

TCHFUNCTE

600 B.C.— 200 B.C.

*(Below) Artist's rendition of daily life at the site.
Painting by Jack McLehany, courtesy of Guaranty Corporation.*



The Tchefuncte site is in the coastal marsh of southeastern Louisiana. The main excavations at this large, prehistoric site were in the late 1930s and early 1940s. They were crucial for understanding how American Indians in the area lived during the [Early Woodland period](#). This was the first era when people commonly used pottery for cooking and other daily tasks.

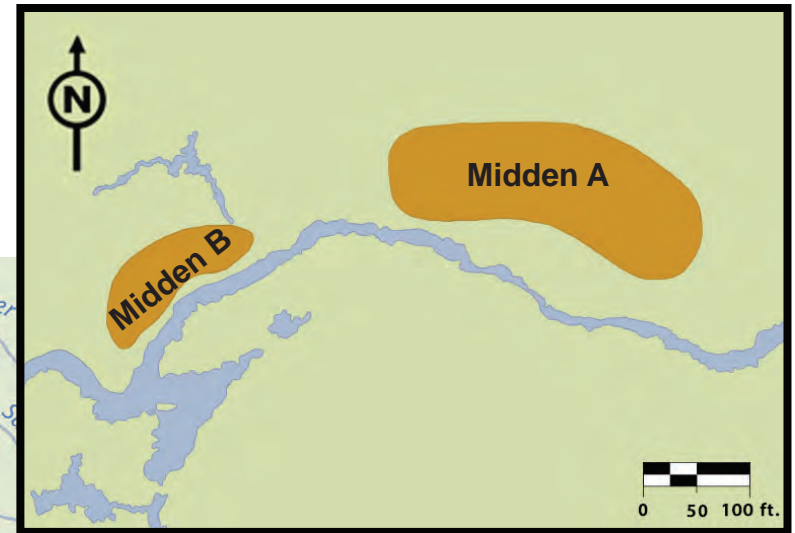
Archaeologists call those who lived in this region during that time the Tchefuncte culture. The name shows that much of what is known about the people came from the Tchefuncte site. This site provided a rich record of how the group that lived there used the resources around them to create a good life.

Time and Place

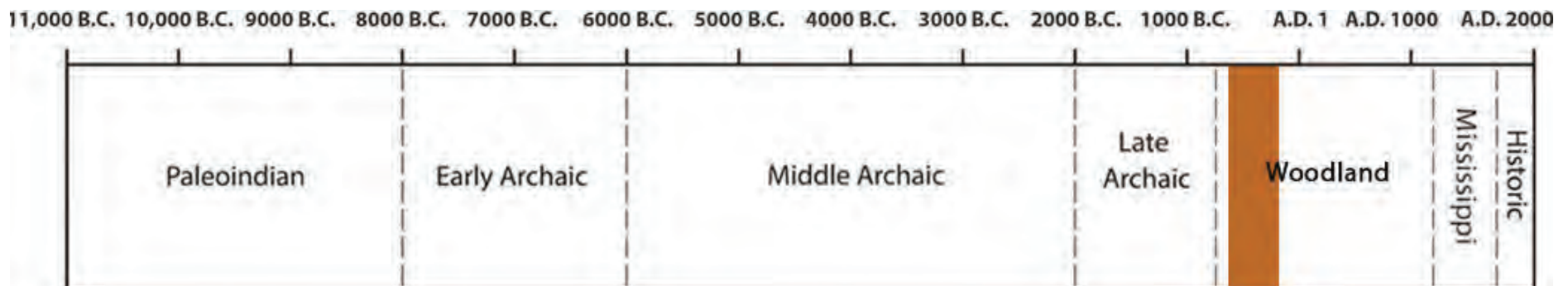
The Tchefuncte site is in St. Tammany Parish, on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain, within Fontainebleau State Park. The site has two **midden** deposits on the bank of a small bayou in the coastal marsh. Middens are the result of trash building up in an area where people lived and worked.

Midden A lies at the eastern end of the site. It extends for over 270 feet along the bayou. Most of the midden is composed of soils that have been darkened by the charcoal, animal bones and other waste that people discarded here long ago. Along the bayou bank, the midden contains abundant shell, left over from clams that were an important part of the local diet. Midden B lies about 100 feet west of Midden A. It is smaller, about 160 feet long, and is almost entirely made of shell.

American Indians lived at the site from 600 B.C. to 200 B.C., during the **Early Woodland period**. The site gives an important view of life at this time. In fact, throughout Louisiana, the people of this period are called the Tchefuncte culture.



What was happening in the rest of the world during this time? People from South America began migrating to islands in the Caribbean Sea. They brought with them new kinds of crops and pottery. In Ireland, people began making tools and weapons out of a new material called iron. In 323 B.C., Alexander the Great died, leading to a long period of war between his successors. South of Egypt, the Nubian civilization was flourishing.



During this time, people began making and using lots of ceramic pots for storing and cooking food. Pottery making was still a new skill, so many of the pots were poorly made and easily broken. As a result, archaeologists found more than 47,000 fragments of pots at the Tchefuncte site. That was nearly five times more than any other type of artifact. No other site has a larger number of pieces of Tchefuncte pottery.

Because of its importance, the site was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2000.

In this series of photos, artist Doyle Gertjejansen is making ceramic pots using the same materials and techniques that some of the people at the Tchefuncte site did long ago. 1) Clay was dug from the banks of the bayou. 2-3) Then it was rolled into coils and the pots were built up, one coil at a time. 4) The outside edge was flattened and burnished. 5) Then, decorations were added to the pots. 6-7) A hot fire was lit and the ceramics were fired. 8) After cooling, it was time to see if the pots could be used for cooking. 9) Success! Credit: Doyle Gertjejansen, doylegert@aol.com.

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Trade and Travel

People at the Tchefuncte site traveled or traded to get some minerals and rocks. However, they also made use of other raw materials that were nearby. Stone was not available at the site, so people had to travel at least a few miles to get it. Much of the stone for spear or dart points and other tools came from sources 15–25 miles north of the site.

The people at the site used a lot of yellow [limonite](#) and red [hematite](#) to make paint and dyes. Sources for these pigments, along with sandstone, were in northern Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. A few pieces of other stone came from farther away, like Arkansas and Tennessee.

Most of the ceramic pots and smoking pipes were made of local clays. However, examination of the clays indicate that some pots came from the Tombigbee River region of western Alabama. This shows that people at the Tchefuncte site were trading with people from that area or were traveling there.

Archaeologists found 42 pieces of pumice at the site. Pumice is a volcanic rock, so these fragments came from very far away. The source of the pumice may have been a volcano in Mexico or in the Caribbean Ocean. Pumice floats, and these pieces could have washed up on a beach in Louisiana rather than arriving through trade. The pumice also could have been acquired by trade from the western United States.



Credit: R. Christopher Goodwin and Associates

Examples of pottery from the Tchefuncte site that came from the Tombigbee region.

Food

The people at the Tchefuncte site fished in the nearby bayou and coastal marsh. They also went to higher ground inland to hunt animals like deer and to gather foods from the woodlands.

The archaeologists' techniques in the 1930s and 1940s did not recover many animal bones. They did not **screen** the dirt and did not find many small items. Most of the bones they did collect were large and easy to see while they were digging. Small bones, like those from fish, were easy to miss. A small project at the site in 1986 used screens to find small bones, like those from fish. Recent study of these bones gave a good understanding of the diet of the people at the site.



(Above) The people at Tchefuncte had lots of dietary options because they lived so close to different ecological zones. (Right) Artist's interpretation of American Indians fishing. Painting by Jack McLehany, courtesy of Guaranty Corporation.

People caught many kinds of fish, but especially catfish and gar. Most of these came from the bayou, and only a few species were from Lake Pontchartrain. The Tchefuncte people ate a wide variety of animals, including bear, muskrat, opossum, raccoon, alligator, duck and turtle. However, deer was the preferred meat source. In addition to the meat, deer were valuable because the bones were used for tools. The people at the site surely ate plants as well, but researchers did not find any traces of them.



Ceremonial Life

The two middens at the site were areas where people lived, worked and played. Archaeologists did not identify any activity areas or earthworks that were set aside just for ceremonial use. However, the people buried their dead in both of the middens, and they may have had ceremonies at those times. At least 34 bodies were in Midden A. Only three burials were in Midden B. The graves were shallow pits dug into the midden. None of the individuals had artifacts buried with them.

Based on the position of the remains, archaeologists can interpret burial practices. Some burials happened soon after death. Those people were probably living at the site when they died. Other people were living elsewhere when they passed away. Someone brought the remains to the Tchefuncte site for burial. This practice suggests the Tchefuncte site was an important place where people wanted to be buried.

Around the world, people have often buried the dead with offerings. Sometimes, people meant for these objects to help in the afterlife. Archaeologists did not find any artifacts with the burials at the Tchefuncte site. The people may have believed they were not necessary for a happy afterlife. On the other hand, they may have felt that the midden already surrounded the bodies with the objects of daily life.

Yellow and red pigments found at the site hint at colorful ritual life. At other times and places, American Indians used red and yellow ochre to paint artifacts and bodies. The paint may have been used in life or may have been part of preparing bodies for burial.

Archaeologists found many clay pipes at the site, like those seen to the right. People may have smoked them during ceremonies or used them in healing rituals. Smoking also may have been a leisure activity at the end of the day.



Credit: R. Christopher Goodwin and Associates

Archaeology Then and Now

The story of life at the site can be told now because of work done more than 75 years ago. Two times, crews from federal New Deal programs excavated the site. This kind of project gave jobs to people who were out of work after the Great Depression. First, in 1938, a State Parks historian led a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) project at the site. Then, two years later, an archaeologist and a Work Projects Administration (WPA) crew dug there again.

The methods at that time left some gaps in understanding. For example, compared to today, there was less focus then on finding small remains and on recording patterns in the soil. That limited the data about food and houses. Even so, the projects gave a rare

glimpse of the site as a whole. Archaeologists have found that the artifacts and records from those past projects are still very useful today.

Study of the site began in 1938, after a construction crew took shell from Midden B to use as road fill. This activity destroyed nearly one-third of the midden, but it called attention to the site. Research efforts focused on the part of the site that further road construction would destroy. The team dug with shovels and did not [screen](#) the dirt to recover smaller artifacts. The crew dug down about 2.5 feet in a single level to the top of the water table. The work did not reach the bottom of the site.

The photo below shows the site being readied for excavation in 1940 or 1941. Credit: LSU Museum of Natural Science.





In 1940/1941, the WPA workers excavated almost all of Midden A and the rest of Midden B. In most of the squares, they reached the bottom of the site. It was hard to go that deep because water seeped in the [units](#). The men dug the levels below the water table on days when the tide in Lake Pontchartrain was low, and a north wind was blowing. These conditions lowered the water table at the site enough that the workers could continue digging to the bottom of the site. As was usual at that time, the crew did not use screens to recover small artifacts.

After the WPA project, a few small areas of Midden A remained for future study. In 1986, an archaeologist from Tulane University supervised a small group from the Louisiana Archaeological Society. Although they dug only one 3-x-3-foot square, the results provided important information. First, the project proved that parts of the site were still intact. Second, it showed that the site still held more information. The crew used water hoses to wash all of the dirt through ¼-inch mesh screen, capturing all artifacts bigger than that size. This technique gave information about what people ate, as many animals have small bones that the earlier crews did not see.

The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was formed in 1935 and was renamed the Work Projects Administration in 1939. Various WPA work relief projects put a lot of unemployed people to work during the Great Depression. Some of the WPA projects included excavations of archaeological sites, like the Tchefuncte site. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-USZC2-1018.