

Marsden is an approximately thirteen acre prehistoric site with five earthen mounds and a portion of an earthen embankment in Poverty Point Reservoir State Park. The site mainly dates to the Baytown (A.D. 400-700) and Coles Creek (A.D. 700-1200) periods and is the type site for the Marsden phase (A.D. 500-600 B.P.) (Bitgood 1989) of the Baytown Period.

Marsden is located on the west bank of a small abandoned meander loop of Bayou Maçon and south of Glade Slough, a tributary into Bayou Maçon. The active channel of Bayou Maçon is approximately 350 meters to the east. The site sits on the convex side of the loop, which was cut into Maçon Ridge, thereby providing an ecotonal setting between the wetlands along Bayou Maçon and the uplands.

Please refer to the attached map for the site configuration. Mound A is in an old agricultural field and has been subjected to plowing for decades. Today it is oval in shape, measuring approximately 34 x 25 m and 1 m in height. Dome-shaped mounds B, C, and D are located east and southeast of Mound A, along the east edge of Maçon Ridge, protected from plowing by trees and cane. It appears that a small embankment connects Mound B to C and C to D. Mound B measures approximately 18 x 12 m, with a height of 1.2 m. Mound C is 20 x 15 m and 1.5 m in height. Mound D is 18 x 14 m and ca 1 m high. Mound E, the largest mound at Marsden, is in a wooded area approximately 100 m SW of Mound A. It is a square platform mound measuring approximately 45 x 45 m at the base and 40 x 40 m on the summit and is ca. 4 m high. A small dome-shaped mound appears to have been constructed on the SE corner of the platform mound. An earthen embankment extends from the SE corner of Mound E; it is approximately 33 m in length, 5 to 8 m wide and ca. 30 cm high. It ends at the tree line, although it does appear that remnants of the enclosure continue to the south (has been plowed away). A deep gully defines the southeast, south, and west sides of Mound E and may mark the outlines of the borrow pit for Mound E.

Previous Archaeological Investigations

The first recorded account of Marsden was by Gerard Fowke in 1928. He described

“an embankment, now partially obliterated by cultivation, forming an arc of a circle and terminating on each end on the bank of the bayou. This connects four mounds situated at intervals. First, at the north, is a flat topped mound six feet high and 150 feet across; next, a round mound nearly destroyed; third, a flat-topped mound 9 by 200 feet, with a small conical mound built on one corner of it; finally, another nearly obliterated structure; this and the other reduced mound may have been flat-topped. There are a few other elevations in this field, now scarcely visible, which may be artificial (Fowke 1928:436).

James Ford visited the site in 1933. His notes mention and illustrate a shell-tempered ceramic vessel. He also said that the mound by the bayou had been plowed over and that west of the mound there was a midden buried 6 inches below the surface; “both Hopewell and recent material come from surface of mound” (Ford 1933:34). Presumably later, Ford made a notation on an L.S.U. site form that the site was “Marksville and Coles Creek”.

During this visit, or perhaps later, Ford surface collected 86 sherds during his research for *Analysis of Indian Village Site Collections of Louisiana and Mississippi* (1936). He identified, from more recent to older, Deasonville (Baytown), Coles Creek, and Marksville components under his unique ceramic typological system.

As part of the Tensas survey, W.L. Kean of the Lower Mississippi Valley Survey (LMS) visited Marsden in 1963. He drew a sketch map and noted that Mound A was not round and in poor condition owing to plowing. The embankment in the field was only slightly visible, but very obvious where it connected Mounds B, C, and D, which also were well preserved. Sherds and shell were visible in the dirt road that paralleled the mounds along the terrace edge. There was no mention of Mound E. In 1964 Kean returned to the site and noticed that two potholes had been dug into Mound A.

In 1964 Stephen Williams, John Belmont and Alan Toth of the LMS conducted excavations at the Marsden site. Units were excavated in Mounds B, C, and D, but not Mounds A or E (Bitgood 1989). Two 2 x 2 m units were excavated into Mound B. Five strata were identified: Stratum V (120 cm BS), sterile clays; Stratum IV (80-120 cm BS) was a midden, with a pit feature that extended into Stratum V to a depth of 170 cm BS. A stratified fire pit also extended into Stratum V to 225 cm BS. Ceramics from both features indicated that they were the same age as Stratum IV. Charcoal from the fire hearth dated to an uncorrected assay of A.D. 560 ± 85 (Gx-483)

and a calibrated age of A.D. 656 ± 85, with a two-sigma range of A.D. 527 – 782 with 91 percent probability. One small pit feature with charcoal extended into Stratum IV, and another stratified pit feature extended into Stratum V (165 cm BS). It appears that Stratum IV was the submound surface. Stratum III was the first episode of mound construction, Stratum II the second, and Stratum I the topsoil (Bitgood 1989:58-69).

Three 2 x 2 m test units were excavated in Mound C. Four strata were recognized: Stratum IV was a sterile silty deposit. Stratum III appeared to be an accumulative midden. A number of fire pits and storage/trash pits in Stratum III extended into Stratum IV. Stratum II was mound fill and Stratum I topsoil (Bitgood 1989:51-58).

One test unit (dimensions not listed) was excavated into Mound D. Bitgood did not think it was a mound but rather a midden deposit and thus referred to it as Locus D. Two groups of burials were encountered approximately 40 cm BS. Neither group was completely excavated. The first group contained five individuals, one of which was associated with Coles Creek Incised, *var. Phillips* vessel fragments. Burial group two consisted of an adult and three or four infants (Bitgood 1989:69-74).

In 1980 John Belmont (LMS survey notes) analyzed the Marsden ceramics from the LMS excavations and Ford's surface collection housed at LSU. He concluded that the two main components at the site were Marsden and Balmoral.

A smattering of Poverty Point period (1700-1200 BC) artifacts and a few Tchefuncte (500-100 B.C.) sherds were recovered from the site, as well as Marksville (100 B.C.-A.D. 400) ceramics. The submound middens in Mounds B and C and the midden on Mound (Locus) D dated to the late Baytown Period (AD 460-600), which Bitgood defined as the Marsden phase (Bitgood 1989:105-107). Ceramics from the mound fill above the submound middens suggested an early Coles Creek component, or the Sundown phase (AD 600-800). Bitgood attributed the mound construction activities to the later occupations.

Ceramic types characteristic of the Marsden phase include: Salomon Brushed, *vars. Salomon* and *Oxbow*; Mulberry Creek Cord Marked, *vars. Eudora* and *Edwards*; and Baytown Plain, *var. Reed*, which dominate the Marsden assemblage. Other associated ceramic types are: early Coles Creek Incised, *vars. Phillips*, *Marsden*, and *Warden*. The earlier Marksville types do occur, but not in great number (Bitgood 1989:106).

Stephen Hinks and Johnna Thackston of R. Christopher Goodwin and Associates, Inc. conducted a survey of Marsden in 1992. They relocated Mounds A-E, the enclosure segment SE of Mound E, and two topographic features north and northwest of Mound E. They also field mapped the site and noted ceramics, lithics, and fauna in a number of areas. A small surface collection included Tchefuncte and Coles Creek ceramics (Hinks et al. 1993).

In 1993 Hinks et al. returned for additional survey and testing. Work included a topographic map, a controlled surface collection, and the excavation of 35 shovel tests, of which 16 recovered prehistoric artifacts (Hinks et al. 1994:60). The mapping noted possible remnants of the small conical mound on Mound E, as described by Fowke. Artifacts were concentrated around Mound A. Diagnostic artifacts included ceramics from the Tchefuncte, Marksville, Baytown, and Coles Creek periods.

Joe Saunders and Thurman Allen excavated auger probes into Mound A and Mound C in 1992. The Mound A auger detected an intact midden beneath Mound A. Two soil probes into Mound B identified approximately 1.5 m of mound fill above an intact submound midden/2Ab horizon (Saunders 1998).

In the summer of 2002 John Hogg and Recca Jones of the Regional Archaeology Program at the University of Louisiana at Monroe mapped the site with a total station. While mapping, the right-of-way of a trail for viewing the Marsden earthworks at Poverty Point Reservoir State Park was cut into the topsoil near Mounds A, B, C, and D. In so doing, numerous prehistoric artifacts were exposed. The location and type of artifact (sherd, flake, or fire-cracked rock) was recorded with the total station, and then collected. A total of 596 artifacts were collected: 335 sherds, 217 flakes, 16 fire-cracked rock, two ground stone fragments, 10 historic ceramics, as well as one piece of bone and one piece of gravel. Plotting off the artifacts shows that the area between Mounds A, B, C, D and Mound E was subject to extensive use. Diagnostic artifacts were two Marksville sherds and two possible Larto Red fragments. During the data recording, one human long bone fragment was observed in an armadillo's back dirt pile in Mound B.

Three soil cores were pulled along the enclosure remnant near Mound E. The core from the pasture

portion of the enclosure did not identify any evidence of ridge fill, but the sediments were saturated with water, so that may be a contributing factor. Cores from the wooded portion of the enclosure determined that it was a single-stage construction.

SIGNIFICANT DATES: Baytown Period (A.D. 400-700)
Coles Creek Period (A.D. 700-1200)
CULTURAL AFFILIATION: Late Baytown and Early Coles Creek
CRITERION: D

Four aspects of the Marsden site are of statewide significance under Criterion D: (1) the excellent condition of the Woodland-age earthworks; (2) the intact nature of the mounds with human burials; (3) the well-preserved buried midden deposits; and, (4) the fact that this is the type site for the archaeological Marsden phase.

Marsden is a significant Woodland Period (late Baytown and early Coles Creek) mound group. The construction of the mounds appears to begin ca. A.D. 650, based on one radiocarbon assay from a hearth in the submound surface of Mound B and the decorated ceramics from the middens under Mounds B, C, and D. The mounds are in excellent shape, with the exception of Mound A, which has been impacted by repeated plowing. Mounds B, C, D, and E have been protected from post-occupational disturbance by cane fields and trees.

Marsden is one of the few Woodland mound groups in Louisiana with extant remnants of a semi-circular earthen enclosure. The embankment extends for approximately 35 m SE of Mound E and vestiges of it may continue into the pasture. The "D"-shaped enclosure at the Marksville site has been reconstructed and most of the "D"-shaped enclosure at Troyville has been destroyed. Furthermore, the construction of a conical mound on a platform mound (NE corner of Mound E), as described by Fowke and illustrated in the total station map, may be the only remaining one in Louisiana. The most notable example, Mound 5 at Troyville, was completely destroyed in the 1930s.

Two well preserved groups of human remains were encountered in Mound D during the 1964 LMS excavations. Human remains also were recovered from an animal burrow in Mound B in 2002. The pristine condition of these two mounds makes it possible that information on the burial practices of the Baytown and Coles Creek cultures can be recovered by non-invasive methods as the technology evolves.

Macrobotanical and faunal preservation has been observed in buried midden deposits associated with Mounds A, B, C, and D. The potential to recover important data on the foods and economic behavior of the Marsden phase and early Coles Creek cultures is very high. The recovery of intact hearths and pit features in Mounds B and C by the LMS excavations further attests to the high research potential of the Marsden site.

The intact midden under Mounds B and C is the ceramic assemblage used to define the Marsden phase for the Tensas basin.

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