



The Mudcat

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Mississippi Mounds

Throughout Mississippi there are large man made hills called **mounds**.

These mounds were built by Native Americans hundreds and even thousands of years ago. There are three types of mounds: burial, ceremonial, and effigy. Burial mounds are usually shaped like cones and used to bury the dead. Ceremonial mounds are flat on top because this is where Native Americans put important buildings, such as temples and the homes of very important tribesmen such as the chief. Effigy mounds look like animals or geometric shapes.

There are thousands of mounds in the United States, but the only time European explorers witnessed the Native Americans using them was during the early 1700s at the Grand Village of the Natchez Indians. There, the Europeans noted that the most important person of the tribe, the chief, lived on the highest mound, while the temple,



Winterville Mounds, Greenville. MDAH Museum Division Education.

the center of religious activity, was on the mound directly across from him. During New Moons and other religiously significant events, the Natchez would gather from nearby mounds to celebrate at the temple.

It took the manpower of entire communities of Native Americans to build these mounds. First, they leveled the area to build on, often bringing in soil to flatten it. Next, they dug dirt with their hands and with sticks and used baskets to move the earth. Then they stamped

the earth down with their feet until over time a mound was constructed. As more Europeans came to the New World, the Native American population began to decline and their mound sites were abandoned. Many mounds were destroyed by farmers plowing the land for farming or to use for grazing livestock. But some, like those at the Grand Village of the Natchez, Winterville Mounds in Greenville, and Emerald Mound along the Natchez Trace have survived and can be visited today.

Mounds are Sacred Sites

In the Choctaw language, Nanih Waiya means “leaning hill.” It is unknown exactly when the mound was constructed, but by the 18th century the mound had grown in importance to the Choctaw people who believe that the mound gave birth to the tribe. According to one origin legend, the first Choctaw people left the underworld through the mound and rested on its slopes before settling the area.

Today the mound is still the heart of the Choctaw people and considered **sacred**. After losing the mound to the U.S. government in 1830, the site was returned to the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians on August 18, 2008. The Choctaw declared August 18 a tribal holiday dedicated to the telling and performance of dances and stories about the tribe’s history, a holiday that is still celebrated today.

What is archaeology?

People today are fascinated by the lives of people who lived hundreds and even thousands of years ago. The scientific study of historic or prehistoric peoples and their cultures is called **archaeology**. **Archaeologists** travel all over the world to conduct digs that unearth the remains of ancient civilizations. Many of the remains found are simply prehis-

toric garbage dumps but they tell archaeologists what ancient people ate, wore, and how they lived on a daily basis, making them very important. Other digs, such as those in Egypt, reveal elaborate and costly burial monuments. **Artifacts** from these digs, whether broken pots and buttons or royal jewels can be seen in museums around the world.

Artifacts



Many artifacts have been found at Winterville Mounds in Greenville, including broken pieces of pottery that have been pieced back together. Some of them were simple, leading archaeologists to believe that they were for everyday use. But others were highly decorative and probably used for ceremonies or special events. MDAH Museum Division, Winterville Mounds.

The three glass trade beads above date from between 1492 and 1560. Originally from Europe, they are typical of those brought by Hernando de Soto to the Southeast and traded by the European explorers to the Native Americans. Shown enlarged here, the circular beads are approximately 3/16 inch in diameter while the rectangular bead is 1/4 inch wide and 1 3/4 inches in length. MDAH Museum Division Collections.

Descendants of the Mound Builders

It was the Mississippi Native Americans who built the mounds seen today throughout the state of Mississippi. That group no longer exists but its **descendants** do and include the modern-day Native American tribes of the Chickasaw and Choctaw.



Choctaw tribal celebration. MDAH Archives and Records Services.

Today the Choctaw tribe is the only federally-recognized Native American tribe in the state of Mississippi. They have 10,000 members and hold over 35,000 acres across ten counties. The Choctaws maintain their own schools, hospitals, and courts, and have worked hard to promote economic development on tribal lands. This has included creating new businesses, shopping centers, and tourist attractions that provide jobs and career opportunities for tribal members.

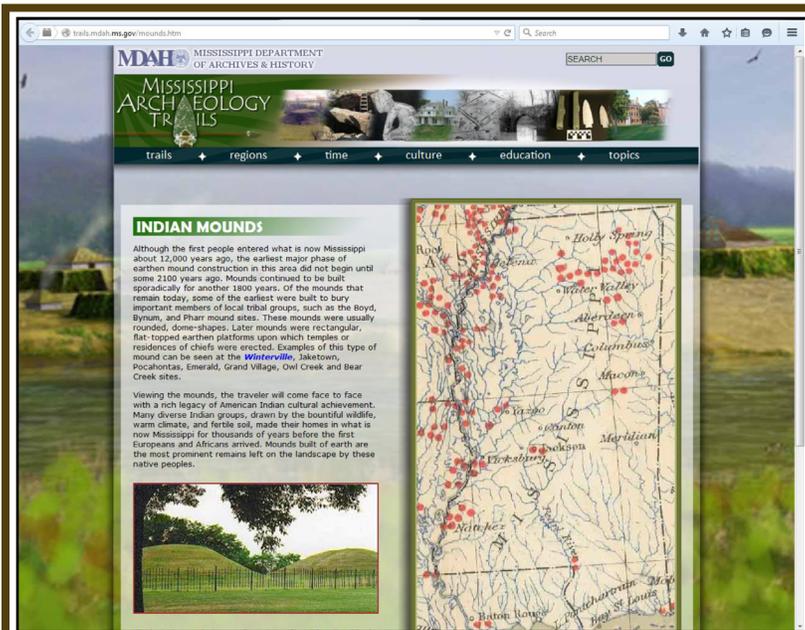


Chickasaw tribal celebration. MDAH Museum Division, Winterville Mounds.

In the 1830s, the U.S. government forcibly removed many of the Native Americans east of the Mississippi to the west in order to make room for white settlers. The Choctaw tribe split, leaving some members in Mississippi while others left for Oklahoma. The entire Chickasaw tribe was removed to Oklahoma. Today the Oklahoma Chickasaw maintain their vibrant culture and have created a solid economic base to support tribal members.

Investigate More

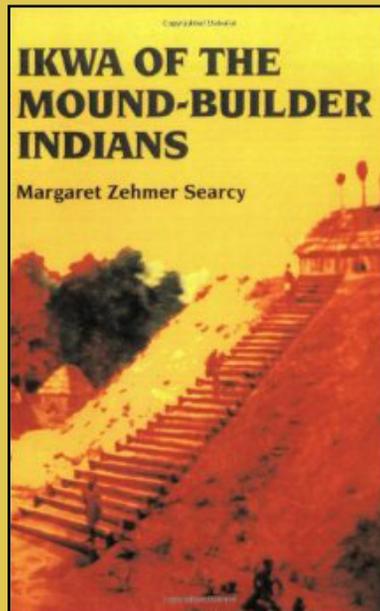
There are mounds all over Mississippi for you to visit and explore!



Go on a Mississippi mound tour without even leaving your computer screen! Visit <http://trails.mdah.ms.gov/htm> and take an interactive virtual tour of the most significant mounds throughout the state.

Learn more about how to become an archaeologist from the Mississippi Archaeological Association. At <http://www.msarchaeology.org/> you can find out how to get involved in archaeology in your local area on a regular basis or just during October's Archaeology Month!

Read a novel about a young Native American girl in the southeast in the days before European colonization. Check out *Ikwa of the Mound-Builder Indians* by Margaret Zehmer Searcy from your local library!



Visit a Mound!

Here are some great choices of mounds you can see – wherever you live in Mississippi!

Emerald Mound: Built by the Mississippian Native Americans around 500 years ago, this mound was a ceremonial center for the surrounding native population. Burials, dances, and religious rituals took place here. It is one of the largest mounds in the United States –over 3,300 school buses could fit inside it!



Winterville Mounds: Twelve mounds are still visible at the Winterville site and the largest is 55 feet high. There are also two plazas where modern Native Americans still play stickball games and hold festivals. The museum helps tell the story of the people who lived there 1,000 years ago.



Learn more about the modern-day descendants of the Mississippian mound builders!

Visit the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians website at <http://www.choctaw.org/> You can read about the culture, traditions, and language of the Choctaw people or make plans to visit a festival, **stickball** game, or the Chahta Immi Cultural Center in Pearl River.

Show What You Know!

Vocabulary

archaeology: the scientific study of historic or prehistoric peoples and their cultures by analysis of their artifacts, inscriptions, monuments, and other such remains.

archaeologist: a person who specializes in the study of archaeology.

artifact: an object made and used by humans.

descendant: the offspring of a specific person or group of people.

mound: large, man-made hills built by the Mississippian Native Americans beginning around 2,100 years ago.

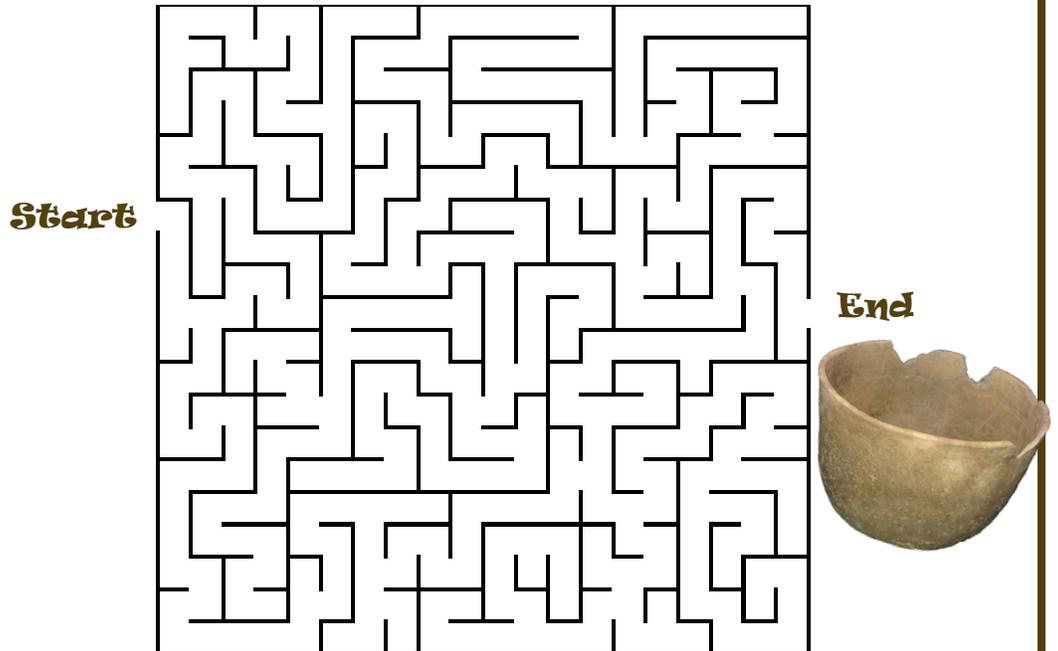
sacred: something or someone that is considered holy.

stickball: a traditional Native American game where players move a ball across a field with homemade sticks.

Modern-day lacrosse is based on it.

Mound Maze

Imagine you're an archaeologist studying mounds in Mississippi. You have mapped out your dig site, but now you must thread your way through a maze of history before you can discover an artifact!



Check Your Knowledge!

What is the name of the scientific study of historic people and their cultures?

What Native American game is lacrosse based on?

What is the name of the sacred Choctaw mound in Mississippi?

Create a Catfish Competition

How would you like to see a catfish of your own creation on the cover of the *Mudcat*? If you're an artist — or even if you're not — **craft a cool catfish graphic**, send it in to the *Mudcat*, and **YOUR catfish could win a coveted spot on the cover** of the next issue! Send all entries via mail or email to:

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Congratulations
to Bonnie G. from
Jackson for her
winning *Mudcat*!