

Indian Mounds



Large Flat-Topped Mounds in Cultivated Field

What Are Indian Mounds?

Indian mounds are the visible testament of the first Mississippians. Mounds are planned earthen architecture made by Native American people for a variety of reasons including ceremonial and domestic uses.

Many people today believe that any elevated area with artifacts is an Indian mound, but actual mounds only make up a small fraction of the known archaeological sites in Mississippi.

How Were Mounds Made?

Construction of mounds was accomplished by heaping basket loads of soil and other materials onto natural land surfaces. Some mounds were built in multiple construction stages over long periods of time and others were built quickly in single episodes.

Where Are Mounds Found?

Mounds are found in nearly every county in Mississippi, but they are most common in the Delta counties and along major waterways. Mounds tend to be located on high natural levees or on terraces adjacent to floodplains, but can also be found in upland areas—especially in the Loess Bluffs region.

Nearly all mounds are located on private land. Therefore, landowner cooperation is crucial for their long-term preservation.

How Old are Mounds?

Indians first built mounds in the Lower Mississippi Valley by about 4000 B.C. Widespread construction of mounds, however, began around 100 B.C. Mounds continued to be built for another 1,800 years until around A.D. 1700.

Characteristics:

- ◆ Conical Mounds
 - Rounded top
 - Usually small 3-10 feet tall
 - 50-100 feet diameter
 - Burial often primary purpose
 - Built during most time periods
- ◆ Rectangular Platform Mounds
 - Flat-topped pyramid
 - Often large, 15-60 feet tall covering 0.1 to several acres
 - Platform for buildings primary purpose
 - Often burial location of important individuals
 - 100 B.C.—A.D. 1700
- ◆ Mounds can stand alone or be in groups of 20 or more.
- ◆ Mounds can be associated with large villages, or have little evidence of habitation.
- ◆ About 1,100 mound sites are recorded in Mississippi. (There are about 26,000 archaeological sites.)



Conical Mound in Grass Cover



How Were Mounds Used?

The purpose of some of the most ancient mounds is still shrouded in mystery, although it has been proposed that they possibly functioned as territorial markers.

People buried their dead in some of the mounds, while at other sites great temples were built atop the mounds.

The shape and size of the mound can give clues to its intended purpose. Conical mounds were frequently constructed primarily for mortuary purposes. Rectangular, flat-topped mounds were primarily built as a platform for a building such as a temple or residence for a chief. Many later mounds were used to bury important people.

Mounds are often believed to have been used to escape flooding. However, mounds are typically located on high natural levees or terraces above the flood plains, and many mounds were constructed in upland areas where flooding would not be a concern.

Why Are Mounds Important?

Mounds are irreplaceable resources. Indian mounds and the archaeological deposits they contain are the only evidence we have for most of Mississippi's human history.

Each mound has a story to tell. Careful archaeological investigations at mounds provide valuable information about how people lived in the past.

Mounds provide many Native American people today with an important link to their culture and their past. Mounds that contain burials are particularly significant.

Threats To Mounds

Development spreading into rural areas and some agricultural practices are the main threats to mounds. Deliberate destruction by looting is also a serious problem.

However, a lack of awareness is perhaps the most serious threat to the survival of many mounds. Because mounds lack the visual impact of other historic monuments, such as the cliff dwellings in the Southwest or antebellum homes, many people are unaware of why they are important.

Are Indian Mounds Protected?

Protection of Indian mounds in Mississippi primarily relies on voluntary stewardship. State burial laws do provide some protection for mounds on private land by making it illegal to desecrate a cemetery or open graves.

Mounds on State and Federal property are protected by a number of laws and regulations. Severe penalties are imposed for illegal digging or removal of artifacts on public lands.



Destruction of the Blaine Mound, Hinds County

Best Management Practices

Effective resource management comes from understanding the values of the mounds and ensuring that any decision tries to balance the effects of any management action so that negative effects are minimized and positive effects are maximized.

Some recommended Best Management Practices for mounds:

- Document mounds located on your property in the State Archaeological Site File.
- Check the mound condition on a regular basis, and take action to stop destabilizing actions such as erosion.
- Contact professionals for help in dealing with your mound.
- Avoid ground disturbing activities and frequent traffic (pedestrian, vehicles and livestock) on mounds.
- Remove mounds from cultivation. Consider establishing permanent grass cover on the mound, and create a 30 foot buffer zone around the base of the mound.
- Mounds with tree cover: The possibility of wind thrown trees is a potential concern. Overturned trees can pull up large chunks of soil with the root system causing damage to cultural deposits. Root penetration of trees and scrub can also have a significant impact on archaeological deposits. However, removal of long established trees can be more detrimental to the mound than maintaining the existing cover.
 - Clear small underbrush from mounds. As needed, removal and reduction of scrub growth should be carried out with hand tools during the winter and concentrate on scrub with stems over 1 inch in diameter cutting as near the base as possible.
 - Scrub growth and brush piles can also attract burrowing animals which damage cultural deposits.

For more information contact:

Cultural Resources Specialist
Natural Resources Conservation Service
McCoy Federal Building, Suite 1321
100 W. Capitol Street
Jackson, MS 39269
(601)965-4139
www.ms.nrcs.usda.gov

