figurines archaeologists have found at the site, mostly on the earthen ridges.

The figurines show a range of body shapes. Some look like seated, pregnant women and others are slender. Most of the figurines were made without arms or legs, and the majority are missing their heads. Archaeologists have found clay heads around the site, but the number of bodies is far greater.

Poverty Point figurines could be statues of ancestors, magical charms, or even toys. Why is it so hard to tell what the figurines are meant to be? Archaeologists largely rely on patterns and context to understand the past. The figurines come in a variety of forms and have not been found with other things that give clues to their use. This makes it hard for archaeologists to interpret them.



© Jenny Ellerbe

A New Way of Life

People living at the site would have been able to get almost anything they needed through trade, including news. In fact, there were some things the site offered that could not be found anywhere else at the time. This was because the scale of Poverty Point was unmatched in its day.

In the **Late Archaic** period, most people lived in small groups. These people would have known the members of their group very well. This was not quite the case at Poverty Point. At its peak, hundreds of people lived at the site, maybe more. Poverty Point was not just a big settlement, it was a new kind of community. The people who lived and worked at Poverty Point were part of something bigger than themselves.

The amount of work needed to build the site is hard to imagine. Even harder to envision is the kind of commitment, from one generation to the next, that made the site the wonder that it is today. That commitment is part of what makes Poverty Point one-of-a-kind.



The site would have been a destination for some and a home for others. Some families could have lived there for generations. It makes sense that those families would have had a special connection to the earthworks. Yet, there is no evidence that any persons or families were privileged. Instead, people seem to have lived with one another as equals. Life at Poverty Point was a group effort that surely changed the people living there as much as the land itself.

Around the globe, anthropologists (people who study human culture) have explored the ways people trade and exchange things. What they have learned is that trade is more than just a way for people to get needed items. Trade and exchange also help shape people's social relations. Likewise, ceremonies and group construction projects form and renew social bonds between people.



Explore the Site!

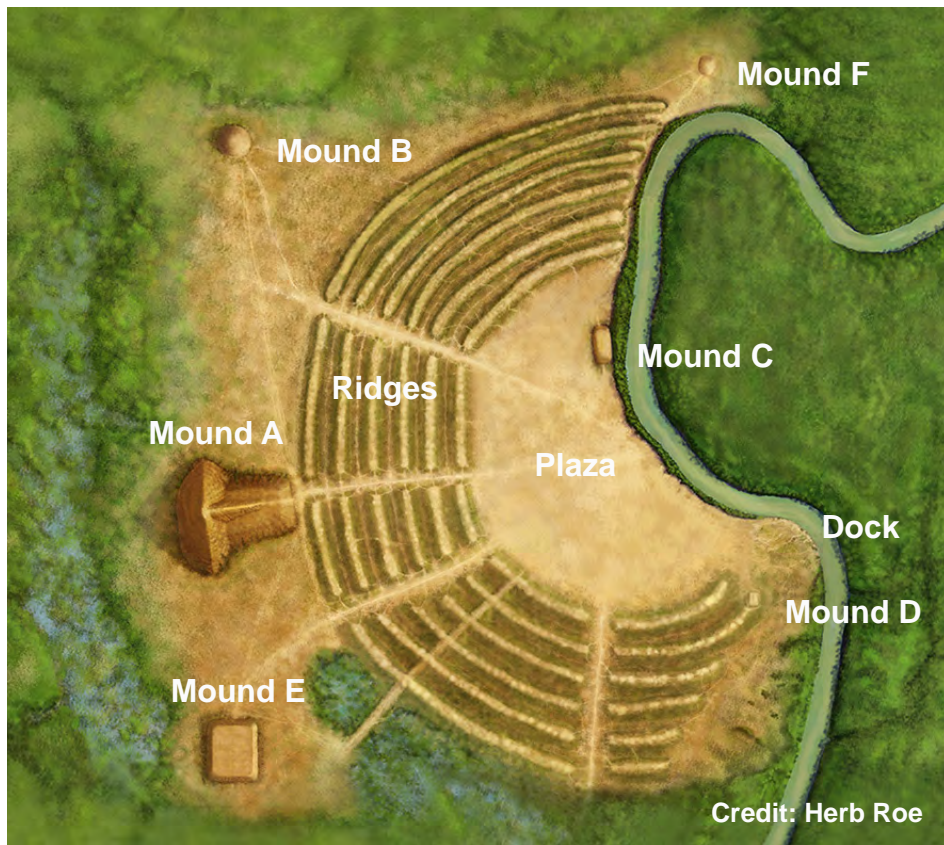
Researchers have been studying Poverty Point for over a century. In that time, they have found clues about life in the past in some unexpected ways. Now it is your turn to explore the site and check out some of the evidence for yourself!

Mound A

Mound A is the largest mound built at Poverty Point. It stands a whopping 72 feet tall, 710 feet long and 660 feet wide. In fact, the mound is so big that making it would have taken as many as 15.5 million basket loads of earth!

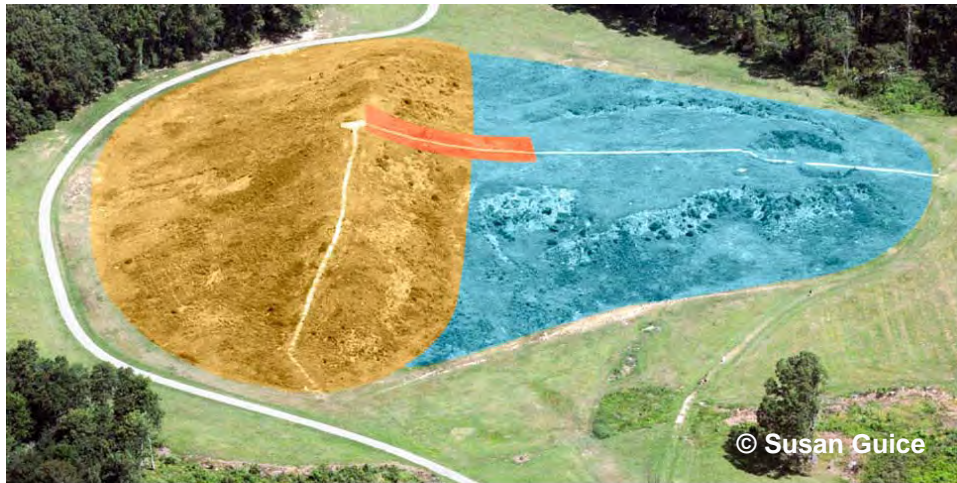
American Indians built this massive mound around 1300 B.C. That makes it one of the last mounds built during the **Late Archaic period**. Builders made Mound A differently from the other mounds at Poverty Point. They built the other mounds by creating a single portion and then adding to it, one stage at a time, to reach their final height.

Unlike the other mounds, builders made Mound A in three sections: the peak (or cone), the platform, and a ramp that linked the platform to the peak. After finishing the first two sections, each in a single stage, builders took a long break before making the ramp. When it was finished, Mound A was in a direct north-south line with Mounds B and E.



Researchers have taken samples of earth from each of the site's mounds, including Mound A. From these samples, they learned that people made the peak of Mound A with dirt taken from just below the surface of Macon Ridge.

The platform section of this mound is unusual. Some archaeologists think that people built this section in less than 90 days! American Indians made it in a single episode, mixing different colored soils found around the site. The result was a rich pattern of colors and textures. While there is no way to tell why people chose these soils, it is clear that they chose them with great care.



■ **Cone** ■ **Platform** ■ **Ramp**

When archaeologists say that people living at Poverty Point were part of something larger than themselves, they really mean it. Just how much bigger? Mound A alone is roughly 7 school buses tall, 20 buses wide and almost 18 buses long! Photo © Jenny Ellerbe



The image above is of a soil profile, or side view, of the interior of the platform section of Mound A. This image makes it easy to see the many different kinds of earth that were used to make this part of the mound.

Archaeologists get core samples (like those seen to the right) by pushing a tube into the ground and pulling out a single column of earth. This allows them to look at the layers of earth in the lab just as they were in the ground. These cores let them see how, and sometimes how quickly, people built the site's features. Archaeologists took the core pictured to the right from the southern part of the platform section of Mound A. Some of these cores are very long. The tire in the background gives a sense of scale.



Mound B

Mound B is a small, conical mound, only 21 feet tall and 180 feet in diameter. American Indians started building Mound B around 1700 B.C. This makes it one of the first mounds built at the site. Later, Poverty Point people would build Mounds E and A due south of Mound B.

In later time periods, people sometimes buried their dead in conical mounds. The people of Poverty Point did not use Mound B this way, though. In fact, it is unclear just how people used Mound B. Its builders did do an odd thing, however. They left about 100

baskets and hides full of dirt on the mound once they had reached the halfway point in the mound's construction.

American Indians made Mound B in seven stages. First, they prepared the floor of the mound by removing the natural topsoil. Then, they built two thin layers followed by four thicker layers. Lastly, they placed a covering of earth over the top of the mound. This gave it its round shape. People may have lived on the layers of the mound as it was being built or held rituals there. Archaeologists have found possible **postholes**, charcoal and fire pits on some of these layers.



In the past, people often used the position of the moon, sun, and stars to get their bearings or plan events. To help with those tasks, they sometimes built mounds in relation to these objects in the sky. The people who built Poverty Point likely used the North Star to align Mounds B, E and A. The North Star (Polaris) is easy to identify, because its position stays constant, as other stars appear to circle it. Here it is seen over Mound B (above).

Mound C

Mound C could either be one of the oldest or one of the newest mounds at the site. **Radiocarbon tests** used to date the mound only showed that it is from the Poverty Point occupation. The mound is small, oval shaped, and roughly 260 feet long. Mound C now stands six feet above the plaza, with two more feet below the level of the plaza.

There is good reason to believe that Mound C was special. It was the only mound that people built in the plaza during Poverty Point times. Builders also made it differently than the other mounds. It is the only mound that they made right on the natural surface of the earth. They built all of the other mounds on prepared surfaces.

Mound C has 16 thin layers, more than any of the other mounds. Each layer has a distinct color and texture. Soil for the layers likely came from deep in the ground, accessible along Bayou Maçon or from gullies around the site. Some layers had

fire pits, possible **postholes** and charcoal on them. Archaeologists think these things mean that people either lived on these layers or held ceremonies there.

Workers placed a final layer of earth five feet thick on the mound to give it a rounded top. This final layer had many artifacts in it. The fire pits and other things found in the mound are not evident on the mound's surface. This means that people most likely stopped using the mound after they finished the last layer. All of these things suggest that Mound C had some unique role to play at the site.

The depression on the left hand side of Mound C (below) is the result of a road that was worn through it in the nineteenth century. Luckily, most of the site's mounds have escaped damage by building, farming, looting or erosion by natural means. These are common problems that threaten many archaeological sites.



Mound D

Although Mound D is part of the site, American Indians built it much later than the other mounds. The mound dates to around A.D. 700. This was almost 2,000 years after the people of Poverty Point made the last mound, Mound F. A later group of American Indians built Mound D during the **Late Woodland** period. People made many other mounds in Louisiana during this period.

Mound D is a flat-topped mound and is almost rectangular in shape. It is 6 feet tall and 100 feet wide by 130 feet long at its base. It is the only mound built on one of the site's ridge segments. American Indians made the mound using earth taken from the surface of the site. Poverty Point artifacts mixed in the soil were included in this much later mound.

When American Indians built Mound D (below), they were reusing the site. This made them part of the site's story even though that story started long before them. Later, nineteenth-century settlers reused the site, too, building a farm there. The site gets its name from one of these historic farms. Gravestones on Mound D mark the burials of two of these early settlers.



Mound E

Mound E is one of the earliest mounds at the site. A low, flat-topped, and roughly rectangular mound, it reaches 13 feet tall and has sides that are about 360 feet wide by 300 feet long. American Indians built the mound around the same time as Mound B, almost 3,700 years ago. Mound E is due south of Mound B. American Indians later built Mound A between these two mounds.

Archaeologists almost classified Mound E as a knoll by mistake. They had drawn soil samples from the mound, which they interpreted as natural and not made by people. Plus, they did not find any artifacts in the mound, further leading them to think it was a natural part of the landscape. In 1993, however, archaeologists found proof that people had made the feature. Later, research showed it was built in five stages. Like Mound B, people had removed the original topsoil before building the mound. Unlike Mound B, however, they did not add a final layer to "cap" Mound E.

Researchers have had a hard time figuring out the age of the mound. They did not find any charred material that could be **radio-carbon dated**. Their attempts at other methods of **absolute dating** also failed. Instead, they used **relative dating**, comparing certain traits of the soils in the mounds at the site. The soils from Mound E most closely resemble those from Mound B. This led archaeologists to conclude that they were built around the same time.



Mound F

The last mound that American Indians built at the site during the **Late Archaic** period was Mound F. The mound is small and dome-shaped, nearly 5 feet tall and 80 feet by 100 feet at its base. Archaeologists have only recently discovered it.

The placement of the mound on a natural ridge makes it seem larger than it really is. American Indians often took advantage of terrain to make mounds look more impressive. In fact, Mound D was built on one of the ridges on top of Macon Ridge so as to make it look taller when viewed from Bayou Maçon.



Of all the mounds that people built at the site, Mound F was the smallest and took the least amount of effort. This suggests that mound building had, perhaps, become less important than it was several generations earlier.

When people left Poverty Point, they also chose to leave behind a certain way of life. North American Indians would not build a site bigger than Poverty Point for nearly 2,000 years. That bigger site, named Cahokia, was built by American Indians who grew and ate agricultural crops like maize (corn) and beans.

The Ridges

Poverty Point's C-shaped earthen ridges are truly unique. Nothing else like them existed in the ancient world. There are six ridges in total. Each ridge is divided by four aisles that extend from the plaza. The highest ridge stands over 6 feet tall. The lowest ridges, to the south, are less than 1 foot tall. American Indians built some of these ridges in stages and others all at once.

Making and maintaining the site's ridges would have been an ongoing activity. Many people wonder if the site's ridges once formed a complete oval, but there were never any ridges where Bayou Maçon now flows. The ridges' unusual C-shape was part of the site's original design.

Researchers have found more artifacts and earth ovens on the ridges than anywhere else. So even though they have not found any house remains there, this leads them to think that people lived on the ridges. The sheer quantity and kinds of artifacts lead archaeologists to think that there were lots of people living there year-round, probably hundreds of people, maybe more.

Based on the patterns and sizes of **postholes** found on the ridges, archaeologists think the houses may have been built somewhat haphazardly, with a mix of thin poles and cane forming the framework. Researchers have found daub, which is mud that once covered the outside of the houses. The roofs may have been hides, thatch or palmetto fronds.



The low ditches between the ridges are called swales. These swales are between 65 and 100 feet wide. They were created when people dug soil to build the ridges. It is hard to say if the swales served a purpose aside from making the ridges taller. One thought is that the swales could have collected water during heavy rains (image right). This may have kept people's homes drier.

A narrow rise that crosses a shallow depression outside the southwestern section of the ridges is called the causeway. The causeway is about 295 feet long and almost 50 feet wide, but probably originally went across the entire depression. Archaeologists are not sure what the causeway was for. Perhaps it was the path people used to get the soil for maintaining the plaza.



Archaeologists have had a hard time telling why people built the ridges in a C-shape. After all, there is nothing else in the world like them! Some think there were symbolic reasons, maybe related to spiritual beliefs. Others think that building the ridges helped create a sense of community at the site.



The Plaza

Though it may not look like it, people built the site's 43-acre plaza by hand just like the mounds and ridges. People started building the plaza around the same time as the site's ridges, or perhaps only slightly later. Maintaining the plaza required lots of care. People regularly filled low spots and tried to stop gullies (trenches formed from erosion) from spreading before they got too big.

The plaza's most striking features now lie beneath the surface. Hidden underground are holes filled with earth where hundreds of wooden posts once stood. Some of the holes are over 2 feet wide and their bases are 10 feet below the modern ground level. The number and closeness of the holes suggests that people reset the posts often. The posts were in circles that were up to 213 feet in diameter and may have stood 20 feet tall!

(Below) Today, white cylinders in the plaza give visitors to the site an idea of how big some of the post circles were.



(Above) The wide-open plaza offered a great view of the site, which could have made it an ideal meeting place.



The Dock

The southeastern corner of the plaza slopes down to Bayou Maçon. Archaeologists call this gentle slope the dock. The dock would have provided an easy route for people to reach the site from the bayou. This was important because the bayou was used for trade, travel and fishing.

People raised the uppermost part of the dock where it intersects with the plaza. Guests walking up the slope would not be able to see the site until they reached the very top of the dock. Then, visitors would have been able to see Poverty Point in its entirety. The view surely would have left travelers in awe of the site.

(Right) Bayou Maçon viewed from the top of the slope.

(Below) The gentle rise of the dock is clearly visible from the air.



Artifacts

Archaeologists have an interesting way of looking at the world. When they see a bowl, bead or stone spear point they do not just see an object, they see a piece of a story and the choices people made. The things archaeologists find are the data they work with to learn about people in the past. Take a look at some of the things found at Poverty Point — things made with purpose, skill, and maybe even affection.



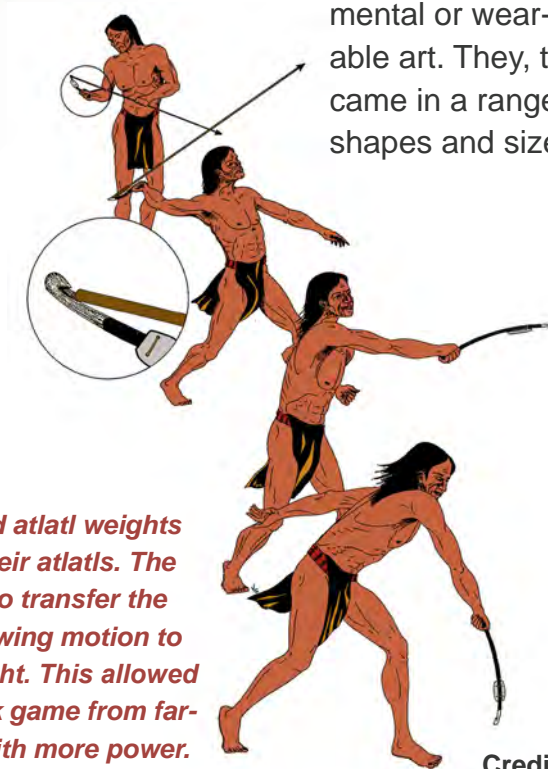
Atlatl Weights and Gorgets

The atlatl, or spearthrower, is an ancient tool that gave thrown spears extra power and speed. A hunter held an atlatl shaped like an oversized crochet needle in his throwing hand. He inserted the hooked end into a shallow socket in the end of the spear. He cast the spear at the target with a smooth, gliding motion, while the atlatl remained in his hand. Attaching weight to the atlatl helped make it an effective tool. American Indians made atlatl weights in many shapes and sizes.

Archaeologists have also found many flat, oblong stone artifacts at Poverty Point that they call gorgets. Gorgets are ornamental or wearable art. They, too, came in a range of shapes and sizes.



© Jenny Ellerbe



Hunters attached atlatl weights to the shaft of their atlatls. The weights helped to transfer the force of the throwing motion to the spears in flight. This allowed hunters to attack game from farther away and with more power.

Sometimes it is hard to tell whether an object is an atlatl weight or a gorget. Both may be plain or decorated and nicely finished. They both may have holes drilled into them for attachment or repair, to bind damaged ones together and keep them intact.

Credit: Jon Gibson

Beads and Pendants

Archaeologists have found many different kinds of beads and pendants at the site. Some are made of clay and some are of rock or copper that came from far away. Similar kinds of beads have been found at other sites in Louisiana, suggesting, if not contact with the people at Poverty Point, at least a strong cultural influence from the site.



The beads found at Poverty Point may have been decorative, but few have actual decorations on them. The bead seen here has a small bird etched onto it. Bird forms appear on several artifacts from Poverty Point. Given the great number of different kinds of birds that call Louisiana home, seasonally and year-round, this is perhaps not surprising. Even today, people from around the world visit the state for its unparalleled bird watching!

Beads and clay objects are not to scale.

Decorative Clay Objects

These clay objects (below) come in many sizes and shapes, including cube, barrel and globular designs. While similar to PPOs, they are smaller, decorated and not typically found in cooking pits. People often impressed or cut rings or grooves into them. They are some of the most unusual and beautiful artifacts found at the site and may have been made as objects of art!



Figurines

Archaeologists have found more than 100 small, clay figurines at Poverty Point. Most resemble women, and some were made to look pregnant. Some have very fine details, like hair styles, head bands or belts. Some of the faces even look like they are smiling. Often the figurines are missing their heads, but it is unclear if they were made without heads, if the heads were snapped off on purpose, or if they just broke off.



Most of the figurines have been found on the site's ridges. This is the area where people probably lived. Around the world, female figurines are common. While some think they may have been symbols of fertility or used for ritual healing, the figurines could also be meant to look like ancestors or loved ones, or could even be children's toys.

Fired Earth Objects

Archaeologists sometimes find lumps of fired earth, called daub (left half of image to the right), that reveal how people made their houses. Daub is mud that people packed against a framework of woven sticks to make the walls of a house. Packing the weave with mud gave it more support and insulation. If the structure caught fire, the daub was burnt but retained the impression of the weave — and sometimes even human palm prints!

Other bits of fired earth bear the marks of the baskets they were hauled in (right half of the image below). If clay that had been pressed against a basket was fired, the mark of the basket would be preserved. Looking at the pattern left behind, it is easy to see that people wove cane strips together to make strong baskets. On average, the baskets held about 50 pounds of dirt.



Microliths

Many of the rocks close to Poverty Point are small cobbles. These stones were used to make microliths, which are tiny stone tools. With the right technique, people could get a lot of these tools out of a single small cobble.

Archaeologists refer to some microliths by more specific names, like perforators or blades, based on the shapes of the tools or how people used them. Blades are long, thin microliths that people used for cutting, drilling and scraping. Some of the blades became tiny key-shaped tools called perforators, but whether they were purposely shaped or worn into that shape through use is not known.

American Indians probably used microliths for preparing food, making other tools from bone or wood, and engraving decorated objects. If people were actually making textiles at Poverty Point, then microliths would have also been good tools for stripping fibers from plants. Microliths were the Swiss Army knives of their day!



Owl Pendants

One of the most unusual artifact types researchers have found at the site is the red jasper "pot-bellied" owl pendant. These ground stone pendants are very rare. In fact, fewer than 30 have been found, mostly at other sites and some as far away as eastern Florida. Yet, archaeologists consider these pendants to be a classic Poverty Point artifact type.



Pipes

Archaeologists have found tubular pipes made of clay and stone at the site. Pipes like these may have been smoked for special events, like rituals or ceremonies. Or, shamans or priests may have used them as "sucking tubes" to suck illness, objects or bad spirits from people. Long after Poverty Point, American Indians sometimes smoked pipes to declare peace or war and to honor other tribal leaders. Just how far into the past these practices extend is unclear.



Plummets

These teardrop-shaped weights (right) varied in size with some over 4 inches long. People often made them out of iron-rich stones found in the Ouachita Mountains of Arkansas. There is a good chance that people used plummets as fishing net weights. Net fishing would have provided them with a lot of food in exchange for very little time and effort.

People may have also used plummets as loom weights for making textiles. These textiles would have been woven from wild plant fibers. Archaeologists have found rare **Late Archaic period** textiles at Avery Island in southern Louisiana. However, they have not yet found any at Poverty Point. This may be due to the fact that textiles simply do not preserve well.



Pottery

The people at Poverty Point were among the first in Louisiana to use pottery. Some of the pieces, or sherds, of pots and bowls found at the site are similar to ones archaeologists have found on the Gulf Coast of Florida and in the Tennessee River Valley. The people at Poverty Point probably traded for those ceramics.

American Indians also made pottery at Poverty Point. This pottery was the earliest ever made in the Lower Mississippi Valley. Poverty Point pottery was simple in design and often had no material mixed in with the clay. Some pottery had plant fibers mixed in with the clay to prevent cracking during firing. Spanish moss, which grows on some of the trees around the site, was used in this way. Firing is the process of placing the pots in or near a fire to harden them.

Even though people at Poverty Point made pottery, they tended to use stone containers more than ones made of fired clay.



Poverty Point Objects (PPOs)

Poverty Point Objects (or PPOs) are fired ceramics that were used in place of cooking stones. People made them from the fine soil found at the site and most were small enough to fit in the palm of your hand. There is evidence suggesting that the number, size and shape of PPOs determined how hot an earth oven (seen below) would get and how long it could stay hot.

More PPOs have been found at the site than any other kind of cultural artifact. The large number of PPOs suggests that people did a lot of cooking. If people did a lot of cooking, it was probably because they had access to a lot of food. The resource-rich environments nearby would have made it easy for them to find food. People probably did not go hungry. Then again, maybe they were also being good hosts. After all, the site probably had a lot of visitors over the centuries.



People molded PPOs by hand and heated them until they became ceramic. The hardened PPOs worked a little like charcoal briquettes. Someone dug a fire pit, placed the PPOs in the bottom, and built a fire on top of them. After the fire died down, the food could be wrapped in leaves, put on the heated PPOs, covered with dirt, and left to roast or steam. That is called an earth oven, and the heat of the oven could be controlled by varying the number and placement of PPOs. Hot PPOs also could have been used as "boiling stones" to heat food in containers.



The image to the right shows the four main varieties of PPOs archaeologists have found at Poverty Point. Clockwise from the top: biconical, cylindrical grooved, cross grooved, and melon shaped.



Projectile Points

Projectile points are the chipped stone spear, dart or arrow tips that ancient peoples made. Researchers have found over 8,000 intact projectile points at Poverty Point. Most of these were made from rock brought from afar. The imported rock came in many colors and textures (see the **Trade and Travel** section).



These are the sorts of stone points hunters used with light-weight spears and atlatls (spearthrowers). Arrow points are much smaller and lighter.

When archaeologists study stone tools, they often look for wear patterns. These are small scratches, tiny chips, or smooth spots on the tools that form from repeated use. If stone points were used only for hunting, they should show the same kinds of wear patterns, mainly broken tips from when they struck bone. Yet, points from the site have different kinds of wear patterns. This is probably because people used these points as multi-purpose tools, rather than just for hunting.

Researchers have found only a few points at Poverty Point that predate the **Late Archaic period**. Likewise, they have found far fewer arrowheads than spear points. This is because American Indians did not adopt the bow and arrow in this area until around A.D. 700.



- | | | | |
|-----------------|-----------------|------------------|------------------|
| 1. Motley Point | 5. Gary Point | 9. Epps Point | 13. Marcos Point |
| 2. Motley Point | 6. Kent Point | 10. Motley Point | |
| 3. Gary Point | 7. Motley Point | 11. Motley Point | |
| 4. Delhi Point | 8. Delhi Point | 12. Gary Point | |



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Credit: Louisiana State Exhibit Museum

Soapstone Bowls

The people who lived at Poverty Point cooked and stored food and other things in soapstone vessels like the one seen to the left. The stone for these bowls came from quarries in what is today Georgia and Alabama. Craftspeople sculpted the bowls at these quarries and sent them out for trade only after they had been carved. It is much more efficient to transport a hollowed-out bowl than a block of stone.

People tried to get as much use out of their bowls as they could. Many of the bowls found by archaeologists at Poverty Point have repair holes for lacing cracked bowls together.

Learn More

Want to learn more about Poverty Point? Check out the resources below. Be sure to also visit the Poverty Point World Heritage Site in person! Still have some questions? Be sure to explore the **Top 10 Site FAQs** section.

- **Poverty Point World Heritage Site: Travel**
- **Louisiana Office of State Parks Poverty Point World Heritage Site**
- **Poverty Point National Monument**
- **UNESCO Monumental Earthworks of Poverty Point World Heritage Listing**
- **KnowLA Encyclopedia of Louisiana: Poverty Point**
- **Louisiana State Museum Capitol Park**
- **For Teachers: *Poverty Point Expeditions* classroom activity guide**



Poverty Point World Heritage Site
6859 Louisiana 577 Pioneer, LA 71266

Glossary

Absolute Dating: These are methods that archaeologists use to find out the age of artifacts or features of a site. These methods test the chemical or atomic properties of the things archaeologists find. When these sorts of dating methods are successful, archaeologists get a specific age range for the things being tested (e.g., 2700 B.C. - 2200 B.C.).

Earthworks: American Indians built the mounds and C-shaped ridges at Poverty Point using nearby soils. Since these things are made of earth, they are called earthworks.

Late Archaic Period: (2000 B.C. - 800 B.C.) In Louisiana, the Late Archaic period is often described as a time when the climate shifted from hotter and drier to cooler and wetter. Mobile bands of people started settling down and forming small villages. It is also a period marked by the earliest use of containers made of stone and ceramic. People made other ceramic objects, too, like cooking balls, figurines and pipes.

Late Woodland Period: (A.D. 400 - A.D. 1200) This period saw a big rise in population. At this time, some people could also be born into, or gain, more social or political power than others. During the Late Woodland period, American Indians built lots of distinct places that were used just for ceremonies, often with large platform mounds. They also gave some people, who may have been leaders, special burials.

Postholes: A posthole shows where a wooden pole or post once stood. When they are found by archaeologists, postholes usually look like dark circular or semi-circular stains in the soil because the hole was filled with different dirt. Sometimes, there are stains remaining from the wooden posts, and they are called postmolds.

Radiocarbon Dating: Radiocarbon dating is a reliable way for archaeologists to tell the age of old organic remains like bone or wood. All living things absorb carbon, including radioactive carbon-14, from the atmosphere. When something dies, it stops absorbing carbon. The carbon-14 in its system decreases at a known rate through radioactive decay, but the other stable carbon atoms remain. Comparing the number of carbon-14 and stable carbon atoms reveals the age of the organic material.

Relative Dating: Unlike absolute dating (see above), relative dating is a way of ordering events rather than giving things a precise age. Relative dating is good for showing where something fits in a sequence. Archaeologists rely on this method a lot in their work. For instance, if they find an artifact between two layers of earth (layer X on top and layer Y below) they may not know how old the artifact is, but they would know that it ended up in that spot **before** layer X had formed but **after** layer Y.

Top Site FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions)

Q1. What American Indian tribe(s) built Poverty Point?

To date, archaeologists have not found anything that links the site to a specific tribe or tribes. Proving that a tribe has a direct cultural link to Poverty Point would be very difficult because culture changes over time. Sometimes, pottery styles, folklore, or other clues can make these links clear. Yet, rarely, if ever, are those links to the past still clear after more than 3,000 years!

Q2. Why did American Indians build the mounds at Poverty Point?

We do not know. Archaeologists think that American Indians built mounds for many reasons. One reason was to mark important places. This could be where a notable event happened, where an important person lived, or it could be a sacred space. They may have also built the mounds for religious and/or civic ceremonies.

Q3. Have there ever been any burials found at Poverty Point?

To date, archaeologists have not found any American Indian burials at the site. The only known graves on the site are those of historic settlers and slaves.

Q4. What kind of religion did the American Indians of Poverty Point practice?

We do not know. Many historic tribes have clans, often named after an animal (bear clan, deer clan, etc.). Each clan has its own animal and its own sacred duties (performing rituals, healing, hunting, etc.). Membership in these clans may have been based on someone's gender, ancestry, or something else. Perhaps the people of Poverty Point had similar beliefs.

Q5. Why did the American Indians who built Poverty Point use spears and darts instead of bows and arrows?

Simply put, the bow and arrow had not been adopted in North America yet. In fact, the bow and arrow was not widely used in the southeastern U.S. until around A.D. 700. Spears and darts served the needs of the people who lived at Poverty Point just fine.

Q6. What did the American Indians who lived at Poverty Point use to cook and eat their food?

The people who lived at the site cooked their food in earth ovens. They used heated cooking balls (called Poverty Point Objects, or PPOs for short) and stones to cook their food in these ovens. Soapstone and ceramic bowls could have been used for storing and serving food.

Q.7 How did the American Indians of Poverty Point dress?

We do not know. People at Poverty Point probably wore clothes made of animal hide or woven textiles made from plant or tree fibers. Color dyes from plants, bug shells and minerals could have been used to color their clothes and skin. Tat-toeing could have also been popular. Some of the objects found at the site, like beads, pendants and gorgets, could have been worn like jewelry or sewn onto people's clothing.

Q8. Why did European settlers who farmed on the site choose the name Poverty Point?

Many nineteenth century farmers gave their farms names that mirrored the hardships they had to endure. Names with allusions to poverty, hunger and death were common!

Q9. How far down did archaeologists have to dig to find artifacts at the site?

Poverty Point archaeologists have found some artifacts right on the surface of the ground. Other artifacts have been found nearly ten feet below the surface, either in gullies or under mounds. However, researchers have found most of Poverty Point's artifacts just below the surface. Because the site is elevated, it is protected from flooding, and layers of silt have not had the chance to build up on top of artifacts over time.

Q10. How do archaeologists know if a mound is natural or built by people?

Mounds will often have artifacts on or under their surface. This can be an archaeologist's first clue that a rise is a mound and not a hill or knoll, although natural rises often have artifacts on them and some mounds lack artifacts. Another clue is called an "A horizon." The A horizon is the black layer of dirt found just under the surface of the ground if the soil has not been disturbed. Most people call this the topsoil. Mounds often have A horizons beneath them because people piled up dirt on top of the A horizon of the natural ground surface. Hills, on the other hand, will not have a buried A horizon. Archaeologists also look for different kinds of soil that cannot occur together naturally.

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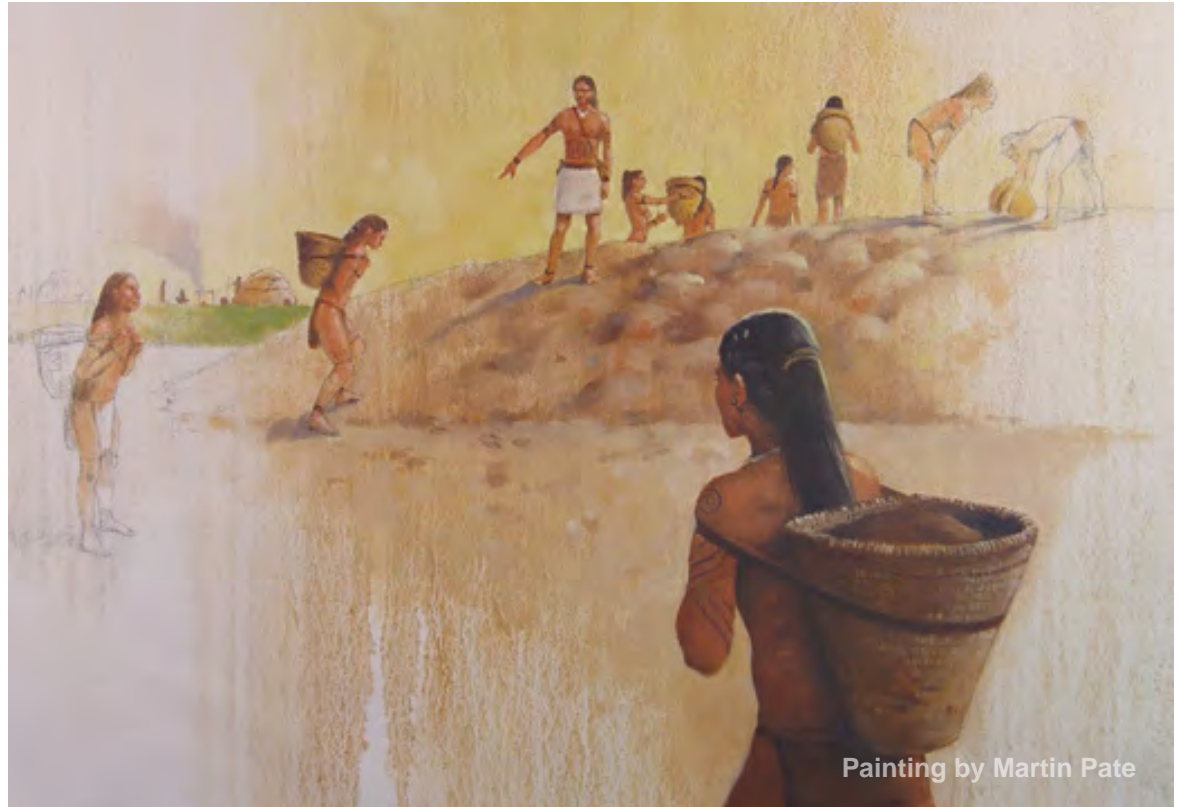
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