

# Explore the Site!

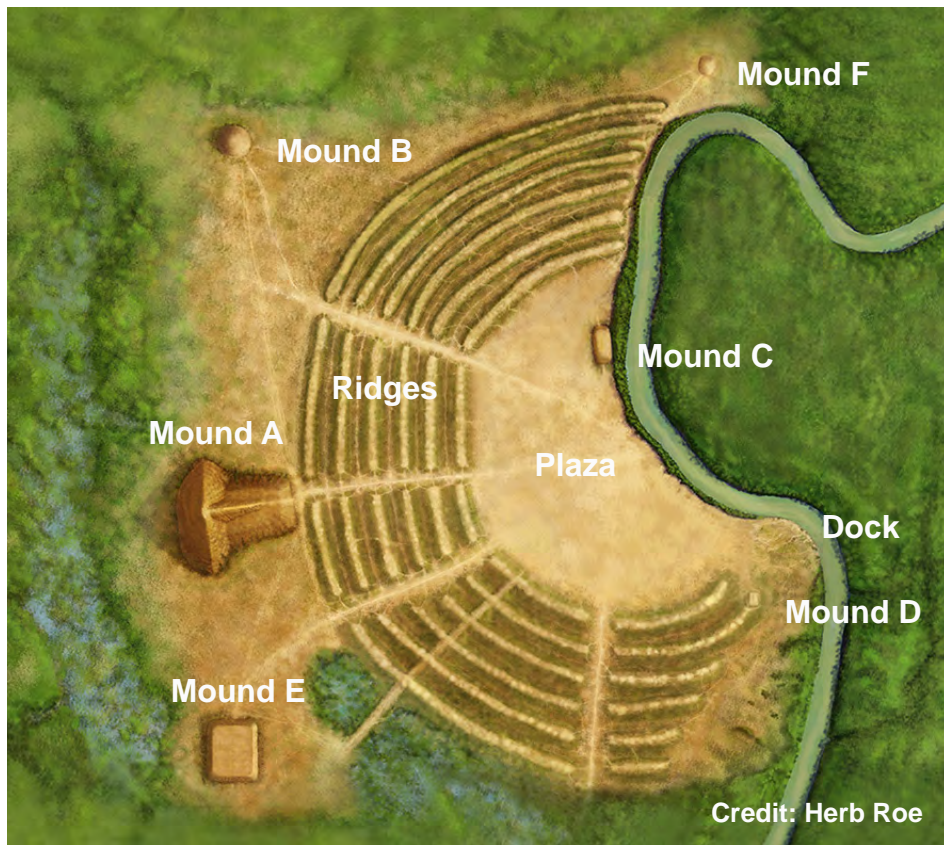
Researchers have been studying Poverty Point for over a century. In that time, they have found clues about life in the past in some unexpected ways. Now it is your turn to explore the site and check out some of the evidence for yourself!

## 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.

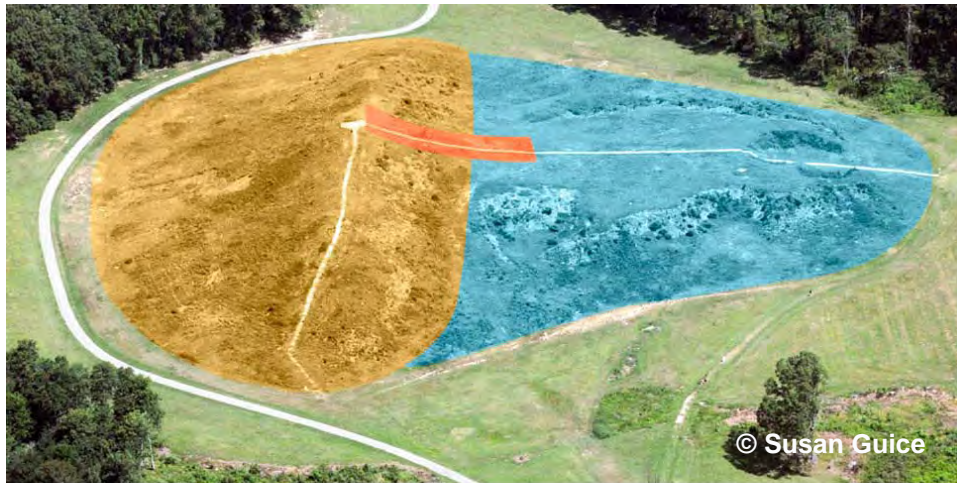
Unlike the other mounds, builders made Mound A in three sections: the peak (or cone), the platform, and a ramp that linked the platform to the peak. After finishing the first two sections, each in a single stage, builders took a long break before making the ramp. When it was finished, Mound A was in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



*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).*

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.

# 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.*



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