

# Russell Cave

NATIONAL MONUMENT • ALABAMA

Thousands of years ago nomadic bands of Indians, hunting in the vicinity, stumbled upon Russell Cave in the hill country of northern Alabama. We know little about them except that they were few in number, probably less than 15 or 20, and that the only durable possessions they carried with them were a handful of chipped flint points with which they tipped their short hunting spears. These few possessions were found 12 feet below the present floor of the cave.

This evidence, supported by charcoal from their campfires, tells us that about 9,000 years ago, long before the rise of the first true civilizations of Egypt and the Near East, these Archaic Period Indians first began to occupy Russell Cave. They lived there only during the autumn and winter seasons, maintaining their primitive existence by hunting game and gathering wild plants. Agriculture was probably known, but little used by the Indians of the Archaic Period.

The cave was a great boon to these Indians because it provided ready protection from the elements. This freed them from the need to build a shelter in the forest and gave them more time to find food. Successive bands of hunters with their women and children took shelter in this cave until A.D. 1000. The records of their seasonal occupations, including several burials of adults and children, have been uncovered by archeological digs. The charcoal from their fires, the bones of the

animals they ate, the tools they fashioned from animal bones, their spear and arrow points, and their broken pottery had accumulated layer upon layer as the years, the thousands of years, passed.

When the last occupants departed, a thousand years after the birth of Christ, Russell Cave held beneath its surface the record of at least 9,000 years of human life upon this continent.

The first of these relics were not discovered until 1953 when four members of the Tennessee Archeological Society began digging in the cave. As they dug deeper, they realized that the importance of their find demanded more intensive efforts than they could give. They then discussed their discovery with the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., which conducted three seasons of archeological explorations in close cooperation with the National Geographic Society. Further excavations were carried out in 1962 by the National Park Service. From all this work has come our knowledge of the Indian occupations of Russell Cave.

#### INDIANS FIND SHELTER IN THE CAVE

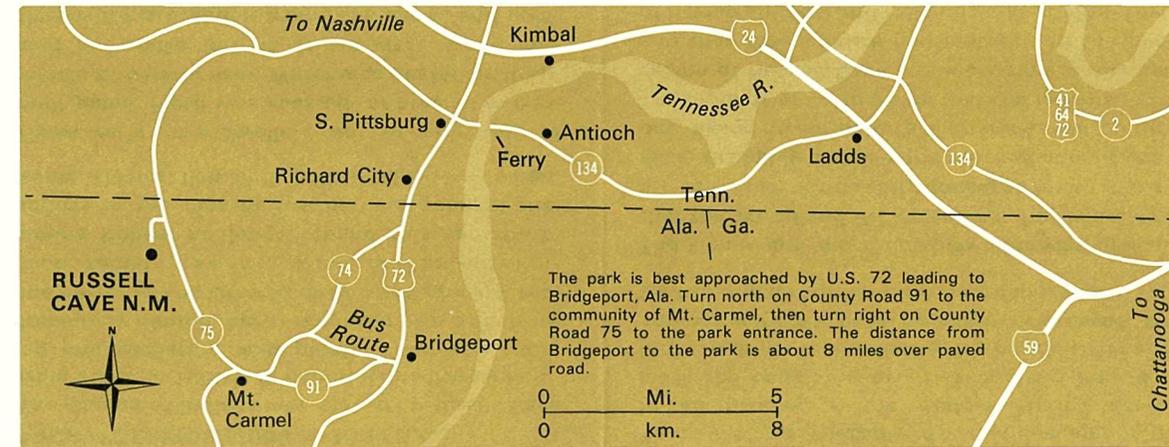
About 9,000 years ago, some 4000 years before the Egyptians built their Great Pyramid, the first Indians made campfires in Russell Cave. They could not have lived there earlier, because a stream of water filled the whole cavern until a great rockfall from the roof shunted the stream to one side and raised the floor of the cave well above its waters.

The first party of cave dwellers camped on the irregular floor of rock slabs. Archeologists have been able to date the arrival of these people at some time between 6550 and 6145 B.C. by measuring the radioactive carbon remaining in the charcoal of their fires. Russell Cave was a seasonal haven for these early forest-dwelling Indians. They survived by hunting and gathering wild plants in the great hardwood forests of the region. After they had depleted the supply of animals and edible plants in one area, they would move on to another section of the forest.

Probably a number of related families used the cave as a place of shelter and safety mostly in the autumn and winter. The relative warmth of the cave probably prevented the stream from freez-

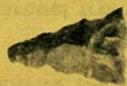
ing and thus they had a constant supply of water. The forest bore a rich crop of nuts that must have been an important source of food during the worst winter months when game in this mountain-valley country was scarce. In spring and summer, small bands—several families—probably camped along the shore of the Tennessee River only a few miles from the cave. Fish, birds, and small mammals could be obtained in the river environment.

Studies in historical geology and paleobotany have shown that the plant and animal life of the Eastern Forest Region remained virtually unchanged for thousands of years, until European settlers felled the trees for lumber and opened up extensive acreages for subsistence and commercial farming.





arrowpoint



## MISSISSIPPIAN PERIOD

After A.D. 500. Large towns with dependent villages, political centralization and warfare between rival groups. Fulltime specialists in crafts, trade, and warfare. Hierarchy of chiefs, priests, and warriors. Widespread trade in raw materials and finished products, contact with civilizations in Mexico. Russell Cave used only intermittently as a shelter.

spearpoint



## WOODLAND PERIOD

1000 B.C. to A.D. 500. Beginnings of settled village life and growing importance of individuals with ranks of chief, priest, and chief warrior. Introduction of pottery-making and trade with other groups for materials such as shell and native copper and for finely finished stone tools and other items. Russell Cave used as a hunting campsite during winter months when stored food in the villages was low.

spearpoint



## ARCHAIC PERIOD

7000 B.C. to 1000 B.C. Russell Cave is home to a small band or extended family (a set of parents with their children, the spouses of their children and their grandchildren); hunting and trapping of wild game from deer to squirrels, gathering and use of a wide variety of wild plants as food.

## ARCHAIC PERIOD (7000 to 1000 B.C.)

The groups of Indians who stayed at Russell Cave from 7000 to 1000 B.C. continued to live by hunting and gathering wild plants. Deer was most commonly hunted, but turkey was also a favorite and easier to kill. Other quarry were squirrel, raccoon, rabbit, gray fox, skunk, and bobcat. Porcupine bones, no longer found this far south, appear in the digs at the earliest occupational levels. Turtles, fish, and shellfish also were eaten.

These early cave dwellers wasted very little of their game. Flesh was roasted, or stewed in containers of bark or skin. Water was heated by dropping hot rocks into it. Hides were made into clothes for protection from rain, snow, and cold. Bones were made into tools of several kinds.

During the autumn and winter, when the cave was occupied, plant foods such as fruits and berries were scarce or unavailable. Nuts and seeds became the staple fare.

A short spear, tipped with a stone point and propelled by an atlatl, or throwing stick, was the chief weapon of these hunters. They chipped the points from chert, which occurs as hard nodules and veins in the limestone near the cave. The many chips dug up indicates that the Indian men fashioned the sharp, hard projectile points in the cave.

The few tools they used reflect the limited needs of these people and the necessity for their household goods to be portable. The men chipped the sharp, flinty stone chert into scrapers and knives. They turned bones into awls and needles, which suggests they worked hides into items of clothing. They also made pieces of bone into fishhooks. No ornaments have been found in these deposits.

The Indians probably made other articles that the soil has not preserved. Basketry and items of wood and hide have long since disappeared. One piece of evidence pointing to the use of perishable material was the discovery of impressions of cane matting on a clay "floor" deep in the Archaic deposits.

Occasionally the Indians buried members of their family inside the cave. Several burials of adults and children have been found in shallow pits scooped out of the cave floor. No artifacts were found with these burials.

Some scraps of evidence hint that during the last 3,000 years of this long Archaic Period, when the cave may have been less frequently occupied, these Indians of the Tennessee Valley relied on the food resources of the river for their chief source of sustenance. But in most other respects, the Russell Cave Indians maintained the same way of life unchanged.

## WOODLAND PERIOD (1000 B.C. to A.D. 500)

Archeological excavations reveal that, beginning about 1000 B.C., the implements of the Indians using Russell Cave underwent a dramatic change. Pottery appears for the first time, and in quantity. Smaller weapon points suggest that the bow and arrow had replaced the earlier throwing stick. Bone tools were more finely finished, and there was a variety of bone and shell ornaments.

**A.D. 1300** Mexica people build Tenochtitlan on an island in the Valley of Mexico, c1345 A.D. A capital of the Three-City League, later of the Aztec Empire.

**A.D. 1066** Battle of Hastings. Norman conquest and the founding of the English nation.

**A.D. 900** Beginning of first North American city, Cahokia, Illinois. Trade center, many plazas.

**A.D. 300** Classic Maya culture in Mesoamerica, c300 to 900 A.D. Accurate calendar, large cities, glyphic writing system. Regular trade with Teotihuacan.

**400 B.C.** Beginning of city of Teotihuacan in the Valley of Mexico. Extensive trade contacts with all Mesoamerica.

**500 B.C.** Towns, trade and complex religious cults in Peru, c1200 to 500 B.C.

**800 B.C.** Greece and Rome. First Olympiad, beginning date for the ancient Greeks, 776 B.C. Legendary date of founding of Rome, 753 B.C.

**1000 B.C.** Olmec civilization on the Gulf Coast of Mexico. Elite hierarchy, pyramids, trade.

**1200 B.C.** Fall of Troy (Ilium) c1220 B.C., source of material for Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

**1700 B.C.** Shang Dynasty in northern China, c1750 B.C. to 1100 B.C. Cities, irrigation agriculture, ancestor-oriented ceremonies, silk, writing, and elaborate government, use of money in wide trade.

**2000 B.C.** Stonehenge, England, construction in three phases c2750 to 1600 B.C.

**3000 B.C.** Settled agricultural communities widespread throughout Europe and Near East. First farming villages in Mexico and South America, c2000 B.C. First Dynasty founded in Egypt by Menes, c3000 B.C. Farming villages in China, Thailand c4000 to 3000 B.C.

**8000 B.C.** First farming villages in Near East c7500 B.C. Domestic animals include sheep and goats. Earliest known pottery in Japan c7500 B.C. Early forms of gardening in Thailand c7000 B.C.

**10,000 B.C.** Hunting and gathering widespread as a way of life throughout the world. Total world population approximately 10,000,000 people.

These changes, widespread at this time among the Indian groups of the eastern United States, mark the beginning of the Woodland Period of Indian culture. It was during this period that burial mounds were first built, population increased, and trade of numerous items became important.

The richer and more complex lifestyles indicate that the Woodland Period Indians had more time for activities not directly concerned with staying alive. Probably a stable and more abundant economy based on agriculture supported their culture. The mounds are also a sign that the Indians in the region of Russell Cave had increased in numbers and that their culture had matured to the point of having political and religious institutions. These must have been well developed and in strong control of the people—sufficient control to keep them at work for long periods building the mounds.

In this period small groups of Indians used Russell Cave only as a winter hunting camp. When they left the cave, in the spring, they probably joined other groups at a summer village that was larger than those of the Archaic Period.

The basis for cultural subdivisions within the Woodland Period are the changes in the shape and style of artifacts at Russell Cave. For example, the early pottery of this period has surfaces decorated with fabric impressions. The later pottery is decorated with impressions made by wooden paddles that were carved into a variety of designs. The shapes of arrowpoints also changed during the period.

## MISSISSIPPIAN PERIOD (after A.D. 500)

From archeological evidence we know that shortly after the close of the Woodland Period (A.D. 500) Indians made less and less use of Russell Cave. Occasionally small parties, probably hunters, left a scattering of objects that differed from those of the Woodland Period occupants. They came from permanent villages built near the rich river bottomlands, and their fields yielded bountiful crops of corn and other plants. They were the Mound Builders of the Mississippi Period.

Centuries later, the Cherokee Indians occupied this part of the Tennessee Valley. They, and the European settlers who followed them, made little use of the cave. The few objects they left were found very close to the surface.

## ABOUT YOUR VISIT

The park is open all year. Exhibits are in the visitor center, and an exhibit of the archeological excavation is in the cave. There are no camping facilities. Help preserve the natural and archeological scene.

Entrance into cave passages, except at the archeological exhibit, is allowed only with written permission of the superintendent.

Demonstrations are presented on the life of the ancient Indians covering: use of the atlatl (throwing stick), grinding of corn, cracking of walnuts, flaking of flint to prepare stone tools, cutting of leather thongs, and cooking by heat transfer.

# Russell Cave

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**FOR YOUR SAFETY.** Please do not run on the trails; stay on them and do not take shortcuts. The hiking trail is steep and arduous. There are hidden drop-offs, sinkholes, and other dangerous natural hazards. Don't spoil your visit with an accident.

## ADMINISTRATION

Russell Cave National Monument was established by Presidential proclamation on May 11, 1961. Some 310 acres, a gift of the National Geographic Society to the people of the United States, was set aside for the protection of the site and its surroundings. It is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.

A superintendent, whose address is Russell Cave National Monument, Bridgeport, AL 35740 is in immediate charge.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has basic responsibilities to protect and conserve our land and water, energy and minerals, fish and wildlife, park and recreation areas, and for the wise use of all those resources. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

**National Park Service**  
**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR**

