

Top Site FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions)

Q1. What tribe(s) built the Tchefuncte site?

Archaeologists do not know what tribes may have lived in the Tchefuncte area more than 2,000 years ago. There is no way to connect any living tribes directly to the site based on the materials found there. Modern archaeologists gave these people the name “Tchefuncte,” because they first learned about them from the excavations at the Tchefuncte site. “Tchefuncte” also is the name of a river on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain.

Q2. What does Tchefuncte mean?

According to Clare D’Artois Leepers in *Louisiana Place Names: Popular, Unusual, and Forgotten Stories of Towns . . .*, it is from the Choctaw name for the chinquapin, which is a type of chestnut.

Q3. How do you pronounce Tchefuncte?

Tchefuncte is usually pronounced Cheh-funk’ tuh.

Q4. How do archaeologists know how old the site is?

Archaeologists used a technique called radiocarbon dating to find out the site’s age. 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.

Q5. What kind of religion did the people of Tchefuncte practice?

Archaeologists are not sure what kind of religion the people of Tchefuncte practiced. 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 Tchefuncte had similar beliefs.

Q6. Did the people of Tchefuncte have political or religious leaders?

The people may have had leaders, though, if they did, they did not leave behind any evidence of it. Burials at the site were all simple. Everyone was surrounded by broken pots, bone tools, left over food, and stone spear tips. Archaeologists might expect a leader's burial to be different from the others. Perhaps this burial would be marked by a burial mound, or contain special items placed with the dead, such as fancy pots or decorated bone objects, that would symbolize the person's importance.

Q7. Why were some of the bodies bundled and possibly reburied at the site?

People may have only buried the dead at the site during certain times of the year. If people did not pass away during these special times, the living may have had to bury them elsewhere until it was the burial season. The two kinds of burials at the site could also reflect different cultural traditions for honoring the dead.

Q8. How did people learn to make ceramic, stone and bone tools?

Sometimes archaeologists find stone or bone tools or ceramics that are flawed or not quite right. These things may exhibit visible mistakes in how they were made. These things may have been left behind by people who were first learning how to make ceramics or construct tools.

Q9. Why was shell mining permitted on the site if it ended up destroying Midden B?

In the 1930s and 1940s, there were few laws in the U.S. to protect archaeological sites. Since then, however, the state and federal governments have passed laws that offer greater protection for archaeological sites. The sort of damage the Tchefuncte site suffered still occurs at sites sometimes, but now archaeologists have legal tools to help save those sites.