

Ocmulgee

Ocmulgee National Monument
Georgia

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Because of its durability and abundance, pottery reveals much about a prehistoric people: cultural change across time, their aesthetics, basic domestic habits. Mississippian pottery (the two vessels at left) was

strikingly different from that of the Woodland people who preceded them. Woodland Indians decorated their pottery with complex designs pressed into the wet surface of the clay before firing. Mississippian potters made

fairly simple ware of many sizes and shapes well suited to a variety of everyday uses. Their decoration took the form of effigies. The effigy at left, found in a burial, was once the top of a bottle.

Generations after Mississippian culture waned at Ocmulgee, another culture called Lamar sprang up here. Four Lamar vessels are shown at right above. The large bowl is representative of one type of distinctive

pottery produced by this people. It has flaring sides and a broad, inward-sloping rim incised with bold lines.

At right is evidence of the early presence of man in this region. This

fluted "Clovis" point once armed the spear of an Ice-Age hunter about 10,000 years ago. The forward one-third of the point is missing.



A Mississippian Outpost on the Macon Plateau

Ocmulgee is a memorial to the antiquity of man in this corner of the North American continent. From Ice-Age hunters to the Creeks of historic times, there is evidence here of 10,000 years of human habitation. One period stands out. Between AD 900 and 1100 a skillful farming people lived on this site. Known to us as Mississippians, they were part of a distinctive culture which crystallized about AD 750 in the middle Mississippi Valley and over the next seven centuries spread along riverways throughout much of the central and eastern United States. The Mississippians brought a more complex way of life to the region. Though far removed from such Mississippian centers as Cahokia in Illinois and Moundville in Alabama, the people here were the heirs of an ascendant culture and enjoyed a life as rich as any north of Mexico.

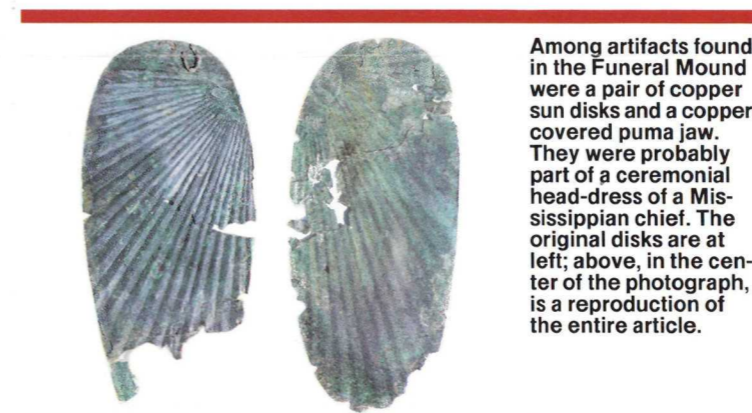
The Mississippians at Ocmulgee were intruders of a sort. They apparently displaced the native woodland Indians, though there is no evidence of conflict. The newcomers were a sedentary people who lived mainly by farming bottomlands for crops of corn, beans, squash, pumpkins, and tobacco. They built a compact town of thatched huts on the bluff overlooking the river. More than a thousand persons lived here at one time. For their public ceremonies, they leveled an area near the river and began constructing a series of earth mounds—places important in their religion and politics. They did not build the mounds to full

height all at once but raised them at intervals over the years, perhaps as new leaders came to power or in response to cycles about which we can only speculate.

Another structure central to life here was the earthlodge. There were several at Ocmulgee. The one best preserved has been reconstructed. It is 42-feet in diameter. Opposite the entrance is a clay platform shaped like a large bird. There are three seats on the platform and 47 on the bench around the wall. In the center of the lodge is a firepit. This building may have been either a winter temple or a year-round council house. The 50 or so persons who met here were probably the group's leaders.

The mound on the town's west side was apparently a place for burials. Like the temple mounds, the Funeral Mound was flat-topped and equipped with steps leading up the side to some kind of mortuary building. More than 100 burials have been found here. Some had elaborate shell and copper ornaments, suggesting high status, but most had no offerings.

The Mississippians seem to have had some influence on the surrounding population (mound-building, rudimentary farming), but we are far from knowing the real nature of the transactions between them. Nor do we know why the town declined or what



Among artifacts found in the Funeral Mound were a pair of copper sun disks and a copper covered puma jaw. They were probably part of a ceremonial head-dress of a Mississippian chief. The original disks are at left; above, in the center of the photograph, is a reproduction of the entire article.

happened to the inhabitants—whether they died out, migrated elsewhere, or were assimilated. Whatever their fate, by 1100 Ocmulgee was no longer a thriving outpost of Mississippian culture.

Over the next two centuries, the native Indians, their style of life irrevocably altered, made occasional use of the old townsite. Then in the 1300s a new culture arose and spread widely through the Southeast. Known as the Lamar culture, it appears to have

been a blending of Mississippian and Woodland elements. The Lamar people were farmers, skilled hunters, and mound-builders whose distinctive pottery employed designs peculiar to both their Woodland and Mississippian predecessors. They also made some use of the site, then fallen into ruins. One of their major centers was the Lamar site, several miles away in the swamps along the Ocmulgee River. This village contained two temple mounds and was surrounded by a stockade. It was the Lamar people that Hernando de Soto encountered in 1540 on the first European expedition into this region.

The arrival of Europeans was catastrophic for the natives. Disease caused staggering losses, and they were drawn into the white man's trading world and his political disputes, with a corresponding collapse of their traditional way of life. The English set up a trading post at Ocmulgee sometime around 1690, and Creeks settled here in numbers. By 1715 the site was again abandoned as warfare between English and Spanish colonials inflamed the frontier. Within a few decades there were few vestiges of Mississippian life anywhere and virtually no understanding of the culture. When the pioneer naturalist William Bartram saw Ocmulgee in the 1770s, he spoke with respect mingled with incomprehension of "the wonderful remains of the power and grandeur of the ancients in this part of America."

A Tour of the Park



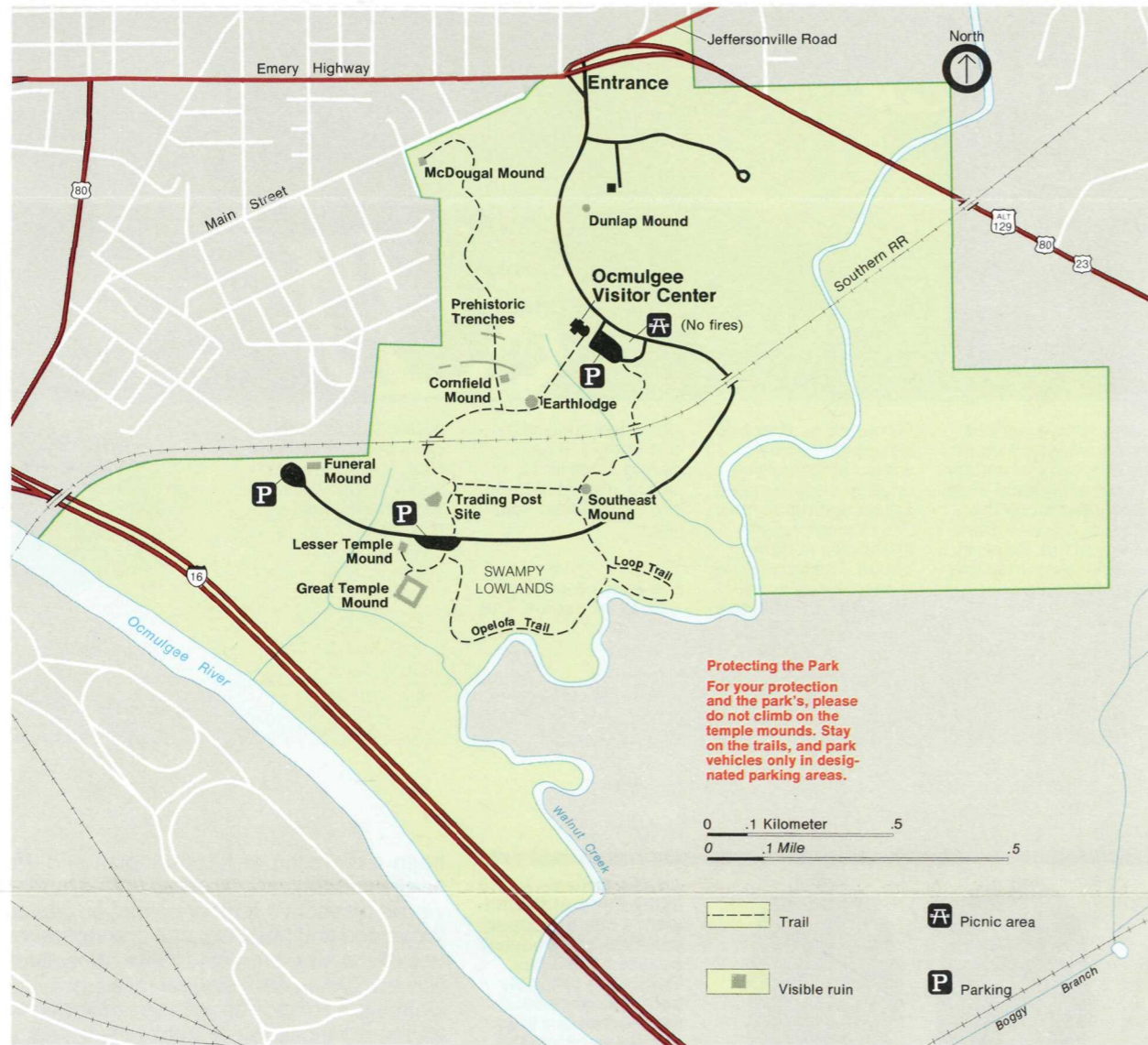
Photo by William A. Bake

Great Temple Mound (center) rises some 45 feet from a base about 300 feet by 270. Lesser Temple Mound (left) is similar in form but far smaller. Little is known about the relationship between the two.



Photo by William A. Bake

The visitor center houses a major archaeological museum. Exhibits describe the human habitation of the area from 10,000 BC to the early 1700s. Emphasis is on the Mississippian town that flourished here from AD 900 to 1100. A short film, "People of the Macon Plateau," is shown every 30 minutes.



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Spring and fall are the best seasons to tour the park on foot. A trail connects most features, of which seven are described below. If the weather is hot or rainy, you may want to take Temple Mound Drive around to the large mounds. Another interesting walk is along the Opelofa Nature Trail, which takes off from the main walking trail and winds through the lowlands of Walnut Creek.

The **earthlodge** is a reconstruction of a ceremonial building that

The interior of the original earthlodge would have looked something like this about AD 1000. A fire preserved evidence of many features, giving archeologists a firm basis for this reconstruction.

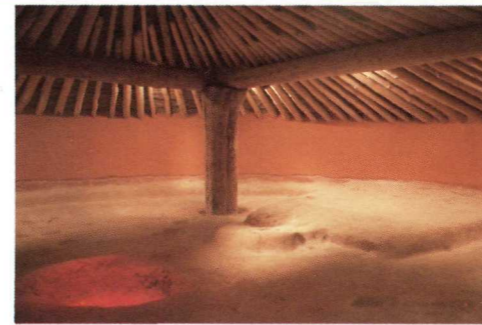


Photo by William A. Bake

Trading post English traders from Charleston, eager to do business with the Creeks, built the first trading post on this site about 1690. They swapped firearms, cloth, and trinkets for deerskins and furs. Excavations have turned up all sorts of goods, including axes, clay pipes, beads, knives, swords, bullets, flints, and pistols and muskets.

Great and Lesser Temple Mounds Relatively little is known about these mounds except that they were topped by rectangular wooden structures that were probably used for important religious ceremonies. Great Temple Mound is by far the largest Mississippian mound on the Macon Plateau. Lesser Temple Mound was partly destroyed by railroad construction in the 1840s.

Funerary Mound This mound was the burial place for village leaders. Over 100 burials have been uncovered, many with shell and copper ornaments. Like the temple mounds, this mound was built in successive stages—at least seven. The structures that stood on top of each stage may have been used in preparing the dead for burial. The present height corresponds to the third stage. Much of the mound was destroyed by a railroad cut in the 1870s.

About Your Visit

Ocmulgee National Monument is on the eastern edge of Macon, Ga., on U.S. 80 East. Travelers on I-75 should exit on I-16 East. Take either the first or second exit from I-16 and follow U.S. 80 East a mile to the park. The Lamar Unit, a detached area, is located in the swamps 3 miles below Macon. It is not open to the public.

The park is open every day except Christmas and New Year's from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., with extended hours in summer. There is a picnic area for visitors. The closest camping area is 8 miles away, west of Macon.

Ocmulgee National Monument 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 charge.

stood on the north side of the Mississippian village. It was probably a meeting place for the town's political and religious leaders. The clay floor is about a thousand years old.

Village site During Mississippian times (AD 900-1100) many other buildings stood here besides the earthlodge, among them several flat-topped mounds, a burial mound, and numerous huts.

Cornfield Mound was originally about 8 feet high. Under it archeologists found signs of a cultivated field, which is something of a puzzle because Mississippian agricultural fields usually lay in bottomlands. The mound itself was probably a platform for a ceremonial building.

Prehistoric trenches Two lines of ditches varying in width and depth have been traced around the east side of the village. Some sections are parallel and lined with clay. The ditches may have been defensive or they may have been borrow pits—sources of fill for constructing mounds.

The Sequence of Cultures on the Macon Plateau

Paleo-Indian Pre-9000 BC

The first inhabitants of this region were nomadic hunters of large mammals, one of the earliest stages of human culture in North America. A distinctive spear point of the type called Clovis is evidence of this people here.

Archaic 9000-1000 BC

The Indians of this period were hunters and gatherers who exploited such new food sources as small game, shellfish, and seasonal plants. The atlatl, a device for propelling spears, came into wide use. Red ochre in burials suggests the beginnings of ritualism.

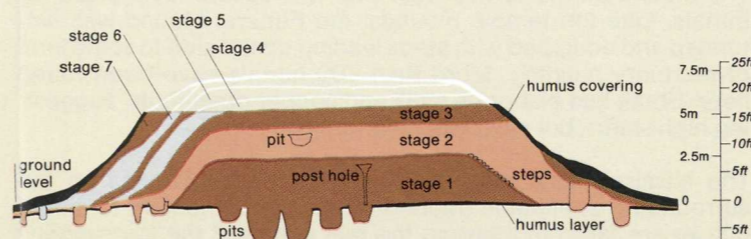
Woodland 1000 BC-AD 900

Crops of squash and gourds and later corn and beans were cultivated. People began to live in villages at least part of the year. Tools and pottery became more varied. The pottery was decorated by stamping the unfired surface with wooden paddles or

carved with complex designs. Some mound building. This people was displaced by the Mississippians but continued to live in the area.

Early Mississippians AD 900-1100

The way of life of this people originated in the Mississippi Valley. True farmers who planted extensive crops, they lived in large villages with intricate social relationships as suggested by their earthlodges and huge, flat-topped mounds. Their pottery was plain but of varied size and shape.



The Funerary Mound was constructed in at least seven stages, each of which had a building of some kind on top. This profile across the north face reveals the basic structure that archeologists found in the 1930s.

Late Mississippian Post 1350

After the waning of the Mississippians a new way of life sprang up that combined elements of the two previous cultures. This culture is called Lamar after the site at which it was first described by archeologists. Now a unit of the park, this palisaded town had

two temple mounds, one with a unique spiral ramp to the top. The pottery was decorated with both stamped and incised designs. It was villages of this type that Hernando de Soto encountered in 1540.

Historic c. 1690-1715

Creek Indians built a large town here to take advantage of commerce with the British. After the Indians were defeated in the Yamasee War, the village was abandoned.