

About Your Visit

Ocmulgee National Monument is on the east edge of Macon, Ga., on U.S. 80 east. Main access is from Int. 75 to Int. 16 east, at the north end of Macon. Take either the first or second exit from Int. 16 and follow the signs one mile to the park entrance.

A detached area, called Lamar, is located in the swamps 3-miles below Macon and is not presently open to the public. The park is open daily 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., with extended summer hours; closed Dec. 25 and Jan. 1. The park has a small picnic area for use by visitors. The closest camping area is 8 miles away, west of Macon.

The visitor center houses a major archeological museum. Tours of the *Earthlodge*, a restored ceremonial building with an original floor 1,000 years old, leave from the museum. An array of solar collectors for a solar heating and cooling system is adjacent to the southeast corner of the visitor center.

The *Temple Mound* drive, a half-mile long, leads to the three largest mounds of the Macon Plateau period and the site of the *British Colonial Trading Post*. These features may also be approached by a walking trail which connects with the mile-long *Opelofa Nature Trail*, where swamp and forest ecology can be observed along Walnut Creek. *Interpretive demonstrations* of southeastern Indian crafts and life are held on the grounds throughout the summer season.

Administration

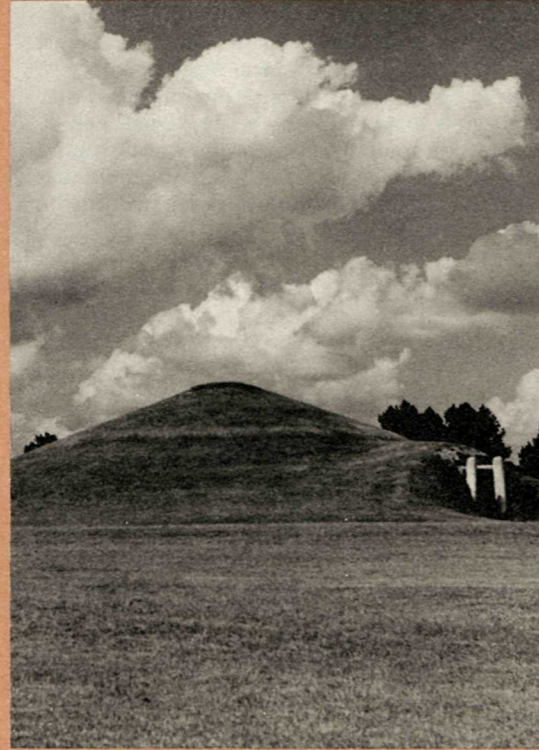
Ocmulgee National Monument, established in 1936, is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is 1207 Emery Highway, Macon, GA 31201, is in immediate charge.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. 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

Ocmulgee

National Monument, Georgia



“on the east bank of the river lie the famous Oakmulgee fields where are yet conspicuous very wonderful remains of the power and grandeur of the ancients of this part of America, in ruins of a capital town and settlement, as vast artificial hills, terraces, etc. . . .”

The Travels of William Bartram, 1791

Today visitors can still see the “artificial hills” and other evidences of the ancient town which intrigued Bartram when he passed by at the time of the American Revolution. Thanks to the patient research of modern archeology, the lives of the people who built these mounds and lived in this town from about A.D. 900 to 1100 unfolds for visitors on the grounds and in the museum of Ocmulgee National Monument.

Yet even a thousand years ago the Indians who built these mounds did not arrive in a virgin wilderness. They were neither the first nor the last people to occupy this spot.

For more than 10,000 years men have sought their livelihood here, where the Ocmulgee River passes from the red clay land of the rolling piedmont to the sandy flat lands of the coastal plain. This is an area where diverse habitats meet and blend, causing a richness of plant and animal life. Within a short distance the river has rapids, channels, and ponds. There are wooded bottomlands and swamps, pine woods and deciduous upland forests. The resources here which man could use were varied and plentiful.

Cover:

The original floor of the Mississippian council chamber, part of the reconstructed ceremonial Earthlodge, dates to 1016, one of the earliest public buildings in North America.

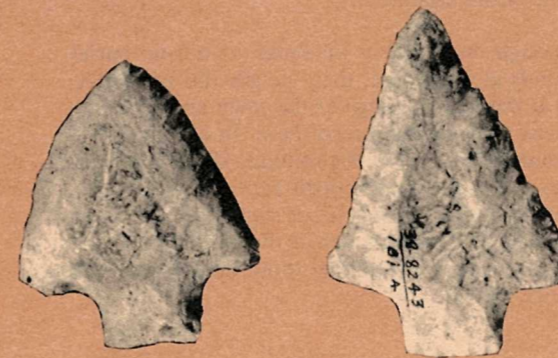
Paleo-Indian and Archaic Periods

The first known trace of man on the Macon Plateau consists of a fluted stone spear point of a type dated about 11,000 years ago in other parts of North America. In the western United States, weapon points of this kind have been found with the bones of now-extinct mammals, such as the mammoth, but we have no clues to indicate the prey which these ancient hunters sought here.

We do know that about this time the world's climate began growing warmer. The glaciers of the ice age melted back dramatically, and many of the large animals that flourished during glacial times became extinct. In a relatively short time the environment of the East became much as it was when the European explorers arrived. For many thousands of years the Indians lived as hunters and gatherers within this rich forest habitat. They hunted deer and turkey, fished the streams and lakes, and gathered the land's abundant wild plants. They found that some plants flourished only at certain times of the year and in particular places. Adjusting to these circumstances, the Indians moved about in small bands to take advantage of food supplies. Favored localities—such as the area in and around Ocmulgee—were visited year after year.

Along the seacoast and lower reaches of the rivers, the Indians relied more heavily on the resources of the waters. Eventually some of these Indians or their ideas spread up the Ocmulgee River as far as this site. Here they found shellfish and such fish as shad and sturgeon, which they had known from their life on the seacoast. The plants and animals of the land supplemented the bounty of the river. Sometime before 2000 B.C., Indians along the coasts of Georgia and Florida began to make pottery, and this idea also spread inland to Ocmulgee. But even with these additions the people remained hunters and gatherers.

Stone dart points used by hunters living at Ocmulgee about 2,000 years ago.



Woodland Period

Agriculture, and associated religious beliefs and social customs, changed all this. The impetus for this dramatic economic shift came from Mexico. Agriculture spread rapidly throughout most of what is now the eastern United States, arriving at Ocmulgee between 1000 and 500 B.C. Squash and gourds and, somewhat later, corn and beans were planted in moderate amounts. Gardening, rather than farming, best describes this initial agriculture. Hunting, fishing, and gathering continued to be very important. People lived together in larger villages than formerly, although they usually split up into smaller camps for part of the year. The use of pottery increased, and the pots, which were of higher quality than before, were often decorated with intricate designs stamped in the damp clay of the vessel before it was fired. More numerous and varied tools and ceremonial objects also came into use.

Rubbing of a pottery fragment from the Woodland Period. The design was stamped on the wet clay with a carved paddle.



During this time the custom of burial beneath rounded earthen mounds spread widely through the eastern United States. In some places this burial cult reached elaborate heights, with quantities of ceremonial goods placed with the dead; in this part of Georgia, however, the practice was carried on at a simpler level. Burial mounds do occur in this general area, but none of them were built by these people within the present extent of Ocmulgee National Monument.

Early Mississippian Period (Macon Plateau Period)

While this relatively simple village life continued over the centuries in the Ocmulgee area, a more complex way of life based on a more intensive and efficient corn agriculture crystallized in the central Mississippi Valley. Fields replaced gardens, and villages grew large enough to be called towns. Arts and crafts became more specialized, society more complex, and religious ceremonialism more intricate.

The population explosion in the heartland of this Mississippian culture led to expansion and colonization. One large town appeared as far north as Wisconsin. Other groups spread along the Tennessee River and into the Southeast, and about 900 A.D. one such group moved into the

Upper half of a small effigy bottle from the Macon Plateau Period.



This effigy bottle from the same period depicts a human head.



Macon area and established a town. A short distance down the river from the first town these newcomers also built a somewhat smaller settlement, and houses, standing alone or in clusters, dotted the area between the settlements and the surrounding countryside. The Macon region thus became an isolated outpost of Mississippian culture, surrounded (probably at a respectful distance) by the villagers whom the intruders dispossessed.

The Mississippians brought with them their own way of doing things. In the rich bottomlands they planted corn, beans, squash, pumpkins, and tobacco. On the bluff above the river bottoms their fortified town began to grow. Within the town of some 500 to 1,000 people, the Indians raised rectangular houses; their walls were poles set upright in the ground and plastered with clay, and the whole was covered by a thatched roof.

At the end of town nearest the river they laid out an area which served as a combination religious center and public square. By cutting away the edges of the natural plateau, they created a large terrace and began the construction of their temple mounds. The mounds were not built all at once, but were enlarged and elevated at intervals over the years. Ramps led up the sides of the mounds, providing access to the flat tops where ceremonial buildings were erected. These temples were larger than the houses but built in much the same manner.

At several points within the village still another kind of structure was built. These were circular, heavily framed, and covered with earth. The best preserved of these earth lodges (shown in the drawing in the opposite column) has been reconstructed. It is entered through a long tunnel. Opposite the door is a raised clay platform shaped like a ceremonial bird. There are three seats at the rear of this platform, and around the walls of the building is a raised clay bench with 47 more seats. In the center of the building is a large sunken firepit. The 50 or so individuals who used this temple were probably the town's religious and political leaders whose decisions affected the lives of the entire community.

Although the previous inhabitants built no burial mounds at Ocmulgee, these people did construct one at the western edge of the town and buried at least some of their dead there. In design, the mound differed from the rounded shape of earlier times, having the flat-topped appearance of the temple mounds, with a set of steps leading up the side. The elaborate nature of the objects in some of the graves indicates that those buried here were of high rank.

Late Mississippian Period (Lamar Period)

The displaced villagers did not lose contact with the intruders, and over the years adopted some of their more advanced agricultural practices and the religion that went with them, including the use of temple mounds. At the same time, the Macon Plateau people did not expand their holdings; they began to adopt some of the ways of their predecessors. Finally their civilization entered a period of decline. The reason for their disappearance from the Macon Plateau around A.D. 1100 is unknown, but after that time the town and the mounds fell into disuse and ruin.

The surrounding peoples, their way of life irretrievably altered, now assumed the dominant role in middle Georgia and beyond. Although their settlements and villages were numerous and widespread, they used the old townsite on the Macon Plateau only occasionally. One of their major centers, however, was the Lamar site, only about 3 miles away in the swamps along the Ocmulgee River. This village contained two temple mounds and was surrounded by a stockade.



At least some of these people were the direct ancestors of the Creek Indians who held most of Georgia and parts of Alabama in early historic times, and who were to play a vital role in the last pages of the Indian story in the East.

This bowl with designs incised on its sloping shoulders is typical of the Lamar Period.

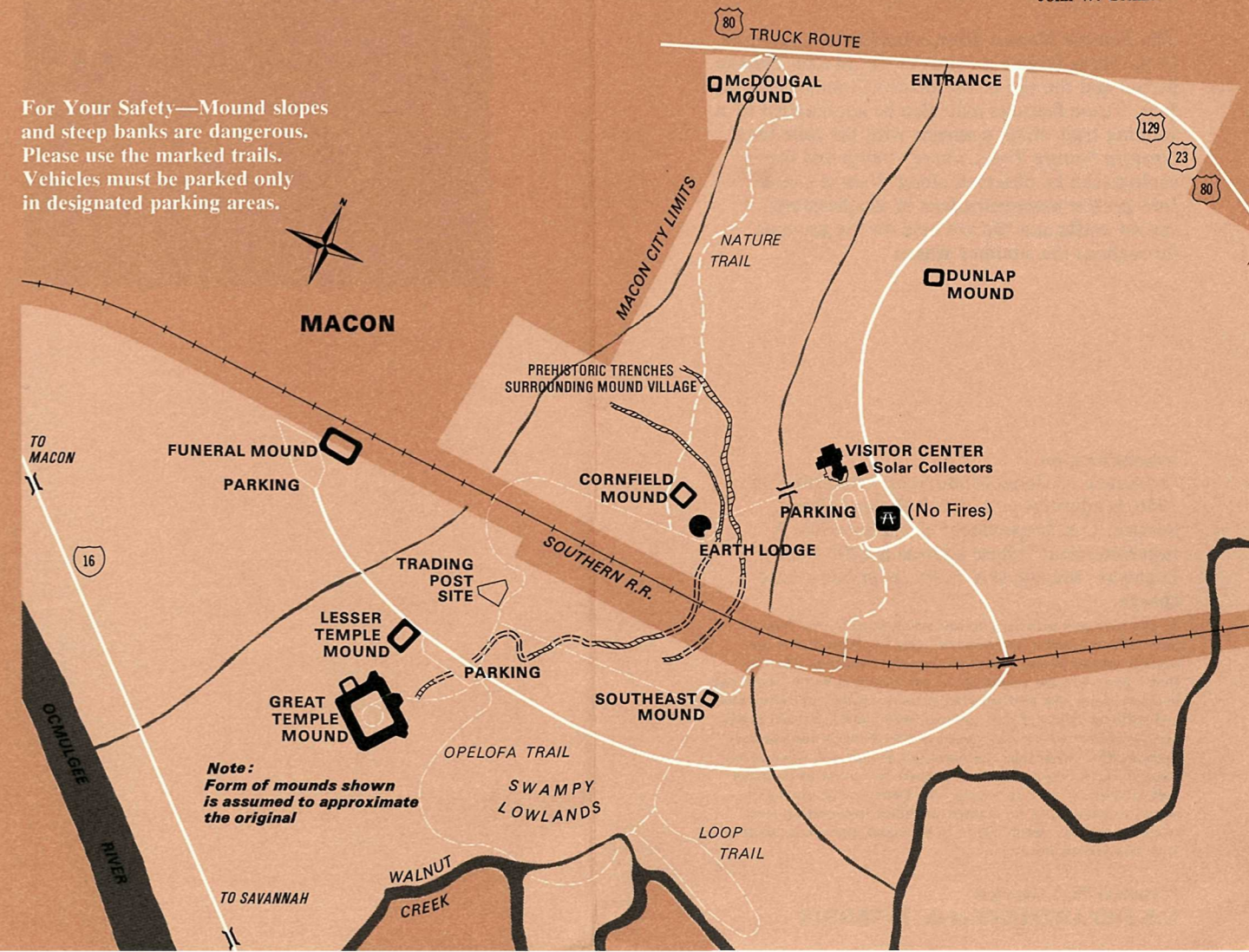


Historic Contact (Creek Period)

In 1540, new intruders appeared in the Creek country. The expedition of Hernando de Soto crossed parts of Georgia, giving a foretaste of what was to follow. Colonists from Spain, France, and England settled on the Atlantic and gulf coasts and began to thrust inland in what would become a struggle for mastery of the Southeast. The Indian could not escape this impact. Disease, often traveling far in advance of settlement, reduced his ranks. The desire for European trade goods grew to a need as he became enmeshed in the deerskin trade. His way of life was disrupted, he hunted more and farmed less, and he ultimately was drawn into the European power struggle, both as opponent and ally.

As early as 1690 an English trading post was operating at Ocmulgee alongside the important Lower Creek Trading Path which crossed the Ocmulgee River here. And a thousand Creek warriors joined Col. James Moore here to launch an attack against the Spanish mission settlements of northwest Florida in 1703. A few years later the Creeks rose up in turn against the English, but were defeated and forced to withdraw westward to the Flint and Chattahoochee Rivers and into Alabama, although from time to time some of them returned to the Ocmulgee. With the birth of the United States and the expansion of its people, the Creek came under relentless pressure. Bit by bit their lands were signed away in treaties, and the remnants of the Creeks were removed to the Oklahoma Territory, where their descendents live today. The treaty which divested them of their last lands at Ocmulgee was signed in 1826, 3 years after the settlement of Macon marked the arrival of yet another culture near the ancient Ocmulgee Fields.

John W. Griffin



For Your Safety—Mound slopes and steep banks are dangerous. Please use the marked trails. Vehicles must be parked only in designated parking areas.