



Foundation Document Overview

Russell Cave National Monument

Alabama



Contact Information

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Purpose



RUSSELL CAVE NATIONAL MONUMENT preserves, protects, and interprets the outstanding evidence of more than 10,000 years of human use of Russell Cave and its environs by promoting scientific research and public appreciation of its archeological, ethnographic, and natural resources.



Significance

Significance statements express why Russell Cave National Monument resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- The ideal combination of geological features, hydrological processes, and natural resources found at Russell Cave and its surrounding area provided the optimum setting for human habitation for millennia. Many of these natural features are still intact today and are representative of what existed in archaic times.
- The 10,000-square-foot Russell Cave shelter contains one of the longest and most complete archeological stratigraphic sequences of southeastern prehistoric cultures, including Paleo-Indian, Archaic, Woodland, and Mississippian as determined by one of the earliest uses of carbon-14 dating. The archeological data are recognized by scientists as critical for understanding southeastern pre-history.
- Russell Cave National Monument contains a large number of sites related to the aboriginal use and occupation of the cave shelter, creating opportunities for valuable research that will continue to enhance our knowledge of prehistoric cultures.
- Russell Cave National Monument contains one of the oldest burials known to date in Alabama, with unparalleled deposits of well-preserved material including some of the oldest bone tools and fishhooks, domesticated seeds, and weaving impressions in the Southeast.



Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **Cave shelter.**
- **Karst system.**
- **Flora and fauna as they relate to pre-history.**
- **Opportunity to connect to our past and link to today.**
- **Archeological data (information) and collections.**
- **Outstanding research opportunities.**



Russell Cave National Monument contains other resources and values that may not be fundamental to the purpose and significance of the park, but are important to consider in management and planning decisions. These are referred to as other important resources and values.

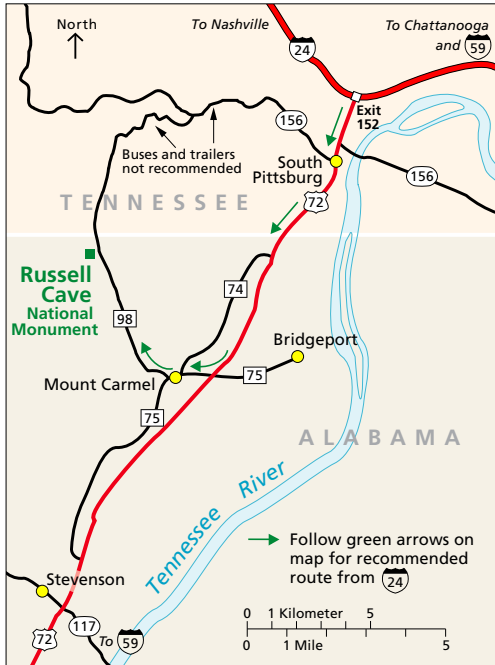
- **Burial Mound.**

Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from—and should reflect—park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- **Revelation of cave shelter occupation through artifacts.** Within Russell Cave's earthen layers are found the stories of countless lives, revealed through artifacts, pottery, weapons, weavings, and other remnants.
- **Life-sustaining developments over time.** The story of Russell Cave National Monument progresses through thousands of years of development of pottery, weapons, medicines, clothing, and food procurement methods that ensured the success of myriad generations of people.
- **Changes in human cultures.** Russell Cave National Monument reveals the cultural evolution of southeastern peoples (Paleo-Indian, Archaic, Woodland, Mississippian) beginning with their earliest presence and extending through the period of European contact.
- **Geological processes created the cave shelter.** An unusual combination of geological process and physical characteristics created Russell Cave—a haven for thousands of years of continuous human use.
- **Resources provided sustenance for millennia.** The rich and diverse plant and animal life of the Cumberland foothills surrounding Russell Cave have sustained human populations for millennia and continues to attract people to this area today.
- **Traces of the past observed today.** The scientific discipline of archeology helps provide an understanding of the lifestyles and cultural practices of the successive communities of people who inhabited Russell Cave.

Description



Russell Cave National Monument, near Bridgeport, Alabama, was established in 1961 by President John F. Kennedy in Proclamation 3413 for its outstanding archeological and ethnological evidence of human habitation in excess of 10,000 years. The monument became possible when all 310

acres of the parkland surrounding the cave opening were donated to the National Park Service by the National Geographic Society.

The cave has a mapped length of 7.2 miles, only a fraction of which is within the park boundary. Its large main entrance was used as shelter for more than 10,000 years by prehistoric peoples. Russell Cave provides clues to the daily lifeways of early North American inhabitants dating from 6500 BC to CE 1650. The cave shelter archeological site contains the most complete known record of prehistoric cultures in the Southeast. Although the use of the cave shelter was discontinued, the area was occupied and changed ownership numerous times.

The Russell Cave site contains the cave, a stream, sinkholes, and sandstone outcrops. The area around the cave is wooded and there are 2.5+ miles of hiking trails.

A short walking trail leads the visitor along a raised boardwalk through the hardwood forest to the cave shelter. The boardwalk extends a short distance into the large cave opening where visitors can view the interpretive exhibits about the cave, the life in the cave, and the successive peoples who used or inhabited the cave.

The visitor center includes exhibits about the prehistoric cultures that inhabited the site including artifacts and reproductions of tools and weapons. A large mowed meadow is a popular site for picnics and is also a venue for special events.

About 9,000 years ago, a stream of water drained into the cave shelter until a great rockfall from the roof raised the floor of the cave well above its waters and rerouted the stream to the side.

Soon after, the first nomadic Indians—known as the Paleo—began to occupy Russell Cave. They may have lived there during the autumn and winter seasons and probably camped there during dry periods, maintaining their existence by hunting game and gathering wild plants. Agriculture had begun, but was little used by the Indians of the Archaic Period.

While Archaic dwellers were sedentary hunters and gatherers with few social divisions—more sedentary than Paleo-Indians—they continued the hunting and gathering subsistence strategy while showing more evidence of complex social structure. The material culture of the Woodland Period indicates that larger populations supported the development of a social structure and widening trade networks. In general, people of the Mississippian Stage were very sedentary, traveling less than previous groups and relying heavily on the cultivation of crops. They also had highly developed religious ceremonies and political structures. The artifacts recovered from Russell Cave reflect the technological and social changes typical for the Archaic, Woodland, and Mississippian Stages.

The cave provided ready protection from the elements and freed its occupants from the need to build a shelter in exchange for more time to find food. Successive bands of hunters with their families took shelter in this cave until at least as late as CE 1650. The records of their seasonal occupations, including several burials of adults and children, have been uncovered by archeological digs. Charcoal, animal bones, tools, spear and arrow points, and broken pottery accumulated layer upon layer as thousands of years passed.

The site is also important because it has one of the most complete temporal and chronological occupation sequences known in the eastern United States. The Russell Cave site was also one of the first sites in the history of American archeology to be excavated after the advent of radiocarbon dating. The interpretation of the site benefited from radiocarbon dating, which provided important temporal and chronological data on the site, and greatly enhanced American archeological interpretation of the prehistoric settlement and habitation of the region.

The importance of the site was established in 1953 during an excavation by the Tennessee Archeological Society. Society members shared their discoveries and discussed them with the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. Carl Miller of the Smithsonian conducted additional excavations in Russell Cave in close cooperation with the National Geographic Society. Further excavations were carried out in 1962 by the National Park Service. Surface investigations were completed in 1993 and reported in 1994, and excavations of two test holes (50cm by 50cm by 50cm) in the eroded area in 2013 were completed by the Southeast Archeological Center.