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Plum Bayou Mounds
Archeological State Park
**Plum Bayou
Trail Guide**



Plum Bayou Trail



NOTICE: To preserve scenic beauty and ecology, fences and warning signs have not been installed in some park locations. Caution and increased supervision of your children and others in your care are required when visiting these areas.

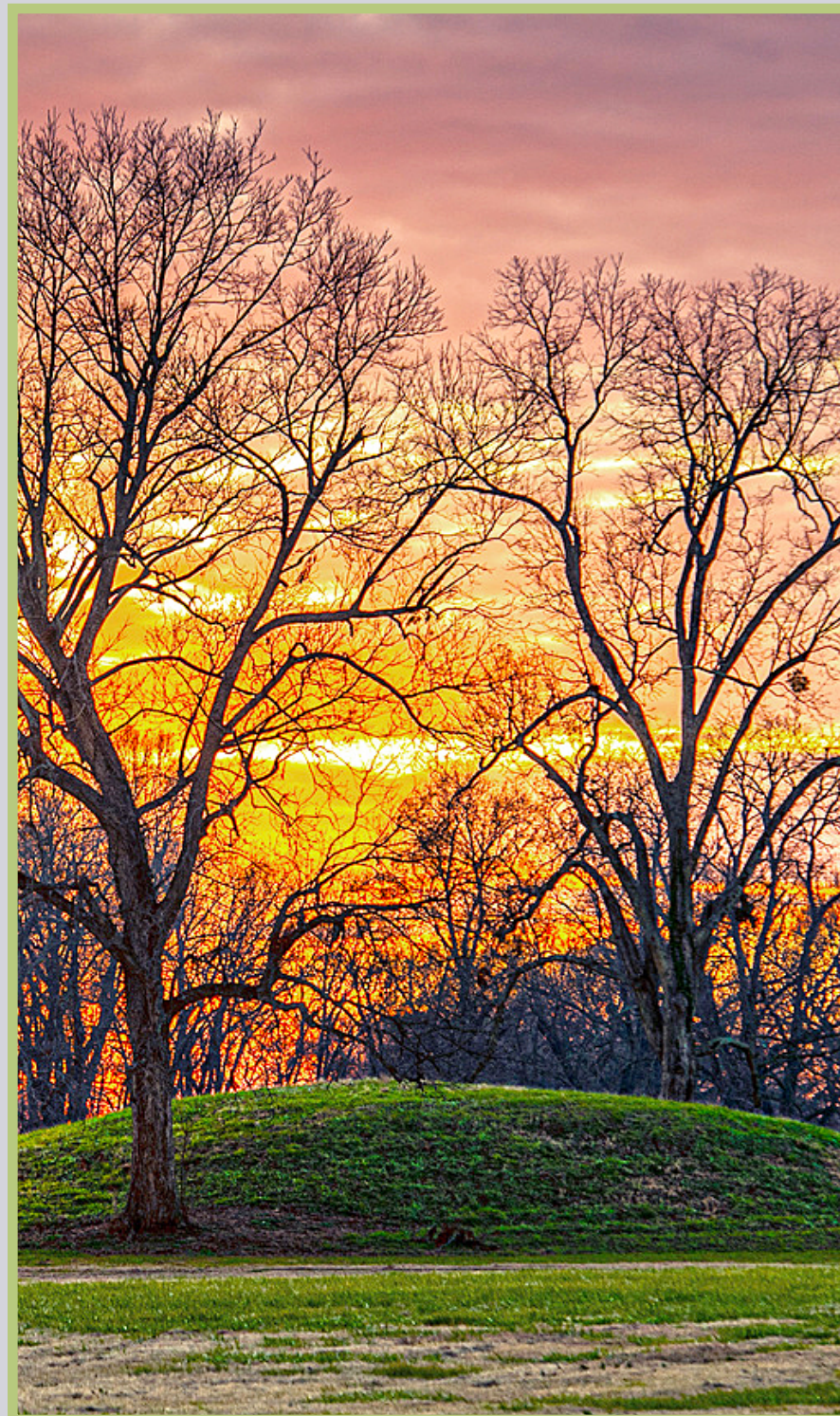
- Park Area
- Earthworks
- Former Earthworks
- Parking
- Plum Bayou Trail
- Knapp Trail
- Visitor Center/
Gift Shop
- Museum
- Wildlife Viewing
- Marker Location
- Restrooms

Map not to scale



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Plum Bayou Mounds Archeological State Park

Welcome to Plum Bayou Mounds Archeological State Park! If you have known us as Toltec Mounds Archeological State Park or have seen that name in other media, the change may have surprised you. The new name became official on November 1, 2022 after conversations between Arkansas State Parks, the Arkansas Archeological Survey, representatives of Arkansas's American Indian groups, and other stakeholders. The name Plum Bayou Mounds Archeological State Park better reflects the distinct culture of the people who built these mounds. The history of the original name Toltec is explained in the text at marker number one.



You are about to embark on a very special tour of this prehistoric American Indian site. The Plum Bayou Trail is just over a mile and a half. Part of this trail overlaps the Knapp Trail, so follow the markers carefully.

In order to preserve the site, it is important that you stay on the trail. As this is a state park, all plants, animals and artifacts are protected by state law. Therefore, do not disturb any of the plants or animals, remove any artifacts, dig the site, or climb any of these mounds. Keep an eye on your children at all times, and pets must be kept on a leash.

Thank you for helping protect this window to our past.

Marker #1

What's in a Name?

Before you begin your journey through this prehistoric site, it may interest you to know that the former name "Toltec Mounds" is actually a misnomer. Gilbert and Mary Knapp, who owned this site from 1848 to 1905, mistakenly thought the mounds were associated with the Toltec people of Mexico. In 1883, this idea was disproved. Investigations by archeologists at that time showed that these mounds had been built by the ancestors of the Southeastern American Indians, not the Toltec culture of Mexico.



Steen, Charlie Photo. (ca. 1950). View of Mound B, old county road, and harvested crops [Photograph]. Arkansas Archeological Survey

Early visitors, more than a century ago, reported that sixteen mounds stood at this site within an earthen embankment wall. Today, eighteen mound locations have been identified. Farming activities have caused considerable destruction to the archeological site, including most of the mounds and a large portion of the embankment wall. In 1975, this land officially became an Arkansas state park, protecting the earthworks from further damage.

Due to a lack of written records, the builders of this site cannot be associated with any modern American Indian tribe. For this reason, the prehistoric people who inhabited this site from approximately A.D. 650 to A. D. 1050 have been named the Plum Bayou culture by archeologists. Plum Bayou refers to the name of a local stream. For unknown reasons, the site was abandoned around A.D. 1050. The Plum Bayou culture grew and flourished at this prehistoric ceremonial center for approximately four hundred years and left mysteries that fascinate us today. Throughout this tour, you will learn more about this ceremonial center and these mysteries.

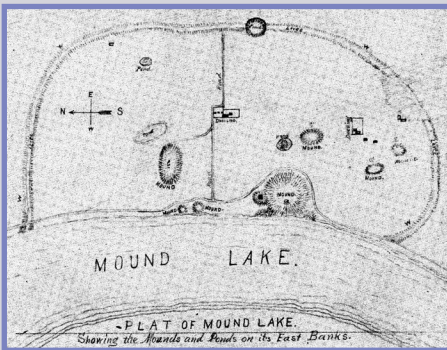
Marker #2

Locating the Mounds



Before you are the remains of this unique ceremonial site. Due to the damage caused by many years of modern farming and plowing, archeologists are still piecing together the mystery of how this site would have appeared when the Plum Bayou culture was thriving. When this land became protected within Arkansas's State Park system, only the locations of the three largest mounds were known. These mounds stand before you. Mound A, the tallest mound in Arkansas, at 49.5 feet, is located between Mound B on the right and Mound C on the left.

Through sketches and written accounts made of this area before it was farmed, archeologists knew that originally there had been more than just the three visible mounds. Using these sketches and accounts, along with aerial photographs and soil sampling, archeologists were able to solve one mystery and determine the locations of the other mounds. In all, archeologists located fifteen additional mounds. These mounds are designated by the red and white letter markers you see on the site.



Site Map Drawing by Henry Jackson Lewis, late 1882 – 1883

Marker #3

The Embankment Wall

Another mystery left by these American Indians is indicated by the white markers you may have seen. These white markers represent the location where the embankment wall would have stood. Near the end of your walk, you will pass by two sections of the remaining embankment wall. Most of the wall was destroyed by plowing, and the ditch was filled. Using the same techniques to locate the destroyed mounds, archeologists were able to determine where the embankment wall originally stood. When the Plum Bayou culture occupied this ceremonial center, the ten-foot high embankment wall and adjacent ditch encircled three sides of the site. The fourth side was, and still is, bordered by an oxbow lake: Mound Lake.

Archeologists have come to think that the embankment wall was built as a boundary marker, not as a defensive wall. Research indicates that this site was a religious gathering center. So, it is thought that the embankment wall was used to indicate the boundary between the inside sacred land and the more secular world outside.

Marker #4

The People at the Site

Archeologists believe only about fifty people lived within the site at any one time. They are thought to have been the religious and civic leaders of the Plum Bayou people and their families. The general population, it is believed, lived in scattered villages and farmsteads in the surrounding area.

Archeologists speculate that several times a year the whole population of the Plum Bayou culture would travel to this site for ceremonies and to renew social and family ties. Looking at what remains of these impressive earthworks, imagine this site overflowing with American Indians – the food, the smells, the games and festivals, the noise.



Deep jar vessel with a flat base found at Mound S

Marker #5

The Plaza

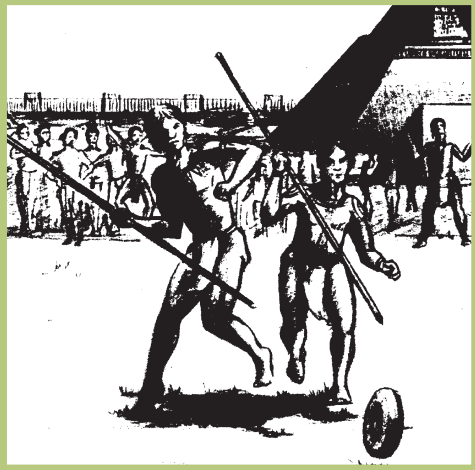


Illustration of Chungke

You have just passed through one of two plaza areas. The plaza, the heart of this ceremonial center, may have been used for dances, festivals, feasts, ceremonies or games.

An American Indian game called “Chungke” was played by many tribes throughout the Southeast and may have been played in this plaza.

Marker #6

Mound G

You are walking alongside the second plaza. It may be difficult to visualize because most of the mounds are not present, but this plaza, like the first one, was surrounded by mounds. In its heyday, Mound G was over 300 feet long and 150 feet wide making it the longest mound on the site. Like all the other mounds, Mound G was created by piling basketful after basketful of dirt in one location. Interestingly enough, through careful examination of what remains of this mound, archeologists determined that this mound was constructed over a long period of time. Rather than building the mound up, the Plum Bayou people added soil to the sides and made it longer and wider. Archeologists also found evidence that a circular structure stood here before the mound was built.



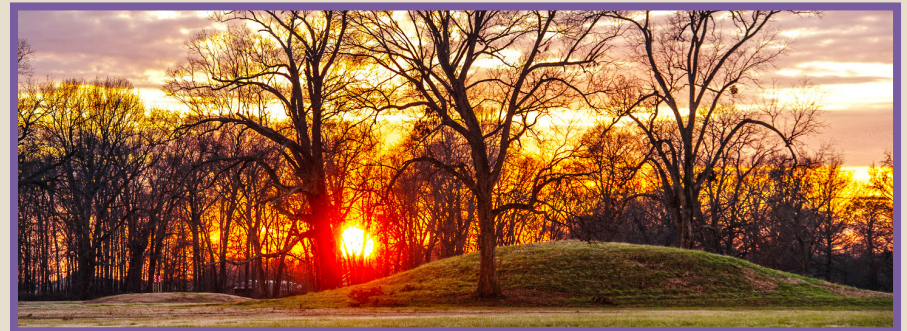
Mound G Artifacts

Marker #7

Mound C

As you walked to this marker, you passed Mound C on your right. The shape of this mound created another mystery for archeologists. As you have probably noticed, the two larger mounds have flat tops. For this reason, they are called platform mounds, and it is believed that residences or temples sat atop them. Mound C, however, has a rounded top. At other mound sites in the Southeastern United States, mounds with rounded tops were often used for burial purposes. Archeologists hypothesized that Mound C was also used for burials.

Through partial excavation of Mound C in the 1960s, archeologists gained evidence in support of their hypothesis. They learned that the mound was constructed by placing the remains of an individual at a single location and then covering them with soil. This was repeated over time, resulting in the low dome-shaped mound you see today. The partial excavation of Mound C helped solve the mystery behind the shape and purpose of this mound.



Without archeology, we would not be able to learn about the people of long ago. However, most people believe that the remains of their ancestors and grave goods must be treated with respect and remain in the earth forever. In recent years, American Indians have protested the digging of remains and artifacts. The 1991 passing of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act now provides a way for American Indians to reclaim remains and special artifacts and have them returned to their tribe or nation. In Arkansas, by way of the 1991 Arkansas Act 753, it is illegal to disturb or excavate human burials. Help protect the cultural heritage of Arkansas. Report any violation or suspected violation you observe to law enforcement.

Marker #8

Mound S

You are standing next to another mound that provided clues to the mystery that is Plum Bayou Mounds. Nearly twenty years ago, Mound S was fully excavated. Later, it was reconstructed to form the low, flat mound you see today. During the excavation, archeologists uncovered a large amount of animal bone, mostly white-tailed deer, as well as an abundance of charred seeds and nuts. In fact, there were more animal remains found in this one mound than could have been consumed by the few people living here. This discovery led archeologists to understand that Mound S was the location of many feasts.

Marker #9

Mound Lake



Mound A

This oxbow lake was part of the Arkansas River 4,000 years ago. Today the Arkansas River is over five miles away. When the Plum Bayou culture was thriving, the river was closer to this site. They would have seen this waterway as you see it today, as an oxbow lake. Over time, rivers and their channels meander back and forth within their floodplain.

This meandering eventually creates

lakes such as this one. This oxbow lake is known as Mound Lake.

Waterways, such as the Arkansas and Mississippi Rivers, were an important part of life for American Indians at this site. It is likely that many of the Plum Bayou people would have used the surrounding waterways to reach the mound site for their ceremonies. Dugout canoes, such as the one in the visitor center, are believed to be the main mode of transportation for these American Indians when they traveled by water. These canoes were made from a variety of trees, including pine and bald cypress. The large trees with the spreading trunks that you see at the edge of the lake are bald cypress.

During excavations, archeologists uncovered fragments of a conch or whelk shell from the Gulf of Mexico as well as copper from the Great Lakes area. This discovery provides another sliver of insight into the mystery of the lives of the Plum Bayou people. The American Indians who lived here had contact and trade with people along the Mississippi River.

Marker #10

The Excavations

During this tour, you have read about excavations that helped solve mysteries at Plum Bayou Mounds. Not only have excavations helped determine the purpose of the embankment wall, the reason for the shape of Mound C, and the feasting location at Mound S, but excavations have also helped shed light on how the mounds were built and the weapons used for hunting.

You are now standing beside Mound B, the second tallest mound here at Plum Bayou Mounds Archeological State Park at 39.5 feet. In 1979, an excavation on the southeastern corner of Mound B was conducted. Through this study, archeologists learned that Mound B was not built all at one time, but in stages. Other excavations showed this to be true of several of the other mounds. At Mound B, three stages were identified by the presence of midden, or trash. Layers of midden typically indicate the location of a residential structure. Residences are believed to have been made of wooden poles and woven mats made of cane.

Excavations indicate that the Plum Bayou people used several types of weapons for hunting but mostly used the bow and arrow.



Stone Artifacts – Knives



Excavation at Mound P in 2010

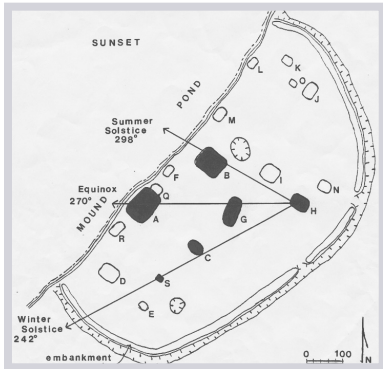
River cane growing nearby was likely used to make shafts for arrows.

Archeologists here have uncovered many stone tools including arrow points, knives, drills, axes, and adzes. The Plum Bayou people commonly used a type of rock called chert collected from river gravel bars to make their stone points. Less commonly, they used novaculite and quartz crystal, found in the Ouachita Mountains. Had excavations never been conducted, most of this information would remain a mystery. Various artifacts found through excavations at this site can be seen in exhibits in the visitor center.

Marker #11

Mound H

On this walk, you have learned that the Plum Bayou people were very concerned about the size and shape of the mounds. In addition, the American Indians at Plum Bayou Mounds were concerned about the placement of these mounds. Some were placed to line up with each other, while others mark the position of the sun at sunrise and sunset on the solstices and equinoxes. The Plum Bayou people most likely aligned the mounds to the shifting sun in order to identify the change of seasons for planting and harvesting, as well as for scheduling ceremonies and feasts.



Site Map Depicting
Solar Alignments

From Mound H, on the summer solstice, you can watch the sun set behind Mound B. On the spring and fall equinoxes, from this mound, the sun sets behind Mound A. The sun sets behind Mound S on the winter solstice. From Mound H, the Plum Bayou people could mark the changing of the seasons just by watching where the sun set. Although archeologists have been able to determine how these mounds align, the extent of the astronomical and solar knowledge of

the Plum Bayou people remains a mystery.

The biggest mystery of all surrounding the Plum Bayou culture is why they abandoned this site around A.D. 1050. After all the hard work put into this site and countless ceremonies held here, the culture seemingly disappeared. Archeological research has been unable to explain where they went or why they left.

As you come to the end of the trail, take a moment to look back at the mounds. Imagine this village more than a thousand years ago when the Plum Bayou culture was thriving. Imagine an overflow of American Indians all coming together for a large ceremony. Maybe they're dancing and feasting, or maybe they're playing games, maybe the children are listening to an elder tell stories of their past, or maybe the men are returning from a successful hunt. Many mysteries still remain about the people who flourished here and the ceremonies they held at this site, but the mounds continue to provide clues, allowing us a glimpse into the fascinating past of the mysterious Plum Bayou culture.

Thank you for visiting Plum Bayou Mounds Archeological State Park!

Thank you for taking this journey through a part of Arkansas's history. We hope you have enjoyed your visit. If you have any questions or comments, our staff in the visitor center will be happy to talk with you.

We encourage you to get out and explore YOUR Arkansas State Parks.

For a list of activities and interpretive programs at Plum Bayou Mounds Archeological State Park, please pick up a Calendar of Events in the visitor center or visit us on the web at www.ArkansasStateParks.com.

