

RUSSELL CAVE SLIDE PROGRAM

The story of Russell Cave began many thousands of years ago but its archaeological significance was unknown until the mid-1950's. Initial excavation was done by amateur archaeologists Paul H. Brown, J. B. Graham, Charles K. Peacock and LeBaron Pahmeyer in 1953. Professional work was requested from the Smithsonian Institution and the National Geographic Society which sponsored excavations by Carl F. Miller from 1956 to 1958. National Park Service excavations in 1962, in the area where you now stand, revealed further evidence of the early inhabitants.

Ten thousand years ago both cave entrances were at the same level. Rockfalls, repeated flooding and silt deposits gradually built up the floor of the present cave shelter, making it habitable by a small band of people as long ago as 9,000 years.

These early people made spearpoints and tools of flint in styles and shapes which changed with generations of cave dwellers. Archaeologists use the differing styles to establish a definite pattern throughout the time periods in which these people lived, both at Russell Cave and throughout the Southeastern United States.

EARLY ARCHAIC PERIOD, 6,500 B.C. - 4,500 B.C.

Early Archaic people were hunters and gatherers. Their food source included nuts, berries, deer, wild turkey, squirrel, and turtle. This Early Archaic soil layer contained the partial remains of a 20 to 24 month old male, to date the oldest burial in Alabama.

MIDDLE ARCHAIC PERIOD, 4,500 B.C. - 3,500 B.C.

In the Middle Archaic Period few changes occurred in the lifestyle of the Russell Cave inhabitants. However, a greater variety of spearpoint types were found, and more cutting and digging tools were used. Also storage pits for preserving food began to be dug in the cave floor.

Five burials found during the National Park Service excavation are believed to have originated during this same time period. The partial remains of a 40 to 50 year old female and a 30 to 35 year old male were the best preserved burials. Both were slender and slightly more than five feet tall. Extreme dental wear was obvious in both burials.

LATE ARCHAIC PERIOD, 3,500 B.C. - 500 B.C.

The Late Archaic Period produced the slowest rate of debris accumulation and the lowest ratio of artifacts per year; however, spearpoint sizes increased during this time.

EARLY WOODLAND PERIOD, 500 B.C. - 200 A.D.

The Early Woodland Period was a time of changing lifestyles, the first pottery and crude farming appeared. There is little evidence of these changes at Russell Cave except that projectile points became smaller, and more triangular points occurred, suggesting the introduction of the bow and arrow.

MIDDLE WOODLAND PERIOD, 200 A.D. - 1,000 A.D.

In the Middle Woodland Period, the cave appeared to have been used primarily as a winter hunting camp. The large number of storage pits in this layer indicate a considerable use of stored foods. Farming produced a more stable food supply and resulted in the organization of village communities and widespread trading. The more settled lifestyle provided additional time for arts, crafts and religious observances.

MISSISSIPPIAN PERIOD, 1,000 A.D. - 1,540 A.D.

Use of Russell Cave was sporadic during the Mississippian Period. Large farming and ceremonial towns had developed, and only occasional hunting and trading parties stopped here. These were the conditions when Europeans first arrived in this Cherokee Indian land.

HISTORIC PERIOD, 1540 A.D. - PRESENT

The only relic of the Historic Period was a metal fish hook which was found in the first few inches of the cave floor. Historic Period ownership of the land began in 1817 with Captain John Woods, a Cherokee Indian, and passed to Major James Doran and then to Thomas Russell, remaining in the Russell family until purchased by Oscar Ridley in 1928. More recent use of the cave shelter included picnics, parties and dances.

Many unanswered questions remain, and the full story of man in Russell Cave may never be completely revealed. Archaeological discoveries of the future may allow us to learn even more about the people who lived in this mountainside home.