Poverty Point discovery marks one-year anniversary

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Louisiana is observing a special first-year anniversary this month.

On June 22 last year, the state Poverty Point Historic Site in West Carroll Parish north of Delhi was designated a World Heritage Site by the United Nations Educational, Scientific & Cultural Organization. It is one of only 22 such locations in the United States, and 1,007 in the world, that are so historically and culturally special as to deserve such an elite place among all the historical sites of the world.

Some people might view the mounds, circles and ridges at Poverty Point with a yawn, just ancient history. But others see them as fascinating and even compelling ancient history, clear markers of the culture and development of an ancient people that include all the questions and unsolved mysteries that could be expected to surround those who inhabited this land far into the dim long ago.

“Something came together here that didn’t come together anywhere else in the world,” said David Griffing, Poverty Point Heritage Site park manager. “Something special did happen here.”

From 1700 to about 1100 B.C., an estimated 1,500 to 2,500 people inhabited the Poverty Point site. They moved tons and tons of earth to build large mounds and ridges and sank huge oak tree posts five to six feet into the ground in perfect circles to create large shelters, possibly for social events. It was all done with primitive flint tools.

They almost perfectly aligned the mounds at Poverty Point with a mound one and one-quarter mile to the south, being off only a couple degrees from the alignment that would be used today with modern instruments and technology.

Then, suddenly, they disappeared without a trace, seeming to melt into the cosmos, leaving not so much as a single burial site with human remains to testify to the 600 years of their existence.

“It’s strange, because a lot of people lived here for a very long time,” Griffing said. “We don’t know where they came from, or why or how they disappeared. It’s a real mystery, very unusual.”

Poverty Point was discovered in 1913 by amateur archeologist Clarence Moore from his steamboat in nearby Bayou Macon. Moore was the first to file a report on the earthworks.

It was not until 1952 that another assessment of the site was made, this time by James H. Ford, who discovered the semi circular ridges. His report prompted the first major excavation at the site in 1955 by the American Museum of Natural History.

The area was designated a state park in 1972.

Since about the 1830s, the area was plowed annually as a part of agricultural activities, Griffing said. Local residents continually found artifacts, and many suspected that the area had special significance.

Actually, the heritage site is at about the center of a 1,500-acre cotton plantation, named Poverty Point,
that was established about 1850. Griffing said it’s a miracle the ridges and mounds survived the constant plowing.

His guess is that the inhabitants of Poverty Point originated from the numerous tribes in the area, but that is an assumption.

The massive earthworks, including the mounds and ridges, were constructed strictly by human labor. There were no horses or mules to haul the tons of earth.

The terraced ridges alone would extend an estimated seven and one-half miles. The ridges, overlooking a large, 43-acre commons area, are believed to be the foundations for houses.

The dirt was moved in baskets. One mound alone consists of the equivalent of 18,000 dump truck loads of earth. There is no evidence yet that the inhabitants used captive labor, something that was not common to hunter-gatherers, Griffing said.

While most hunter-gatherer groups are small and mobile, moving frequently, the Poverty Point group for some unknown reason was large and sedentary.

The settlement’s economy seems to have been built around a far-reaching trade system. Excavations have produced flint from Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky and Tennessee that was used to make spearheads and tools. Raw lead ore from Iowa and Missouri has been found, as has been copper, although the exact source is not known.

More than 6,000 bowls carved from soapstone imported from the Appalachian foothills have been found.

“They brought it in by the tons,” Griffing said. “The amount of material they brought in is staggering.”

The material almost had to have been brought in by boat, he said. Beads made of copper and red jasper have been found.

Trade seems to have been part of the social structure of the inhabitants, and they apparently traded with villages in the surrounding area, although natives from many miles away could have come by trail or boat to the site for the purpose of trading.

Considering the size of the earthworks and how fast they went up, it had to have been an incredibly large work force, he said.

It appears the complex was well planned from the beginning, he said.

The largest mound, 72 feet high, is in the form of a huge bird, its body aligned north-south and its wingspan, east-west. The wing span is 656 feet, the length, 659 feet. Its head is 15 feet in diameter.

According to the UNESCO plaque at the entrance to the site headquarters, 390,000 tons of earth was carried in basket and skin containers at 50 pounds each to build the mound. That’s 15.5 million loads.

The mounds and earthworks were the largest, most complex earth structures of that time in North America and retained their dominance until about 2,000 years after the Poverty Point inhabitants had
disappeared.

“This had to have been an extraordinary people in terms of culture and intellect,” he said. “I question if this has been duplicated anywhere else in the world, especially since these were hunter-gatherers who constructed it.”

Guided tours are offered at the site four times daily March 1-Oct. 31 from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. seven days per week, he said. During the off season, driving tours are available.