Ocmulgee National Monument, Georgia

"on the east bank of the river lie the famous Ocmulgee fields where are yet conspicuous very wonderful remains of the power and grandeur of the ancients of this part of America, in ruins of a capital town and settlement, as vast artificial hills, terraces, etc..."

Today visitors can still see the "artificial hills" and other evidences of the ancient town which intricately Barrett when he passed by at this time of the American Revolution. Thanks to the patient research of modern archaeology, the lives of the people who built these mounds and lived in this town from about A.D. 900 to 1100 unfolds for visitors on the grounds and in the museum of Ocmulgee National Monument.

Yet even a thousand years ago the Indians who built these mounds did not arrive in a virgin wilderness. They were neither the first nor the last people to occupy this spot.

For more than 10,000 years man has sought their livelihood here, where the Ocmulgee River runs from the sandy flat lands of the coastal plain to the sandy flat lands of the coastal plains. This is an area where diverse habitats meet and blend, within a short distance the river has rapids, channels, and ponds. There are wooded bottomlands and swamps 3-miles below Macon and is not presently accessible to the public.

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The Travels of William Bartram, 1791

Palo-Indian and Archaic Periods

The first known trace of man on the Macon Plateau consists of a fluted stone spear point of a type dated about 11,000 years ago, found in a gravel bar on the Ocmulgee River. This is an area where diverse habitats meet and blend, within a short distance the river has rapids, channels, and ponds. There are wooded bottomlands and swamps, pine woods and deciduous upland forests. The resources here which man could use were varied and plentiful.

During this time the custom of burial beneath rounded earthen mounds spread widely through the eastern United States. In some places this burial custom elaborated with quantities of ceremonial goods placed with the dead; in this part of Georgia, however, the practice was carried on at a simpler level. Burial mounds do occur in this general area, but none of them were built by these people within the present extent of Ocmulgee National Monument.

Woodland Period

Agriculture, and associated religious beliefs and social customs, changed all this. The impetus for this dramatic economic shift came from Mexico. Agriculture spread rapidly throughout most of the United States, arriving at Ocmulgee between 1000 and 500 B.C. Spears and arrowheads and, somewhat later, corn and beans were planted in modified ancient gardens. Gardening, rather than farming, best describes this initial agriculture. Hunting, fishing, and gathering continued to be very important. People lived together in larger villages than formerly, although they usually set up smaller camps for part of the year. The use of pottery increased, and the polishes which were of higher quality than before, were often decorated with intricate designs stamped in the damp clay of the vessel before it was fired. More numerous and varied tools and ceremonial objects also came into use.

Raking of a pottery fragment

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Early Mississippian Period (Macon Plateau Period)

While this relatively simple village life continued over the centuries in the Ocmulgee area, a more complex way of life based on a more intensive agriculture developed. In 1300 B.C., the Macon Plateau people had created larger and more intricate village complexes. One large town appeared as far north as Wisconsin. Other groups spread along the Tennessee River and into the Southeast, and settlements and villages grew large enough to be called towns. The Mississippians brought with them their own way of doing things. In the rich bottomlands they planted corn, beans, squash, pumpkins, and winter squash. At the same point where the river bends they raised rectangular houses; their walls were poles set upright in the ground and plastered with clay, and the whole was covered by a thatched roof.

At the end of town nearest the river they laid out an area which served as a combination religion center and public square. By cutting away the edges of the natural plateau, they created a large terrace and began the construction of their temple mounds. The mounds were not built all at once, but were enlarged and elevated at intervals over the years. Ramps led up the sides of the mounds, providing access to the flat tops where ceremonial activities were centered. These temple mounds were larger than the houses but built in much the same manner.

At several points within the village still another kind of structure was built. These were circular, heavily framed, and covered with earth. The best preserved of these earth lodges (shown in the drawing in the opposite column) has been reconstructed. It is entered through a long tunnel. Opposite the door is a raised clay platform shaped like a ceremonial bird. There are three seats at the rear of this platform, and around the walls of the building is a raised clay bench with 47 more seats. In the center of the building is a large sunken area. The 50 or so individuals who used this temple were probably the town's religious and political leaders whose decisions affected the lives of the entire community.

Although the previous inhabitants built no burial mounds at Ocmulgee, these people did construct one at the western edge of the town and buried at least some of their dead there. In design, the mound differed from the rounded shape of earlier mounds. The displaced villagers did not lose contact with their predecessors. Finally their civilization entered a period of decline. The reason for their disappearance from the Macon Plateau around A.D. 1100 is unknown, but after that time the town and the mounds fell into disuse and ruin.

Late Mississippian Period (Lamar Period)

The displaced villagers did not lose contact with the intruders, and over the years adopted some of their more advanced agricultural practices and the religion that went with them, including the use of temple mounds. At the same time, the Macon Plateau people did not expand their holdings, but they began to adopt some of the ways of their predecessors. Finally their civilization entered a period of decline. The reason for their disappearance from the Macon Plateau around A.D. 1100 is unknown, but after that time the town and the mounds fell into disuse and ruin.

The surrounding peoples, their way of life irreversibly altered, now assumed the dominant role in middle Georgia and beyond. Although their settlements and villages were numerous and widespread, they used the old townsite on the Macon Plateau only occasionally. One of their major centers, however, was the Lamar site, only about 3 miles away in the swamps along the Ocmulgee River. This village contained two temple mounds and was surrounded by a stockade.

At least some of these people were the direct ancestors of the Creek Indians who held most of Georgia and much of Alabama in early historic times, and who were to play a vital role in the last pages of the Indian story in the East.

Historic Contact (Creek Period)

As early as 1699 an English trading post was operating at Ocmulgee alongside the important Lower Creek Trading Path which crossed the Ocmulgee River here. As Pippin and his warriors joined Col. James Moore here to launch an attack against the Spanish Indians of northwest Florida in 1703. A few years later the Creeks rose up in turn against the French, but were defeated and forced to withdraw westward to the Flint and Cherokees. They entered Alabama, although from time to time some of them returned to the Ocmulgee. With the birth of the United States and the expansion of its people, the Creek came under relentless pressure. Bit by bit their lands were signed away in treaties, and the remnants of the Creeks were removed to the Oklahoma Territory; where their descendants live today. The treaty which divided them of their last lands at Ocmulgee was signed in 1834. Three years after the settlement of Macon marked the arrival of yet another culture near the ancient Ocmulgee Fields.

For Your Safety—Mound slopes are steep. Please use the marked trails.