



Alabama Public Television Education

## Moundville Archaeological Park Fact Sheet

### Overview

Moundville is an archaeological site located on the Black Warrior River near Tuscaloosa, Alabama. It was occupied from approximately A.D. 1000 to A.D. 1450 and encompassed a large village and more than 25 earthen mounds. The mounds, created over time by the people who lived there, range from 3 to 57 feet in height. The site was an important political, social, and religious center, second in size and importance only to Cahokia in Illinois.

The people who lived at Moundville were part of the Mississippian Culture. In the eras before the Mississippian, Native Americans in the Southeast generally lived independently in small groups, hunting and gathering for their subsistence. During the Mississippian era, however, communities, often located in river valleys where soil was fertile and water was readily available, people congregated into larger groups. This was made possible in part because of reliable and plentiful food. Specifically, farming became more intensive, especially the cultivation of corn, squash, and beans, called the “three sisters,” although hunting and fishing continued to be sources of food.

Researchers believe that Moundville was the center of an extended community that was led by a powerful chief who demanded tribute from smaller chiefs and outlying settlements. Society was organized by family. Individuals were born into their mother’s clan and inherited their rank through her, although the archaeological record suggests they could also achieve status through their own accomplishments. Archaeologists believe

that the establishment of Moundville was at least in part a response to warfare. People found safety in numbers, and at Moundville, they erected a wooden palisade on three sides of the site. This barrier, made from trees felled nearby, would protect them from attack.

Moundville was a major trade center, and artifacts found there include copper, shell, and stone materials that are not native to the area. The people of Moundville made and used advanced tools. They were noted for the artistry, including pottery and clay or stone pipes made into the shapes of animals or people (effigies). Well-known works from Moundville include the Rattlesnake Disc, which depicts a hand-and-eye design surrounded by horned rattlesnakes and the beautiful Duck Bowl showing the arched neck and head of a wood duck. Scholars believe the designs of these and other objects reflect Mississippian spiritual life and practices. The imagery and symbolism associated with Moundville suggest a sophisticated culture with a complex belief system and traditions.

Although it continued to be an important political and ceremonial site, Moundville began to lose population and decline around A.D. 1350. By the time Hernando De Soto arrived in the 1540s, it was largely abandoned. Archaeologists do not know exactly why the site declined, but ongoing research and analysis of the historical record continues to help scientists and historians pursue answers and gain understanding.

## Quick Facts

Moundville was the largest pre-historic city north of Mexico and has been called the “Big Apple” of its time by National Geographic.

At its height, approximately 1000 people lived within the palisade walls of the site with many more living along the Black Warrior River.

Alabama’s Native American history goes back to the Paleoindian Period more than 10,000 years ago and continues today with nine state recognized tribes. The Poarch Band of Creek Indians are also the state’s federally recognized tribe.

Moundville existed during the Mississippian Period, which ranged from approximately A.D. 800 to A.D. 1600. It was preceded by the Paleoindian Period (approximately 15,000 to 10,500 years before the present), the

Archaic Period (10,500 to about 3,000 years before present), and the Woodland Period (3,000 to about 1,000 years ago).

## For More Information

### Site Webpages

[Moundville Archaeological Park, University of Alabama](#)

### Encyclopedia of Alabama

[Moundville Archaeological Park](#)

### Alabama Legacy Moments

[Moundville](#)

### Discovering Alabama

[Alabama Indigenous Mound Trail](#)

[Moundville Native American Festival](#)

### Images/Video

[Moundville Archaeology and Geography Multimedia](#)

### For More Information/Reading

Moundville, John Blitz (University of Alabama Press, 2008), excellent pocket guide to the site and its history

World of the Southern Indians: Tribes, Leaders, and Customs from Prehistoric Times to the Present, Virginia Pounds Brown and Laurella Owens (NewSouth Books, 2010), reading level ages 8-12

People of the Weeping Eye: Book One of the Moundville Duology (North America's Forgotten Past), W. Michael Gear and Kathleen O'Neal Gear (Tor Books, 2009),

People of the Thunder: Book Two of the Moundville Duology (North America's Forgotten Past), W. Michael Gear and Kathleen O'Neal Gear (Tor Books, 2009),