

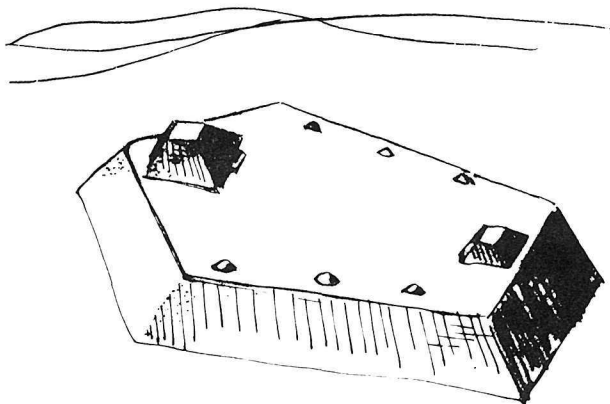
# Natchez Trace Parkway

Mississippi, Alabama, and Tennessee

National Park Service/U.S. Department of the Interior

## EMERALD MOUND

Located about 10 miles northeast of Natchez, Mississippi, Emerald Mound is the second largest mound in the United States, surpassed only in size by Monk's Mound near Cahokia, Illinois. Built and used during the period A.D. 1250 to A.D. 1600, this 35 foot high mound covers 8 acres and measures 770 feet by 435 feet at its base. Two secondary mounds sit atop the primary mound. The larger one at the west end measures 190 feet by 160 feet by 30 feet high. Archeological investigations also suggest there were at least four and possibly six smaller mounds located along the sides of the primary mound. Visual evidence of these smaller mounds has long since disappeared.



The people who built Emerald Mound were part of a wide-spread Indian population residing in the Lower Mississippi Valley and the adjacent Southeast in the centuries immediately preceding the coming of the Europeans. Divided into many groups and speaking different languages, they still shared a common way of life. The builders of these flat-topped mounds are referred to as Mississippians - named not for the State of Mississippi, but for the concentration of their villages and mounds in the Mississippi River Valley. Archeologists have determined Emerald Mound was built by the ancestors of the Natchez.

The Mississippians were skillful farmers, producing enough corn, beans, and squash to feed a large population. Their crops were supplemented with wild game, fish, roots, nuts and berries. They constructed their homes of wood and reed, usually with clay-plastered walls and thatched roofs. They produced a wide variety of decorated pottery and devised specialized tools and weapons from the materials at hand - stone, shell, bone, and wood.

The Mississippians lived in both com-

pact villages and outlying hamlets. They shared the fruits of their labors among the group, and developed a high level of social and political organization. People with special skills produced decorative and utilitarian objects for use by the society.

They wove cloth, tanned leather, and had more leisure time than the hunters and gatherers who were their ancestors. For items not available from their environment, they traded with other societies for shells from the Gulf of Mexico and copper from the region of Lake Superior.

The villages of the Mississippians are marked by flat-topped earthen mounds, which are scattered throughout the Mississippi Valley and the Southeast. Sometimes, as in the case of Emerald Mound, a single large mound marked the village or ceremonial center. More often the mounds occurred in groups, arranged around a rectangular plaza area. More than a dozen mound groups are located within 25 miles of Emerald Mound.

Unlike the smaller and earlier mounds which were constructed to cover tombs and burials, the mounds of the Mississippians were built to support temples and ceremonial structures. On important occasions they were the scenes of elaborate civic processions, ceremonial dances, and intricate and solemn religious rituals.

The builders of Emerald Mound were not a primitive people. The construction of

ceremonial mounds of such great magnitude implies that the Mississippians had a complex way of life. Such a large scale of construction activity required leadership and an efficient organization to direct the work.

When DeSoto passed through the Southeast in the 1540's the Mississippians were still numerous and powerful. The flat-topped temple mounds were still in use. Spanish horsemen mentioned riding to their tops. When the French came to the area around 1700, only the Natchez were still following the old Mississippian way of life. Nearly all of the villages and ceremonial centers seen by DeSoto's men had been abandoned.

What happened to the thousands of people, thickly scattered villages, and great ceremonial centers that DeSoto saw? This rapid decline was caused by several factors: disease introduced by the DeSoto party, the arrival of new, more vigorous groups which drove the disease weakened Mississippians out, and internal strife.

In any case, the life-style of the Mississippians has long since disappeared. All that is left today are the physical remains of their villages, their tools, and their mounds. The long term preservation of these items provides us with the only link we have to the builders of Emerald Mound and the other Mississippian mounds.