



## Emerald Mound



Emerald Mound, located at milepost 10.3, was a ceremonial mound built by ancestors of the Natchez Indians.

### The Ceremonial Center

Located about 10 miles northeast of Natchez, Mississippi, Emerald Mound is the second-largest Mississippian Period ceremonial mound in the United States, surpassed only by Monk's Mound near Cahokia, Illinois. Built and used between the years 1200 C.E. (current era) and 1730 C.E., this 35-foot-high mound covers eight acres and measures 770 feet by 435 feet at its base. Two secondary mounds sit atop the primary mound, bringing the total height to approximately 60 feet. The larger one at the west end measures 190 feet by 160 feet by 30 feet high. Early records suggest there were six, smaller mounds located along the sides of the primary mound, but visual evidence of these smaller mounds has long since disappeared.

### Building the Mound

The builders of these flat-topped mounds are called Mississippians, named for the concentration of their villages and mounds in the Mississippi River Valley.

Imagine groups of people walking with empty baskets, looking for the perfect location to collect soil for building the mounds. Once found, they may have used digging sticks or their own two hands to collect soil, load up their

baskets, and walk back to their village. Baskets would have been emptied, soil stomped down, and the process repeated over and over again to create a mound that was 35 feet high. How many people, how many hours, days, or even years of labor were put into creating this mound?

There are many mysteries that remain regarding mound construction.

### Hernando de Soto and Emerald Mound

When explorer Hernando de Soto passed through the southeastern quarter of North America in the 1540s, the American Indians comprising the Mississippian culture were still numerous and powerful. We know the temple mounds were still in use, because Spanish horsemen documented riding up to their flat tops. When the French came to the area around 1700, the Natchez people and other local cultures still followed the traditional Mississippian way of life.

Nearly all the villages and ceremonial centers that de Soto's men had seen were abandoned by the late 1600s. The rapid decline of the Mississippian culture was likely the result of several factors including disease introduced by de Soto and his men, the intrusion of Europeans on these communities, and internal strife resulting from the disintegration of their social order. The people did not disappear, but adapted to deal with the population loss.

### Archeology at Emerald Mound



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The first archaeological excavations at Emerald Mound occurred in 1838 with periodic investigations continuing until 1972. Through these excavations, we are able to learn more about the people who built the mounds. In the mid 20th century, natural erosion of the secondary mounds became such a problem that the uppermost platform slopes were stabilized by restoring and sodding the surface. Emerald Mound was turned over to the National Park

Service in 1950, and in 1989 it was designated a National Historic Landmark.

The mound first appears in travel and study accounts in 1801; during the 19th century it was known as the Seltzertown site, named after a nearby town that has since disappeared. It acquired the current name from Emerald Plantation, on which property the site was located in the 1850s.

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## Mississippian Culture

The people who built Emerald Mound were part of a widespread American Indian population residing in the Mississippi Valley and the Southeast United States in the centuries immediately preceding the arrival of the Europeans. The Mississippians were divided into many groups, or communities, but still shared a common way of life that is reflected in the remnants of pottery and other artifacts they left behind.

The Mississippians were skillful farmers, producing corn, beans, and squash to feed large populations. Their crops were supplemented with wild game, fish, roots, nuts and berries. They constructed homes of wood and reed, usually with clay-plastered walls and thatched roofs. They were arranged in both compact villages and as outlying hamlets.

They shared the fruits of their labors among the group, and developed a high level of social and political organization—as would have been

required to accomplish major feats such as mound building.

The people produced a wide variety of decorated pottery and devised specialized tools and weapons from hardstone, shell, bone, and wood. They wove cloth and tanned leather; they had more leisure time than their hunter-and-gatherer ancestors. For items not available from their own environment, they traded with distant people. They obtained items such as shells from the Gulf of Mexico and copper from the region near Lake Superior.

As the Mississippian society continued to change due to internal and external strife, the residents were forced to adapt. The Mississippians did not disappear, but became the tribes of the Southeast that we know today, including, but not limited to, the Chickasaw Nation, the Choctaw of Oklahoma, and the Mississippi Band of the Choctaw.

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## Social Significance of the Mounds

The villages of the Mississippians are marked by flat-topped earthen mounds that are scattered throughout the Mississippi Valley and the Southeast. Sometimes a single large mound dominated the village or ceremonial center. More often, the mounds were arranged around a rectangular plaza. At Emerald Mound, however, the village ceremonial center was on top of the mound. There is evidence of a village site near the mound that was destroyed by cultivation. More than a dozen mound groups are located within 25 miles of Emerald Mound.

The mounds of the Mississippians were used for burials, temples and ceremonial structures. Archeologists believe the mounds were the setting for elaborate civic processions, ceremonial dances, and intricate and solemn religious rituals.

Though there are many mysteries that surround Emerald Mound, archeologists are able to put together the pieces to learn about the early residents of the area.

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## Your Visit to Emerald Mound

Emerald Mound is open from sunrise to sunset every day. Please respect the ceremonial origin of the mound by refraining from recreational activities, including ball games and kite flying. There is an established trail that allows you to climb to the top of the mound and enjoy a view of the countryside, just as early residents of the area did.

Please remember, it is a violation of federal law to disturb or remove any artifact from park lands.

Additional information can be obtained by visiting [www.nps.gov/natr](http://www.nps.gov/natr), or calling the Natchez Trace Parkway Visitor Center at 1-800-305-7417.



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Today, an established trail allows you to walk to the top of Emerald Mound at milepost 10.3.