

# Horseshoe Bend

National Military Park  
Alabama



*Archaeology. The very mention of the word evokes images of buried treasure, ancient curses, or the stereotype of a pith-helmeted scholar poking around in the desert. Too often the most sensational aspects of the profession, whether the fact of the great cliff dwellings of Mesa Verde or the fiction of Indiana Jones, have become the sole elements of most people's concept of archaeology. Spectacular discoveries are quite rare in the real life science, which is normally a mixture of demanding physical labor and careful scholarship.*

## Defining a Discipline

The science of archaeology is best thought of as the study of past ways of life. To pursue this study, archaeologists focus on the relationship between the material objects made by past peoples and the makers' behavior. To master archaeology, one must love puzzles and be comfortable with the blank spots in human experience - what could this tool have been used for? Was it even used as a tool? For an archaeologist, ambiguity rules their professional life.

In previous centuries, archaeologists were content to simply find objects. Today, armed with computers, laboratory analysis, theories about society and culture, and a wide range of questions about human behavior, they may try to reach into the minds of those who made and used the artifacts. Thus their analysis acts as a bridge between the two sets of things: one an invisible realm that includes human ways of survival, religious beliefs, family structure, and social organization; the other a visible accumulation of material remains such as trash, tools, ornaments, and buildings. The latter group provides the raw material for understanding the former through logical reasoning. In making this all important link archaeologists have three main goals:

- To obtain a chronology of the past, a sequence of events and dates that, in a sense, is a backward extension of history.
- To begin at least to reconstruct the many way of life that no longer exist.
- To give us some understanding of why human culture has changed through time.

## Earliest People in Alabama

Human history in Alabama dates back to 10,000 B.C. to people known as *Paleoindians* by scientists. It is likely that these earliest Alabamians were highly specialized and very mobile, resulting in relatively little material culture left behind other than projectile points. Although no Paleoindian sites have been found within Horseshoe Bend National Military Park, a site in adjacent Randolph County has yielded multiple impressive fluted points from the earliest period. Gradually, the climate began to warm, changing the composition of forests and the wildlife living within. The Paleoindian Period transitioned into the Archaic Period (8000 B.C. to 1000 B.C.)

## Before the Battle

Life for early Alabamians changed as their environment evolved from mixed forest to a more closed canopy stand of hardwoods, leading to larger bands of hunter-gatherers and a reduced size of individual territories. Within the area now designated Horseshoe Bend National Military Park are several sites dating from the Late Archaic or Early Woodland periods. Artifacts found are, again, primarily projectile points of various sizes. During these periods of human activity, trade links grew around the Southeast, resulting in the presence of copper, marine shells, soapstone, and similar goods. Basic, early fired pottery is also found. Probably the most significant change in Alabama lifestyles around 1000 B.C. was the adoption of agriculture. The earliest planted crops were most likely squashes, gourds, and sunflowers. By 1000 B.C., cultivated crops were a significant part of the human diet. Around this time, the name given to the people becomes Woodland.

During the Woodland period (1000 B.C. to A.D. 900), people in the Southeast appear to have made major lifestyle changes - settling down to more sedentary villages with political structures including designated leaders and family lineage distinctions. Trade and barter dominated the relationship between villages and cultures. Hunting techniques became more sophisticated as the bow and arrow replaced the spear and fishing techniques were developed. Pottery is much more common and becomes more ornate and shows increased interest in developing higher quality ceramics with more aesthetic qualities such as patterns and decorations. These sites are relatively rare within Horseshoe Bend; however, relevant sites have been found within a few miles of the park.

From A.D. 900 until contact with Europeans, the Mississippian period flourished. These mound builders constructed serious architecture and developed complex social hierarchy with an economic base, cultivation of corn, and more intricate ceramics and ornamentation. Although rare in Tallapoosa county, this culture flourished at other locations in Alabama and Georgia. Tohopeka and New-Yau-Cau Village sites both show evidence of the Mississippian period; however, the village at the Tohopeka site died out until the 1810s.

The historic period at Horseshoe Bend is marked by the creation of what was most likely a temporary village of refuge in the innermost portion of the Horseshoe Bend at Tohopeka. The communal construction was a direct result of the Red Stick Movement and focused on the period of 1812 to 1814. The most impressive structure of the time was the heavily fortified wooden barricade constructed the neck of the peninsula in a “zigzag” pattern intended to expose advancing soldiers or warriors to crossfire. The location of this barricade is known but no remnants survive today.

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## Keeping It Real: The Rules of Discovery

One of the values of national parks is that we are the “real thing” - where events really happened, where people really changed history, where the nation’s story is written. Remnants of the past remain for you to discover today, whether it be in the same sounds heard in the past or finding a historic route through the forest. If you find a tangible reminder of the past, you must leave it where you find it. First, it’s the law. It’s illegal to remove any object, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, from a national park. This is not only theft of items; it is also theft of our collective past. Historians use these bits to piece together how events took place. Scientists examine them to pose questions from the past to explore our future. And everyone who comes here should have the same opportunity for discovery - and reflection - as they explore the places where warriors from both sides gave their last full measure of devotion. Leave the past where you find it.

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## Seeing Ourselves in the Past

The quest for cause-and-effect explanations of human behavior over the centuries is perhaps the most important ingredient in archaeology for it has the potential to help us understand the present. Archaeology, in conjunction with other social and natural sciences, enables us to better understand ourselves and how we got to be the way we are. In short, archaeology is not merely the recovery and description of artifacts; it is ultimately a problem-solving science that recovers and analyzes data that reflects the vast diversity of human societies. It enables us to look at the past as it was: people just like us, struggling to carve out a life for ourselves in the world.