

Ocmulgee Mounds

National Park Service
U.S. Department of Interior

Ocmulgee Mounds NHP



The Earth Lodge - A Ceremonial Council Chamber



OVERVIEW

Visitors experience a view of the ancient past when they enter the Earth Lodge, a reconstructed council chamber of the Mississippian culture. This building's walls and ceiling were reconstructed in the late 1930's by Civilian Conservation Corp and Works Project Administration crews under the direction of Archeologist A.R. Kelly. The clay floor within this building is the original floor built by native people. It is dated, using carbon dating techniques, at the year 1015. Council chambers from cultures of the past exemplify public buildings we use today to organize our society, solve problems and celebrate religious ceremonies.

ARCHITECTURE

The Earth Lodge did not follow the usual architectural patterns of house sites within the village. It was round, with an internal square of support logs for the cone-shaped roof. Houses within the village of more than 1500 people were usually square or rectangular and considerably smaller than this 42-foot diameter building. In America, our special public buildings also

look different than our homes. City halls, county courthouses, and places of worship all look different than the average home. These special public buildings represent an important emotional aspect of who we are as a society and how we treasure the ideas and basic moral foundations of the society we are trying to create.

INTERIOR

Formed into the clay floor are more features which help to tell us how this building was used. Buildings which have special uses in Native American cultures often reflect these social and sacred uses in the shapes and forms of special features. Formed into the floor was a circle of 50 seats, a large fire pit, and a bird effigy. The circle was divided by the long, low entrance and the bird effigy. Three of the seats were positioned on top of the massive clay image of a bird. Archeologists have found this symbol on native religious images carved into large shell jewelry called gorgets. They call it a forked eye symbol and do not know what it means. Symbolism in buildings and art can sometimes tell us how ancient cultures viewed aspects of life and death. Often, we cannot interpret their spiritual symbolism and these mysterious images from the past leave us with more questions than answers.

Today we have discovered that modern diplomats reach agreements faster using round tables. Our politicians sit in

congress at a half circle of seats. How societies solve their problems reflects ideas of how a community feels about itself and its people. The bird effigy divides



(EARTH LODGE INTERIOR SHOWING THE BIRD EFFIGY)

the circle of seats. Separating opposing factions would have helped to keep the meeting more peaceful. Perhaps the three seats on top of the bird effigy were special places for the leaders to sit. Look carefully at these three special seats on the bird effigy. They have the formed depression

INTERIOR
(CONTINUED)

where feet would rest but do not have the formed shape where someone would sit. Were they symbolic places for spiritual deities to be represented or places for community leaders? Early archeologists compared the wider, higher seats near the bird effigy with the lower smaller seats near the building entrance and thought this represented ideas of class structure within the Mississippian culture. If you look carefully you will notice what we discovered by measuring the width of all

the seats. The largest and smallest seats in the building are right next to each other in the middle of the south side of the circle. Was the angle of the floor a good way to help keep the building from getting muddy after a heavy rain? Was the difference in seat widths a representation of the person who built the seat or the class structure within this society? Modern archeologists, using new information, often question the interpretations of past scientists.

EARTH LODGE
USES

Twice a year, in February and October, the sun shines down the long low entrance, illuminating the fire pit and the bird effigy. Archeologists wonder if this was done on purpose to help celebrate seasonal rituals. Often, farming cultures design sun and moon calendars to help them track the sacred circle of the yearly seasons. In order for the sun to successfully enter the doorway of the Earth Lodge and use this doorway as a calendar, all the trees to the east of the Earth Lodge would have to be cleared. The Great Temple Mound, only $\frac{1}{4}$ mile away, had a good horizon view of both the sunrise and the sunset. These and many other questions cause modern scientists to question if the sunlight coming in the door of the Earth Lodge was indeed used as a calendar. Perhaps it marked a special ceremony that occurred in the spring and fall. This science, called archaeoastronomy, not only helped ancient people to track the calendar year to know when to plant, but helped to bind the many people of the community through celebrations and religious ceremonies. Many native cultures have a special person called the Sun Priest. It is their responsibility to keep track of the solar calendar and remind the people of their ancient roots and connections to the endless circles of seasons. This transcends

the idea of just keeping track of the days, weeks, and months of a calendar year. The Sun Priest is the connection from the past, through the present, and into the future.

Archeological evidence showed that the large fire pit was not used for cooking. The modern Muscogee Creek New Fire Ceremony might be a continuation of Mississippian traditions as exemplified in the large central fire pit. Ceremonies are the ties which bind a community together. Rituals preserve the important lessons of our ancestors for our grandchildren to learn. New Year celebrations remind us that the circles of seasons reflect the circles of our lives. Spring, summer, autumn and winter reflect the pattern of life: childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and our senior years. So often we see these ideas reflected in the sacred rituals of cultures. In the New Fire Ceremony, which is part of the Creek Green Corn ritual, all fires are allowed to go out. A fire is started in a sacred place and each family takes a bit of those coals to restart their home fire. This is a social binding of the whole community beyond the connections of blood and clans. Later in the year when people have problems to solve, they remember that everyone is family because they “share the same fire”.



(EARTH LODGE EXTERIOR)