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## An ancient outpost on the Mississippi

### The mound complex at Poverty Point is one of the most perplexing archaeological sites in North America.

by Cheré Coen

Between the time the Egyptian Pyramids were constructed and the Mayan temples broke ground, a group of indigenous people planned a community in northeast Louisiana with elaborate precision. Several earthen ridges stretched in a semi-circle facing a wide plaza with various mounds scattered about, and a giant earthen bird in the rear stretched its wings facing west.

Theories abound about Poverty Point near Epps in the Louisiana Delta, but archaeologists can only guess at why these impressive earthworks were established at this 400-acre site. Dated between 1650 and 700 B.C., the village contains six ridges to form a partial octagon, each believed to contain a series of huts serving two to five people, explained Interpreter Ranger Cleon Crockett. At one time, before erosion and cotton farming worked against the archaeological site, the ridges stood five feet high with gullies in between where waste was thrown.

What makes Poverty Point so unique, Crockett explained, is that the people who inhabited the space were hunters and gatherers. For a non-agricultural society to live in such a stationary manner was rare, he said.

“It goes against the theory of hunters and gatherers,” Crockett said. “That makes the historians rewrite the history books and they are rewriting the history books because of Poverty Point.”

One belief is that the Mississippi River ran closer to the village than it does now, and the people of Poverty Point fished and hunted the abundant backwater lakes between the village and the river. The Mississippi has since diverted its flow several miles away, and the chocolate-colored Bayou Macon now skirts the ridges.

In addition to the rows that supported the village, there are various mounds and a large ceremonial



Photo by Cheré Coen

**Interpreter Ranger Cleon Crockett, left, leads a group up the side of the 72-foot-high mound shaped like a bird at Poverty Point.**

bird to the rear. An excavation of “Mound C” found 16 living surfaces and post molds reiterating the theory that Poverty Point was a village.

“We believe that this (Mound C) was where a person of authority lived,” Crockett said. The most impressive aspect of the park is “Mound A,” a massive earthwork shaped like a bird with its wings outstretched. The head has since eroded, but it would have been facing due west, Crockett said.

At its pinnacle, Mound A stands 72-feet high, and beneath the surface lies 17,000 dump-truck loads of pure dirt. It would have taken the native people 10 million to 12 million 50-pound basket loads of dirt to create the bird, Crockett explained.

Another interesting aspect of Poverty Point is the astrological precision of the indigenous people. At nearby Lower Jackson Mound, from the Middle Archaic period around 1500 years earlier, a line can be drawn south to north to slip beneath the bird’s wings and connect with a mound at Poverty Point.

“These people could line these mounds up precisely,” Crockett said. “It’s incredible.”

The cost to visit Poverty Point Historic Site is \$2 per person, free to seniors and young children, and includes a guided tram tour daily at 9:30 a.m., 11 a.m., 12:30 p.m., 2 p.m. and 3:30 p.m. until Oct. 31. The visitor’s center offers an exhibit with relics found on site, in addition to a film.

On May 25 Poverty Point will offer a Memorial Day crafts event where participants will make clay pots and sift sand to recover beads for a necklace. The event is from 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. and participants should bring a lunch.

For those wanting to spend a weekend or longer, Poverty Point Reservoir State Park in nearby Delhi offers camping and RV sites, plus new cabins and lodges along the 2,700-acre man-made lake stocked with bass and crappie. For \$90, fully equipped cabins sleeping eight can be rented directly on the water with wrap-around porches and docking for boats. Lodges sleeping 10 are located nearby in woody areas, some fronting Bayou Macon.

The park includes two boat launches, a marina with boat rentals and plenty of hiking trails through black bear habitat and near the Marsden Mounds, dated between 400 and 1200 A.D.

## If you go

### Poverty Point State Park

(800) 474-0392

### Poverty Point State Historic Area

(888) 926-5492, [lastateparks.com](http://lastateparks.com)

## Did you know?

- There are more than 700 archaeological sites with mounds in Louisiana. Louisiana mounds are among the oldest in the Western Hemisphere, beginning around 4000 B.C.
- The largest earliest mound site identified in Louisiana is the Watson Brake site in northeast Louisiana, constructed about 3000 B.C., created before the first Egyptian pyramid was built.
- Stones from as far away as the Great Lakes were found at Poverty Point.

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