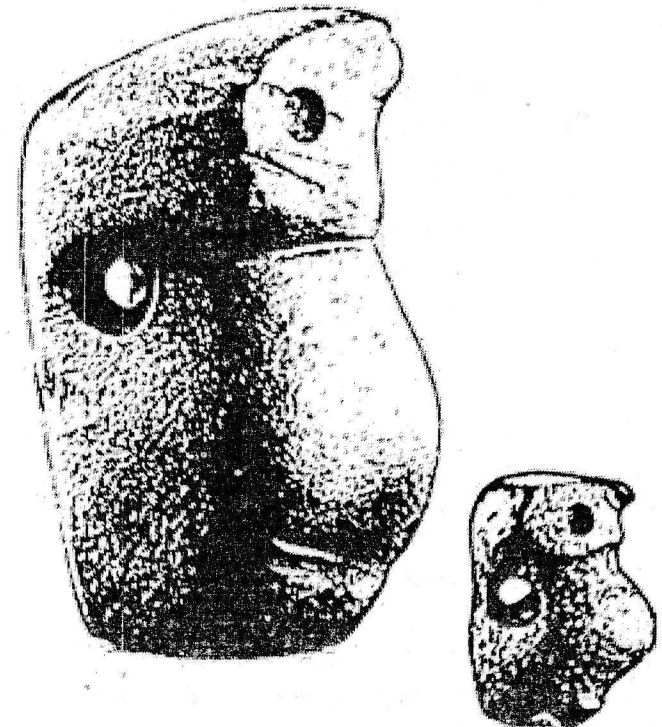


Driving Guide

Poverty Point World Heritage Site

Epps, Louisiana



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Welcome to the Poverty Point World Heritage Site! We want you to enjoy your visit and be amazed at this remarkable prehistoric earthwork, considered by many to be “the New York City of its day.” **Be certain to keep your vehicle on the paved road at all times and do not exceed the 15 miles per hour speed limit. Thank you.**

INTRODUCTION

Many countries have archaeological sites that provide a tantalizing glimpse into the human past. These sites include the Lascaux cave in France, Stonehenge in England, and the pyramids of Egypt. Here in Louisiana, the Poverty Point World Heritage Site also offers a unique view into human prehistory.

Around 1650 B.C., American Indians began to build the massive earthwork complex of mounds and ridges that today make up the Poverty Point World Heritage Site. These ancient builders had no wheelbarrows, wagons, or pack animals to move the dirt; they only had baskets, simple tools, and their own labor. The level of organization needed to build the earthworks in this environment was exceptional for a group that did not practice agriculture – they were hunters and gatherers. Because there was no naturally occurring stone around Poverty Point, the inhabitants got these materials through trade or travel to the Appalachian Mountains, the Midwest, and beyond. Without horses or cars, the Poverty Point people likely used the rivers as their transportation system to move tons of stone to northeast Louisiana to make into tools and ornaments.

We don't know what the American Indians who built these earthworks called this place. Poverty Point was the name of the historic plantation established at this location by 1850.

DRIVING TOUR

To begin the tour, drive to the park entrance on Highway 577. Look both ways and proceed directly across the highway. The white numbers painted on the driving trail correspond to the numbered

Stations in this guide and the numbered Stations on the trail guide map.

STATION 1 - THE PLAZA

From Station 1, you can see the impressive size of the entire Poverty Point earthwork complex. The outside edge of the 43-acre plaza is defined by the taller grass of the innermost C-shaped ridge (Ridge 1). The open plaza area was important to the Poverty Point people. It was an ideal location for social events such as ceremonies, games, or trade activities. Archaeologists discovered substantial evidence of prehistoric landscaping in the plaza. The American Indian builders filled gullies and raised low areas with basket-loads of soil.

Through magnetic gradiometry investigations, archaeologists located about forty circular patterns – two of which (one ahead and the other to your left) are marked by white cylinders. The circles range from 60 feet to 200 feet in diameter. Excavations indicate the circles were formed by large wooden posts set in the ground by the Poverty Point people. We do not yet know the purpose of these circles of posts.

STATION 2 - MOUND E

This flat-topped mound (located ahead and to your left, about 330 feet from the road) is nearly 13 feet in height and 300 by 360 feet at the base. Mound E was built as a series of three flat-topped platforms. The topsoil was scraped from the original ground surface before constructing the first platform. Such a “clean start” was a common practice for moundbuilders of the Lower Mississippi Valley.

Archaeologists did not recover any organic materials from Mound E to obtain a radiocarbon date. However, soil development analysis indicates that Mound E was likely constructed in the early part of the Poverty Point culture occupation that extended from 1700 to 1100 BC. The purpose of Mound E is unknown. Archaeologists found no evidence for houses or other activities on the flat surfaces of the three mound platforms.

STATION 3 - MOUND A

You may pull your vehicle to the side and park at Station 3. Feel free to follow the pathway to the right end of Mound A and climb to the top of the mound. You must remain on the wooden walkway when climbing to the top of Mound A.

Constructed around 1350 B.C., Mound A today is 72 feet tall. The base of Mound A measures 710 feet in length (east to west) and 660 feet in width (north to south) and contains about 390,000 tons of dirt - placed basketload by basketload by the American Indians as they built this massive feature. The complete construction of Mound A contains about 15.5 million 50-pound basketloads of soil! Mound A is the largest mound built by American Indians at Poverty Point or at any earlier time in North American prehistory. Mound A remained the largest earthen construction in North America for the next 2,000 years.

Mound A was built in three distinct stages: 1) the cone or the tall ridge on the western side; 2) the low, flat platform on the east side; and 3) a ramp to connect the platform and cone. Archaeological excavation and core samples indicate Mound A was built quickly, perhaps in 90 days!

In the 1950s, archaeologist James Ford suggested that Mound A is shaped like a bird in flight. Ford envisioned the north-south extensions as the wings and the eastward extending platform as the tail. Today, Mound A is sometimes referred to as the "Bird Effigy Mound." We do not know if a bird form was the builders' intent. However, birds are often represented in American Indian art of the period.

Retrace your steps back down Mound A and return to your vehicle to continue your tour.

STATION 4 - BORROW AREA

Notice how the ground surface on your right is slightly lower, creating a depression. The soils in this area were "borrowed" or removed, probably to build Mound A or other parts of the Poverty Point earthworks. Soil cores show that up to six feet of the natural soils (the A, E, and B horizons) were removed. These types of naturally occurring soils are contained in the constructed earthworks at Poverty Point.

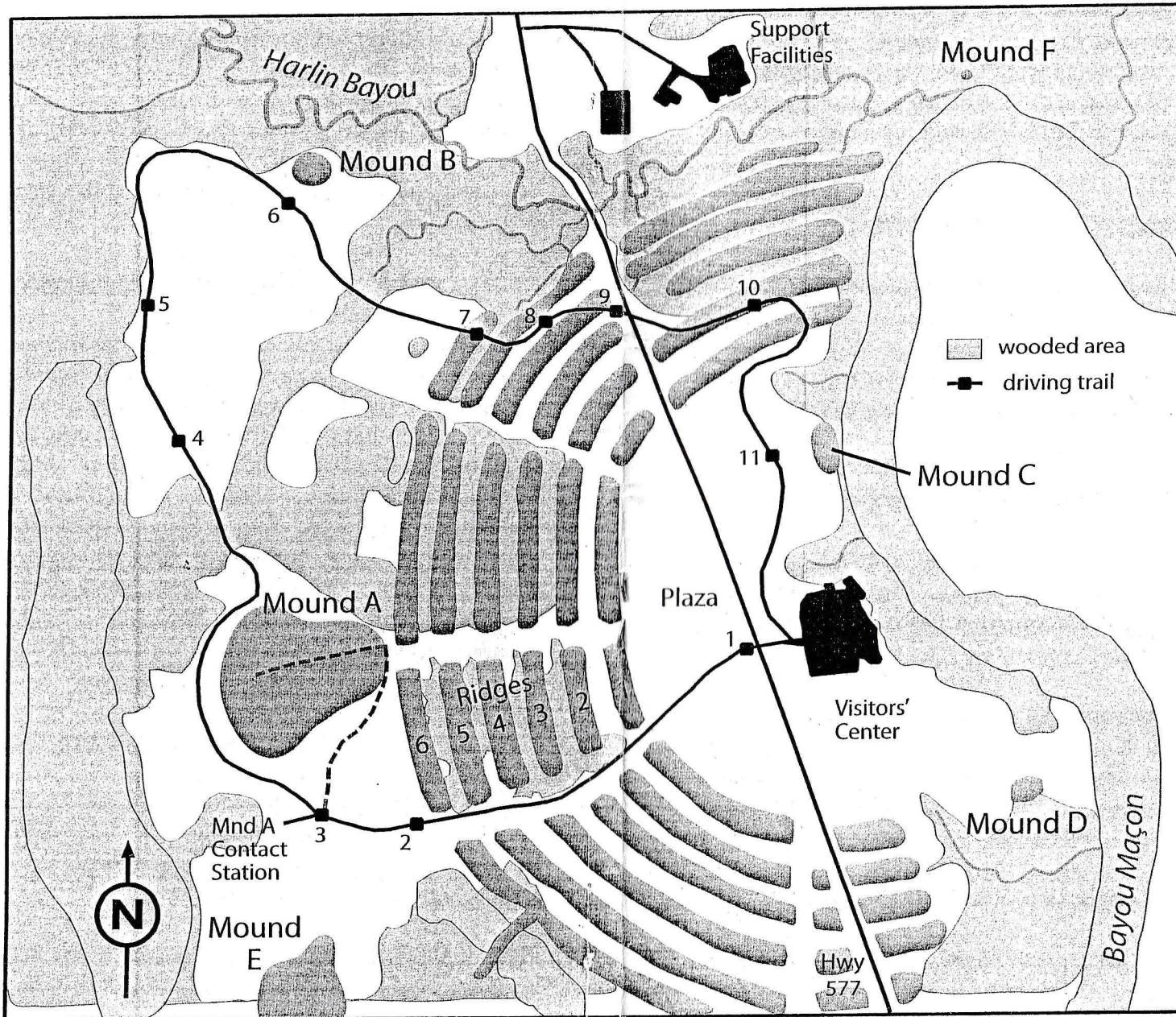
STATION 5 - MOUND B FIELD

Little is known about how this open field was used in prehistory. A few spear point types that date to the time before the Poverty Point people were found in this area. Thus, Mound B Field may be a site location that pre-dates the Poverty Point people. For several thousand years prior to the construction of the Poverty Point earthworks, small groups of hunter-gatherers roamed Macon Ridge. The Poverty-Point-aged artifacts found in the Mound B Field are few in number and seem to represent only part of the entire tool kit. As well, there are no dense middens (concentrations of garbage) like found at other locations of the Poverty Point culture that indicate extended occupations. The logs in the center of the Field are part of a fire ring used during our evening programs.

STATION 6 - MOUND B

Mound B is the oldest earthwork at Poverty Point. Today, Mound B measures about 20 feet in height with a base diameter of 180 feet. In prehistory, Mound B had a conical form, but it was altered by archaeological excavations in the 1950s.

Like Mound E, the topsoil was removed as the first step in Mound B's construction. Next, a thin layer of dark yellowish-brown and gray silt loam was placed on the "clean" surface. On top of that was a layer of fine, powdery, gray silt. Charcoal from the gray silt layer was dated by archaeologists to 1650 B.C. Next, three flat-topped



This Driving Guide contains information about each of the numbered markers on the above map of the Poverty Point World Heritage Site.

platforms were built that reached a height of 14 feet. The surfaces of these platforms contained fire pits and possible postholes – all evidence that activities took place on the mound. Archaeologists recorded impressions and stains from woven baskets and possible skin containers used to transport the dirt that formed the mound. The mound's cone shape was formed during the capping event or final construction stage.

STATION 7 - NATURE WATCH

While crossing the gully ahead, keep your eyes open for local wildlife. Sightings of snakes, white-tailed deer, armadillos, raccoons, and squirrels are common. Louisiana black bears have also been seen in the area. Depending on the time of year, you can see migratory birds such as Indigo Buntings, Purple Martins, Bald Eagles, or Mississippi Kites.

STATION 8 - NORTHWEST RIDGES

To your right, notice the wave-like appearance of ridges and swales in this northwest section of the earthwork. These ridges are still two to three feet in height after more than 100 years of agricultural activities, such as plowing.

Notice the stalk-like plants growing along the ditches and low areas on the side of the road in this area. This "switch cane" was used by the Poverty Point people for house construction and for making split-cane baskets. Later in prehistory, Native Americans made arrows using switch cane.

STATION 9 - HIGHWAY 577 & HARLIN BAYOU

The original road-bed for what is now Highway 577 was constructed in the early 1900s. Highway 577 started out as a dirt road, later was graveled, and finally paved as the highway you see today. To the left of the stop sign, a bridge crosses over Harlin Bayou. The predominant soil on the Macon Ridge landform is a silt-loam that has formed in

loess that is easily eroded by flowing water. Harlin Bayou has cut a deep gully into the land where it passes before draining into Bayou Maçon. The gully has destroyed the outermost ridge, Ridge Six, in the North Sector.

STATION 10 - NORTH RIDGES

To the left, in the wooded area, is a well-preserved section of the ridge system. Archaeological excavations revealed eight feet of basket-loaded earth beneath some of the ridges in this area. This basket-loading shows that the Poverty Point people filled a large depression before building the ridges.

The American Indians undoubtedly built houses and conducted many activities on the ridges. Archaeological evidence for these activities is the presence of hearths, cooking pits, and postholes, along with an abundance of artifacts, including the ubiquitous fired-earth cooking objects known as "Poverty Point Objects." The soils along the ridge edges are black because of a high organic and charcoal content that is consistent with food preparation. The combined ridge segments at Poverty Point equal about six miles of living area. If a structure were placed every 50 feet, over 600 houses could be spaced along the ridges, providing residences for a considerable population.

STATION 11 - MOUND C

The raised area to your left is Mound C which today is 260 feet long by 80 feet wide. Part of the width has eroded into Bayou Maçon since Mound C's prehistoric construction. Today, Mound C appears to be six feet in height, but the mound's actual base is about two feet lower than the current adjacent ground surface. The mound wasn't built in a hole - instead dirt was added to raise the level of the plaza next to the mound. Mound C may have been originally loaf-shaped, but that form is altered by a Historic Era road that extended through the mound's length.

Mound C is the only earthen feature located in the Poverty Point

plaza. Excavations into Mound C revealed up to sixteen thin surfaces or "floors" of different colored and textured soils. Some of the surfaces contained artifacts and features such as hearths, pits, and postholes. Like Mound B, the final construction stage of Mound C was the placement of a thick cap of soil over the mound.

Radiocarbon dates for the construction of Mound C are consistent with a Poverty Point occupation.

CONCLUSION

Numerous earthwork constructions in Louisiana date back to the Middle Archaic period, approximately 2,000 years prior to Poverty Point. However, the Poverty Point complex stands out as the first truly monumental earthen construction north of Mexico. The Poverty Point site also represents the work of a large and organized community with a population that likely numbered from several hundred to a few thousand people. Such a community is remarkable for a hunter-gatherer society. Poverty Point was abandoned around 1100 B.C., possibly because of climate change that caused severe flooding in the lower Mississippi Valley. Flooding would have disrupted the lifeways of Poverty Point people who depended on the rivers for transportation and on the floodplain environment for much of their food. With the abandonment of Poverty Point, earthen mounds were not built until three hundred years later in Louisiana and, even then, on a much smaller scale. Major mound construction did not take place again in Louisiana until the Marksville period in the second century A.D. However, sites comparable to Poverty Point in both size and complexity were not built again for another 2,000 years during the Mississippian period.

If you have any questions about the Poverty Point World Heritage Site, or if you would like more information, please stop by the museum and the staff will be happy to assist you.

MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE POVERTY POINT WORLD HERITAGE SITE

Books

Ellerbe, Jenny and Diana Greenlee. 2014. *Poverty Point: Revealing the Forgotten City*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.

Gibson, Jon. 2000. *The Ancient Mounds of Poverty Point: Place of Rings*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

Gibson, Jon. 1999. *Poverty Point: A Terminal Archaic Culture of the Lower Mississippi Valley*, 2nd edition. Virtual book available online at <http://www.crt.state.la.us/Assets/OCD/archaeology/discoverarchaeology/virtual-books/Poverty-Point.pdf>

Web Sites

Louisiana Division of Archaeology
<http://www.crt.la.gov/archaeology/>

Louisiana Office of State Parks
www.lastateparks.com

Poverty Point World Heritage Site
povertypoint.us

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