



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

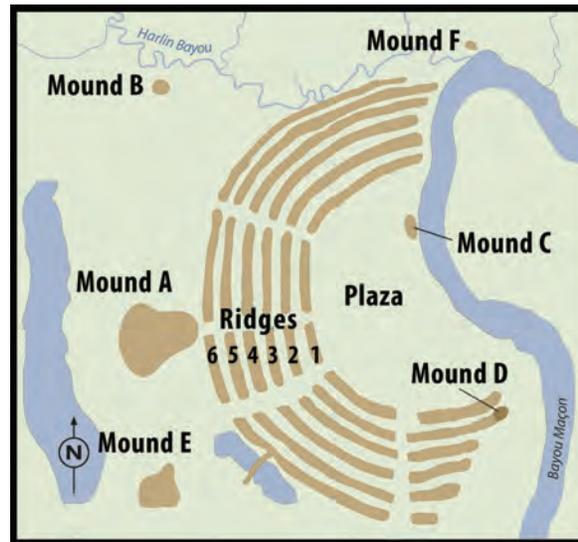
Poverty Point became a World Heritage Site in 2014. That honor goes only to the most exceptional places around the world. Built by American Indians 3,400 years ago, Poverty Point is unlike any other site. Its design, with multiple mounds and C-shaped ridges, is not found anywhere else. In its time, it 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

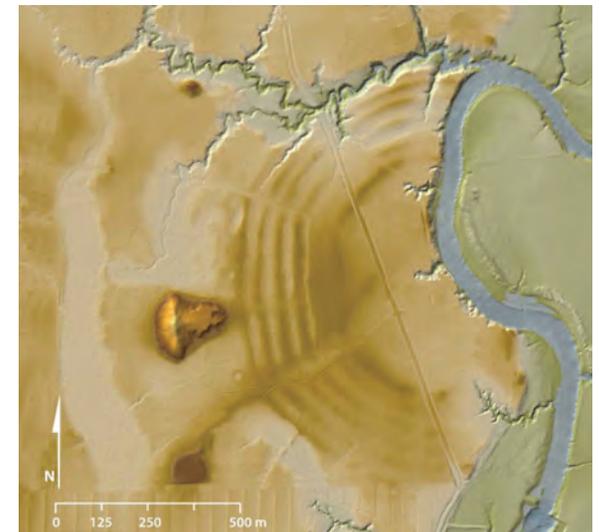
Poverty Point was built between 1700 B.C. and 1100 B.C. There was a lot going on around the rest of the world at this time. In Egypt, Queen Nefertiti and the boy pharaoh, Tutankhamen, ruled. In Britain, Stonehenge was being finished. In China, the Shang Dynasty was flourishing. In Mexico, the Olmec were 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.

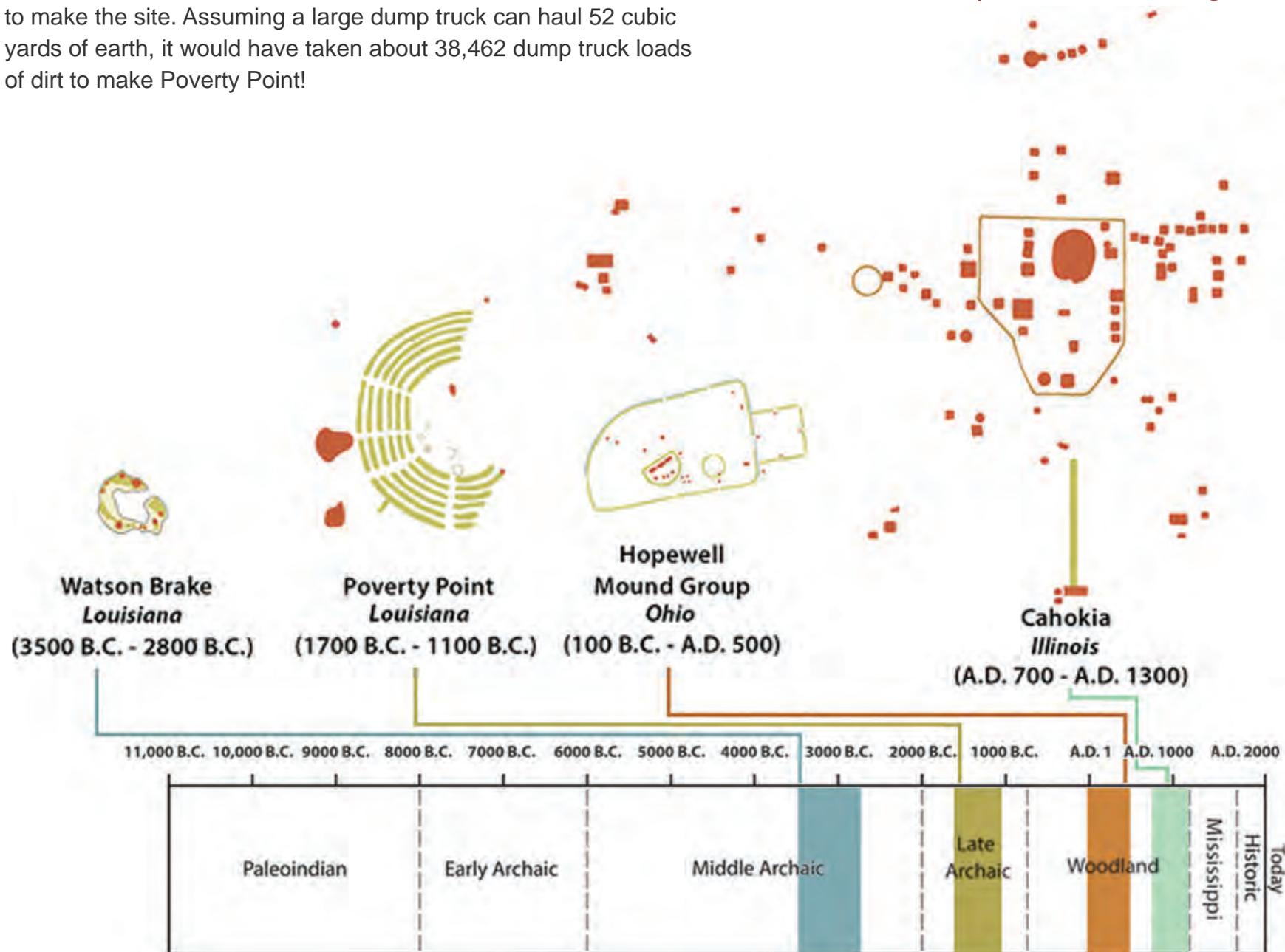
The site map to the right was created using LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging), which is used to make highly detailed maps. This method of mapping, often done from an airplane or satellite, uses pulses of light to measure distances with great precision.



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 Southeastern 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.*



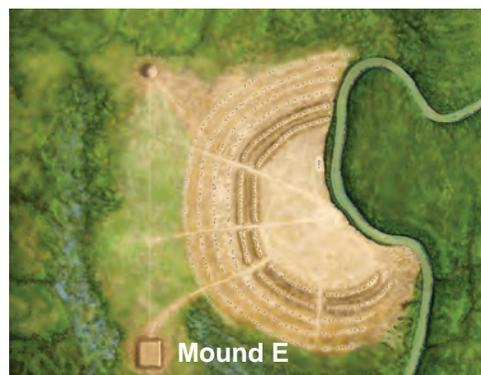
Like any big settlement, people likely came to the site for different reasons. Some came to exchange goods and news or to meet people. Others were attracted by the site's natural resources. Still others came to create the site's mounds and ridges or to take part in ceremonies. Most probably had deep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

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.

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



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

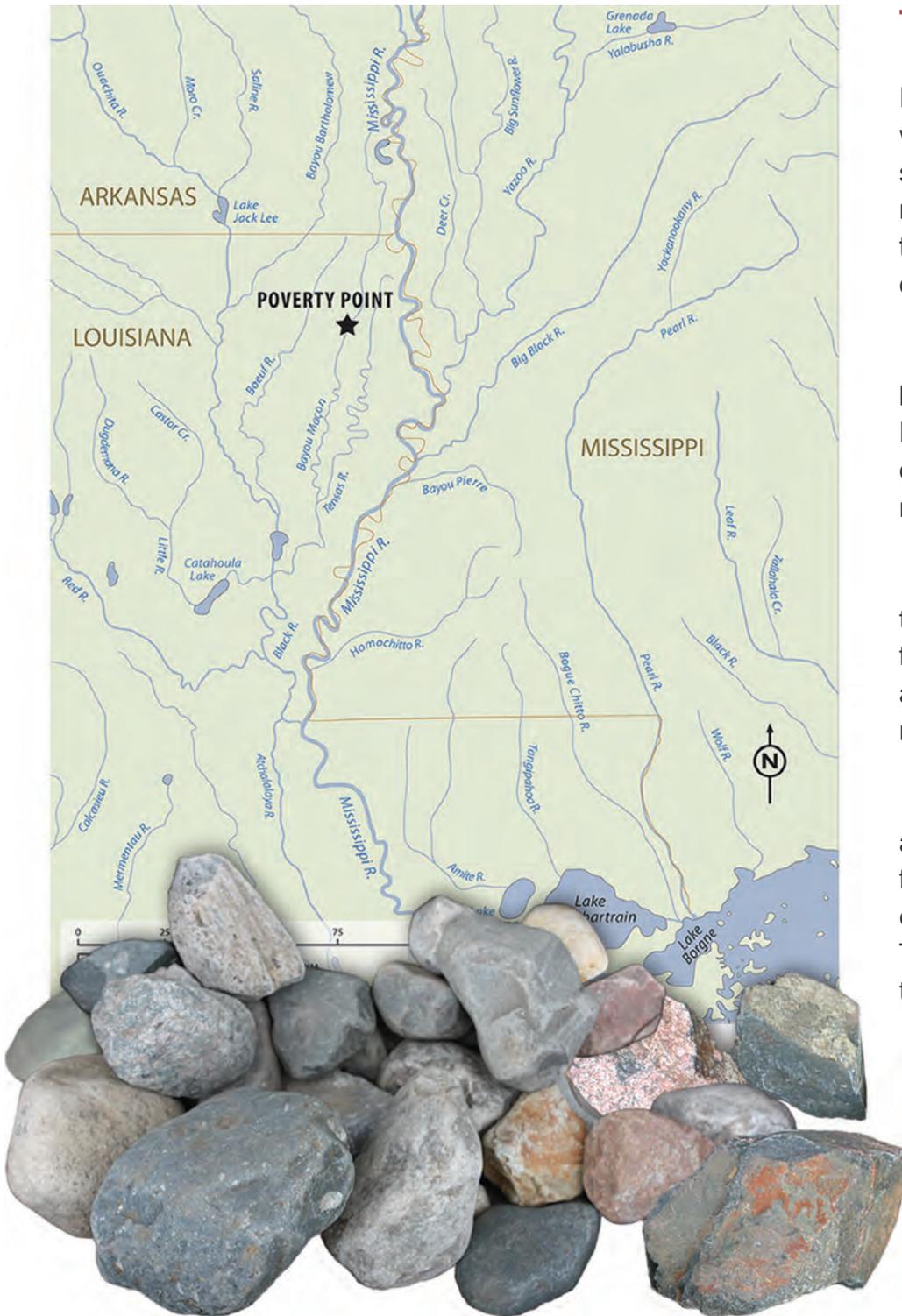
Poverty Point was at the heart of a huge exchange network. This was in no small part due to its location. American Indians built the site on Macon Ridge in northeast Louisiana. This ridge, which is naturally elevated, is surrounded by many rivers. The largest of these is the mighty Mississippi River.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



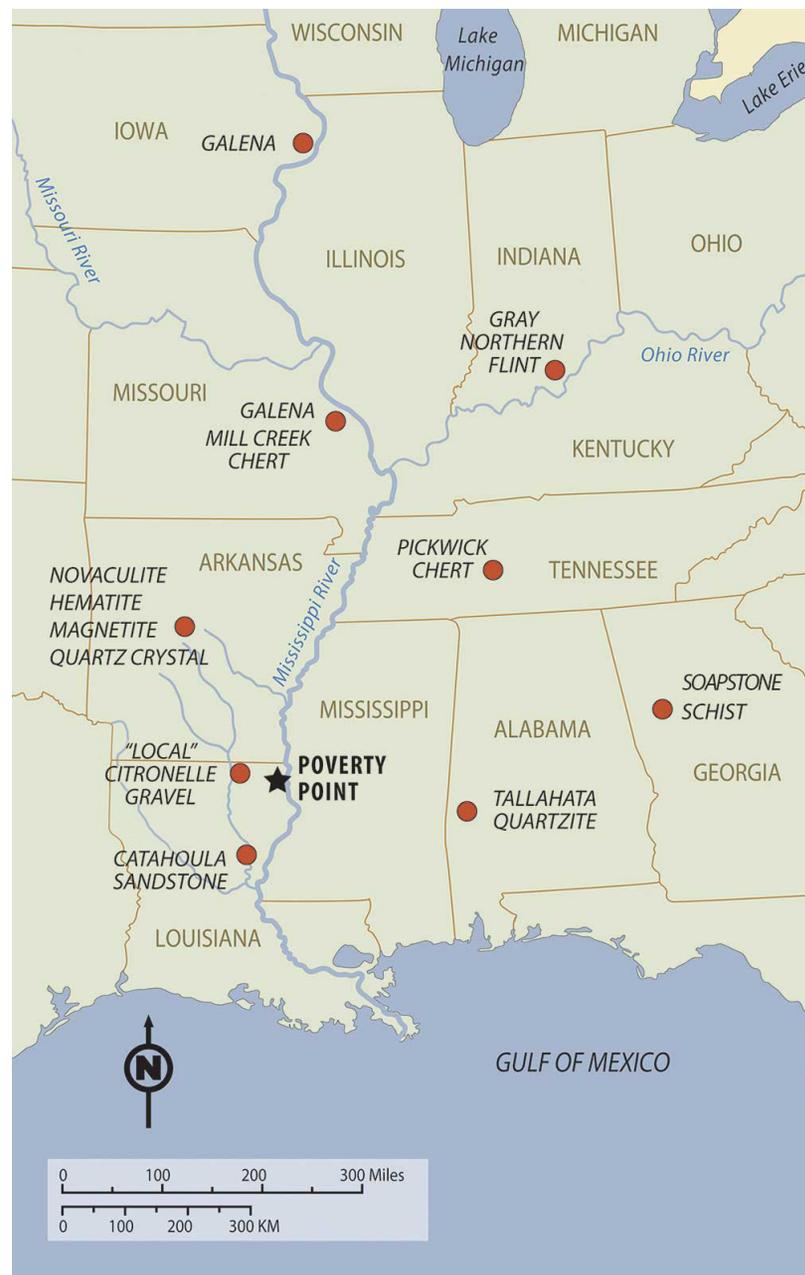
Atlatl weight; soapstone



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.

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

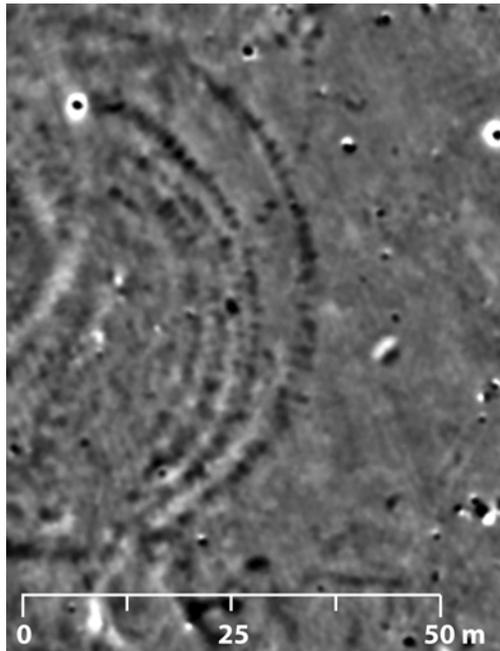
Ceremonial Life

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.



Painting by Martin Pate



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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.

