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A Guided Tour of Chucalissa Archaeology

Paul D. Bundy

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A GUIDED TOUR OF CHUCALISSA ARCHAEOLOGY¹

*FIFTY-NINE YEARS OF ARCHAEOLOGY AT THE SITE AND THE HISTORY OF THE SITE
BASED ON ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE*



JULY 2002

¹ Data compiled and presented by Paul D. Bundy and Jay Gray following 2002 Mid-South Archaeological Conference at request of Chucalissa personnel. A list of references is available at front desk.

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A GUIDED TOUR OF CHUCALISSA ARCHAEOLOGY¹

INTRODUCTION

Chucalissa (40Sy1) is located approximately 6 miles south of downtown Memphis, Tennessee. Located just south of the confluence of Nonconnah Creek and the Tennessee Chute, the site rests atop a natural bluff formation which defines the eastern edge of the Mississippi Valley. The site covers approximately eleven acres of loess bluff, known as the Chickasaw Bluffs, overlooking a meander of the Mississippi River. Major features of the site's layout include a large platform mound on the northern side of the site, a smaller mound to the west, and a raised midden ring around a plaza. The village area of the site extends both north and northeast of the mounds and plaza, and to the south and east separated from the plaza by narrow ravines. Chucalissa was likely occupied prior to A.D. 1000 with a terminal date of approximately A.D. 1500.

Chucalissa is considered one of the most heavily interpreted Mississippian Period sites in the Mid-South region, and is the basis for much of our understanding of this Period in Western Tennessee. Archaeological research has taken place at the site since the early 1940's, and continues through today. Early archaeological investigations at Chucalissa tended to be of an exploratory nature and involved the removal of significant portions of the site, but in the modern era the focus has shifted toward conservation of the site. As the archaeological excavations that have taken place at Chucalissa are numerous and scattered, a walking tour does not allow excavations to be presented in the order in which they took place. An overview of the site's history is presented below in hopes of providing a historical context for each stop along the tour.

HISTORICAL SUMMARY OF CHUCALISSA

- During the 1930's the Federal Government acquired land to the south of Memphis, Tennessee, with intentions of developing it into a park.
- In 1939 the land was purchased by the State of Tennessee, and while in the process of clearing the land for what was to become *Shelby State Park*, Chucalissa was discovered by workers. Then known as the Shelby Site, Chucalissa was brought to the attention of T.M.N. Lewis of the University of Tennessee Department of Anthropology.
- In 1940 archaeological excavations were begun to determine whether it was feasible to construct an archaeological park based on the site. Excavations ceased in April of 1940, when plans to build a wayside museum were opposed by the National Park Service. They suggested instead that the site should become a state archaeological park.

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- Also during the 1940's the Lower Mississippi Alluvial Valley Survey collected artifacts from the Shelby Site, along with dozens of other sites within the region. The site was included in a report published in 1951 by Philip Phillips, James A. Ford, and James B. Griffin that would become a great contribution to archaeological understanding of the prehistoric southeastern United States.
- The next major excavations at the site, by then referred to as the T.O. Fuller Mounds, were carried out by the Memphis Archaeological and Geological Society (MAGS). These excavations took place between 1952 and 1953.
- In 1955 the University of Tennessee's renewed interest in Chucalissa made funds available to hire a staff archaeologist. Charles H. Nash fulfilled the position, and excavations were conducted by Tennessee State Parks from 1955 to 1962.
- In 1961 the park was turned into a research center and facility for the teaching of anthropology and archaeology for Memphis State University (MSU). Charles Nash continued to conduct excavation of the site with Memphis State University until 1967.
- Excavations were conducted at the site by MSU from 1961 to 1985.
- In 1994 Chucalissa was designated as a U.S. National Historic Landmark.

A WALKING TOUR OF MAJOR EXCAVATIONS AT CHUCALISSA

This section is arranged to accommodate a walking tour of the park providing general information about the major excavations undertaken at specific points along the way (indicated on *Figure 1* by **A, B, C...**). The tour begins at the top of the stairs just outside the rear exit of the museum (see *Figure 1* Point A). This is at the summit of a ridge that surrounds the site's plaza. The tour continues around this circumplaza ridge westward (see *Figure 1* Point B) and then to the secondary mound located west of the plaza (see *Figure 1* Point C). The next stop on the tour is the top of the primary mound (see *Figure 1* Point D). The tour then continues northward across a large grassy area (see *Figure 1* Point E), and finally to the head of the Chickasaw Trail (see *Figure 1* Point F) just inside of the woods. Points G and H are discussed and their locations are given, but they are located outside of the fenced area typically included in a walking tour of the site and are possibly best observed as one exits the park following the tour.

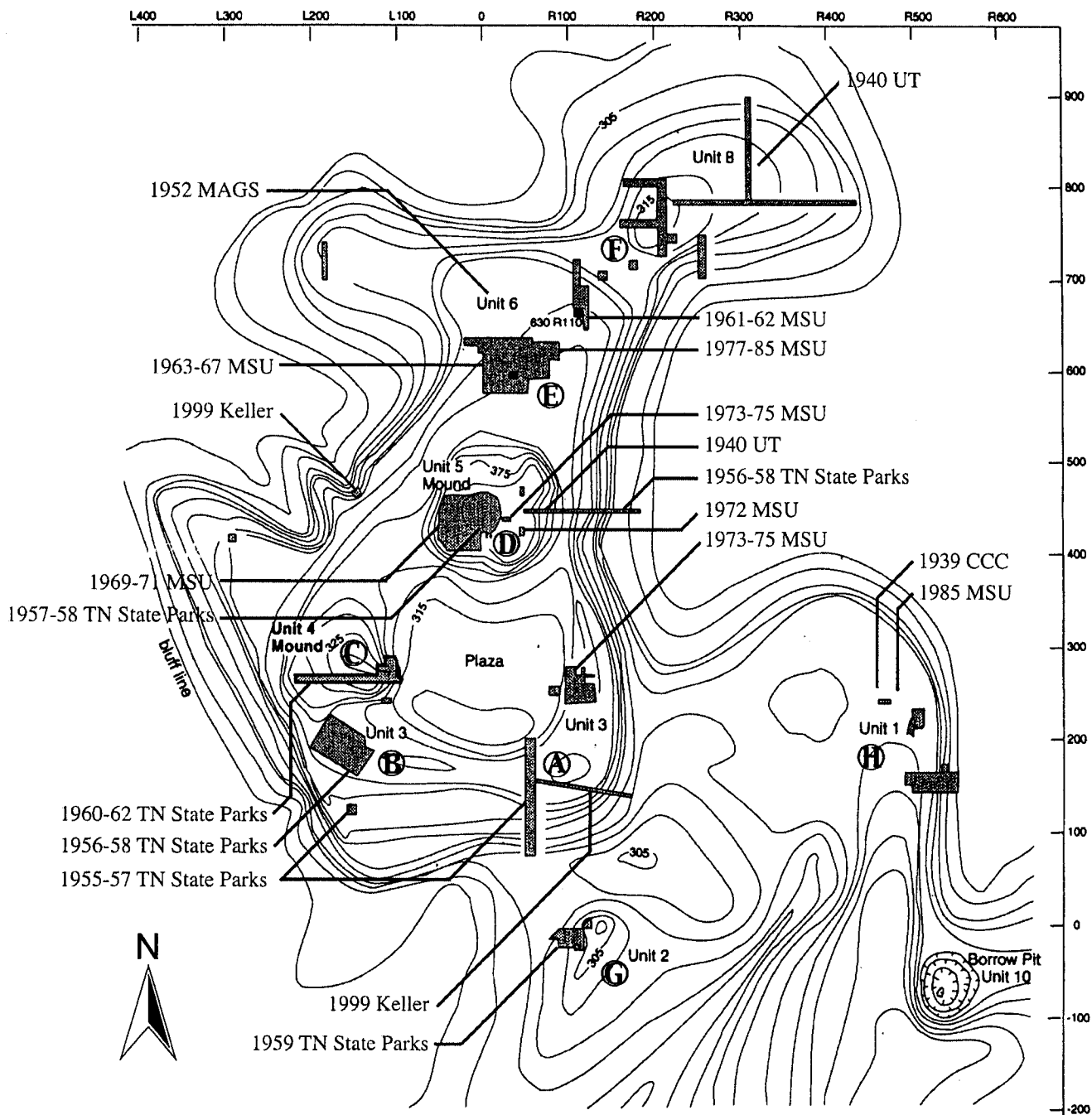


Figure 1. Site Topography (2m interval) and major excavation areas based on a contour map prepared by Charles Nash in 1955 (after Childress and Wharey 1996).

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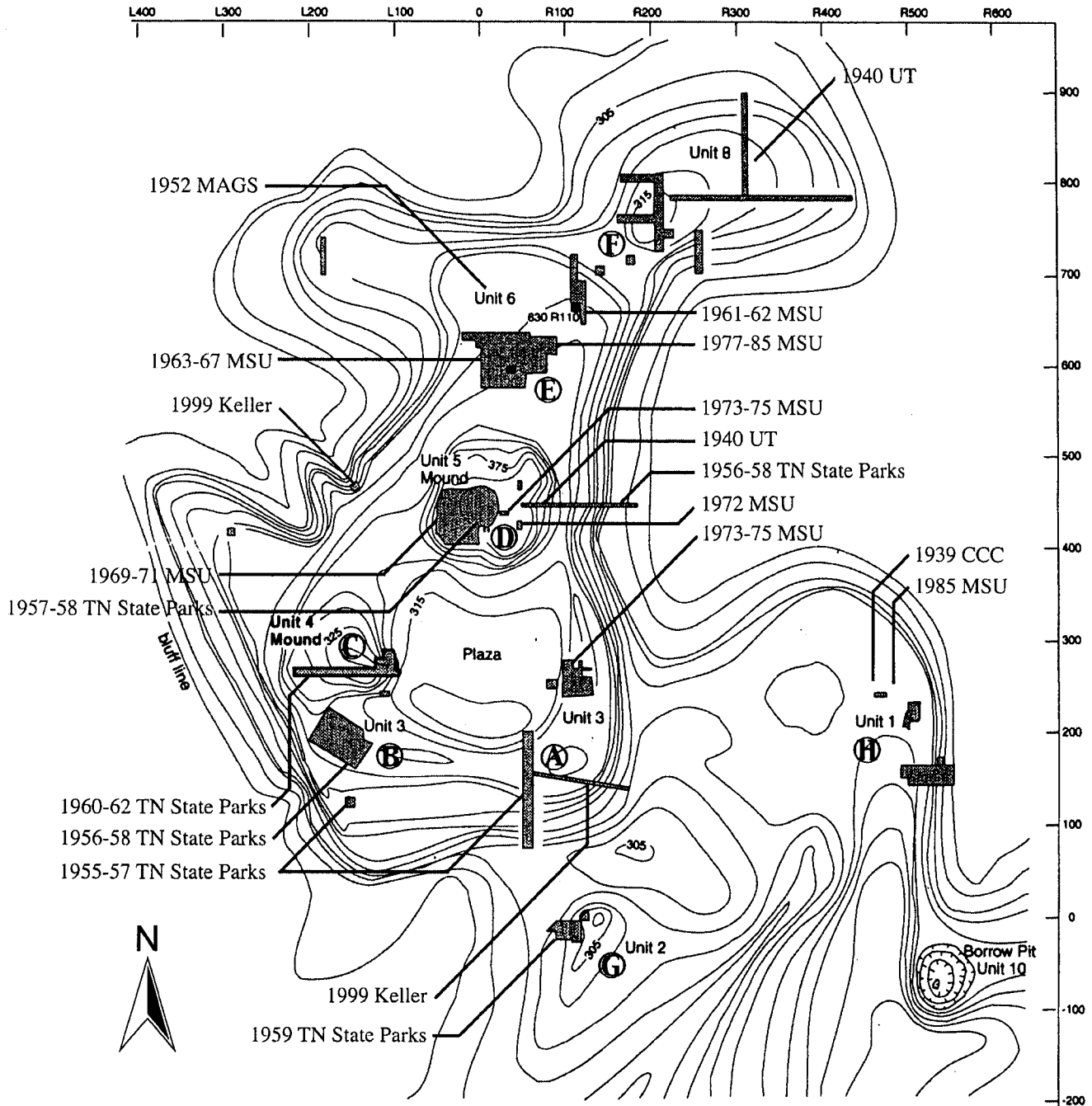


Figure 1. Site Topography (2m interval) and major excavation areas based on a contour map prepared by Charles Nash in 1955 (after Childress and Wharey 1996).

POINT A

Point A is located at the top of the stairs outside the rear exit of the museum. From this point a long cinder block building can be seen immediately to the west. Inside the building is a trench that was excavated and left open, nicknamed “the entrance trench” because it used to serve as the entrance to the main portion of the site (see *Figure 2*). The trench, measuring approximately 65 feet long, ten feet wide, and nearly 10 feet deep, was excavated by Tennessee State Parks (TSP) under the direction of Charles H. Nash between 1955 and 1957. The trench has been widened since its excavation due to the occasional caving off of dirt from the walls. During the excavation of the entrance trench the remains of houses, cooking hearths, storage pits, and burials were uncovered. Many of the house floors can still be observed in the walls of the trench, but unfortunately this exhibit is currently closed to the public. Plans to reopen the exhibit are being discussed.

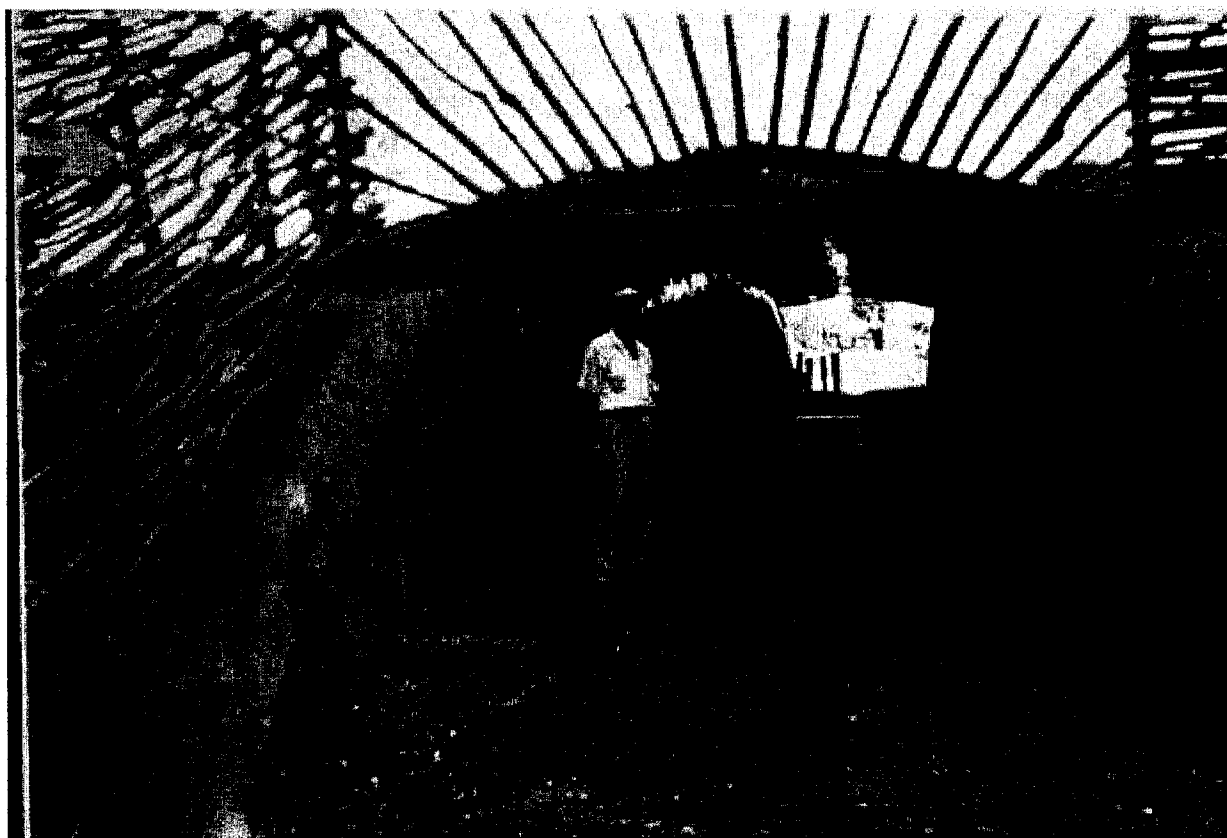


Figure 2. The Entrance Trench as an exhibit with thatched roof covering the trench, prior to the construction of the cinder block building (Photograph on file in museum archives).

A long depression in the ground surface may be observed extending eastward from the cinder block entrance trench building. This is the location of a small trench that was excavated in September of 1999 by Keller Construction Company as part of an emergency renovations project. The project was enacted to reduce erosion and other damage to the site caused by inadequate or failing drainage systems. The trench, measuring 28 meters long, 0.5 meters wide, and 0.6 meters deep, was hand excavated by the construction crew. The excavated material was dry screened using 1/4” wire mesh. Immediately following the excavation, Jay Gray and Paul D. Bundy (Graduate students working at the museum) mapped the entire north profile and sections

of the southern profile. The remains of a house floor were observed in the trench profile, and a pit intrusion through the floor of the house contained an infant burial with a complete, ceramic human effigy bottle (see *Figure 3*). Artifacts recovered from the trench were cleaned, sorted, and analyzed. A report of the findings was completed by Jay Gray and submitted to the University of Memphis in fulfillment of his masters degree.



Figure 3. Ceramic human effigy bottle from renovations trench excavated by Keller Construction in 1999.

Looking northward from Point A, to the east of the plaza, a small garden may be seen. This is the approximate location (see *Figure 4*) of an excavation that was carried out by Memphis State University between 1973 and 1975. The purposes of this excavation were to investigate the archaeological deposits within the circumplaza ridge, and to educate Memphis State University Students in archaeological field methods.



Figure 4. Memphis State University block excavation, 1973-1975 (Photograph on file in museum archives).

POINT B

Point B is located west of the entrance trench and southwest of the plaza. This is the location of a small block unit excavated by Tennessee State Parks from 1955 through 1957 (during the excavation of the entrance trench) and a large excavation block that was excavated from 1956 through 1958 (also opened during the entrance trench excavation). The large block unit exposed dozens of burials with pottery vessels and was left open as a burial exhibit (see *Figure 5*) until 1988. In the mid 1990's the building housing the exhibit and the remains were removed and fill dirt was placed to recreate the circumplaza ridge in this area.

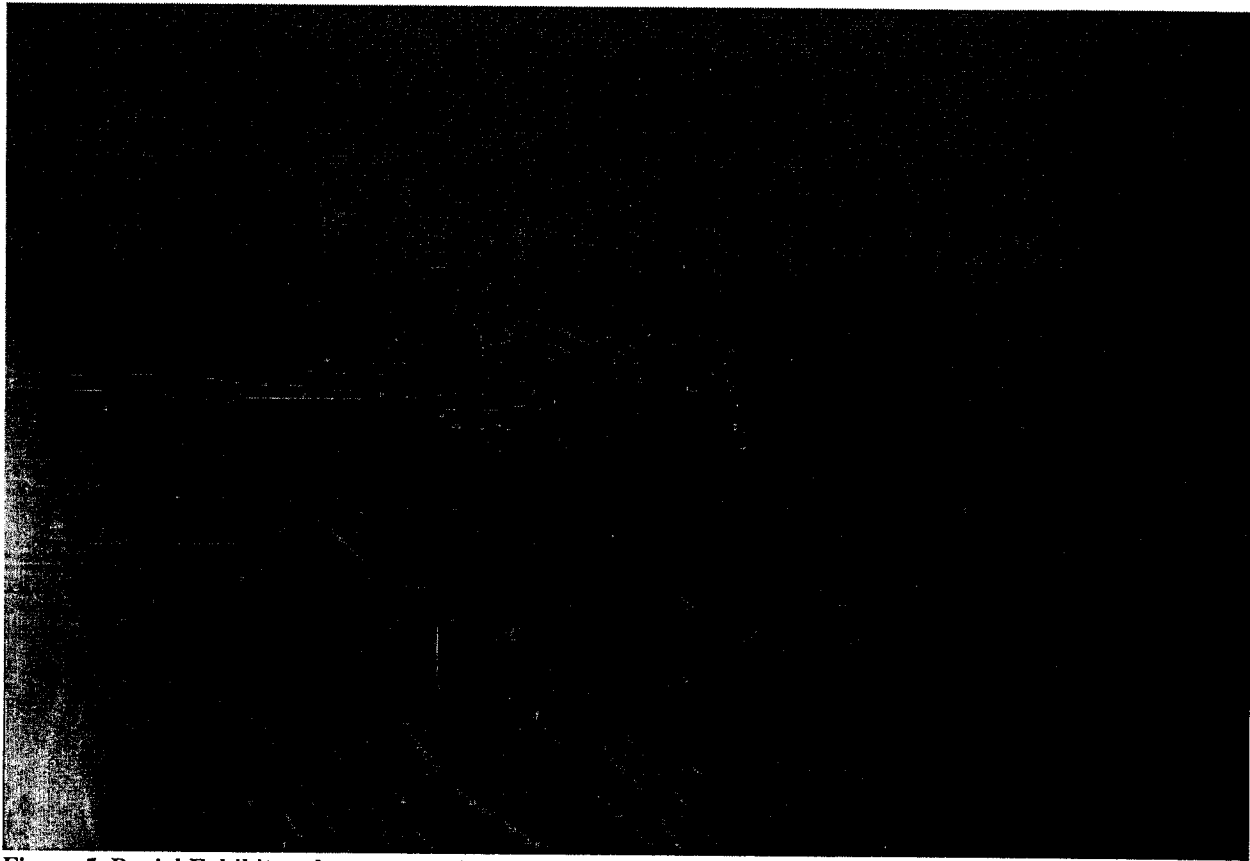


Figure 5. Burial Exhibit under construction (Photograph on file in the museum archives).

POINT C

Point C is the secondary mound located south and west of the primary mound and west of the plaza. This is the location of an east/west oriented trench that measured five feet wide by 30 feet long and was excavated by the Tennessee State Parks between 1960 and 1962. The excavation of the trench ceased after the removal of three 6-inch levels, at which point the excavators moved on to "more productive" areas of the site. Before back-filling the trench, the south wall was mapped in 1962. In 1996 all notes, profile drawings and materials were analyzed by Mitch Childress and the results were published in Arkansas Archaeological Research Series. Childress determined that the mound was constructed on top of an intact midden, beginning ca. A.D. 1100 and terminating ca. A.D. 1400 and noted that there was no evidence of a structure located atop the mound.

POINT D

Point D, the primary mound, is located to the north of the plaza. This mound has been the focus of more archaeological investigations than any other part of the site. The first excavations into the primary mound were conducted by the University of Tennessee in March and April of 1940, under the supervision of T. M. N. Lewis and under the direction of George Lidberg. The excavation is believed to have revealed five phases of construction in the primary mound. The exact location of the excavation is not known, but Kenneth Beaudoin, who excavated north of

the primary mound in 1952, notes that a trench had been excavated by the University of Tennessee in the eastern portion of the largest mound.

Following the clearing of the site in 1955, a rotunda style structure was erected on top of the mound by Tennessee State Parks in 1956 (see *Figure 6*). Tennessee State Parks conducted a circular excavation within the structure between 1956 and 1958. This excavation uncovered the last preserved structure floor and numerous post molds, but was halted due to poor lighting within the structure. Tennessee State Parks also excavated a trench east of the primary mound at about the same time. Charles Nash reported that a deep ravine appears to have been filled in order to level the original ground surface prior to the construction of the mound, presumably to level the area.



Figure 6. Aerial view of Chucalissa with the Rotunda style structure on the primary mound (Photograph on file in the museum archives).

In 1968 the rotunda style structure was deemed unsafe and removed from the site. From 1969 through 1971 Memphis State University, under the direction of Gerald Smith, excavated a large block atop the primary mound to the top of the last prehistoric construction stage. The intention of this excavation was to replace the rotunda style structure with a more site-specific building reconstruction. During these investigations, a burned structure measuring nearly 50' square was uncovered, and there was evidence that the floor had been worn and repaired around a central hearth located in the front 1/2 of the structure. The dimensions and architecture of the large, square building that currently occupies the top of the mound are based on the archaeological structure uncovered during Smith's investigations.

Additional Memphis State University excavations associated with the primary mound took place between 1972 and 1975. In 1972 a test trench was excavated on the eastern portion of the top of the primary mound. The 1973 through 1975 excavations consisted of a "slot trench" excavated

on the eastern portion of the top of the primary mound, which located evidence of a 2nd companion structure adjacent to the main structure.

Looking westward from the top of the primary mound, a small concrete drainage structure may be observed on the edge of a steep hill. This is the location of excavations that were conducted from October to November of 1999 by Paul D. Bundy and Jay Gray (Graduate students at the University of Memphis) in conjunction with Keller Construction (see *Figure 7*). This was a part of the emergency renovations project designed to reduce the impact of erosion to the site. The excavations took place at the location of a failed drainage structure that was removed by Keller Construction. During the removal of the failed structure a burial was encountered, and the archaeological excavations uncovered a house floor and cooking hearths approximately 2.5 meters below the ground surface. Artifacts recovered from the excavations were cleaned, sorted, and analyzed. A report of the findings was completed by Paul D. Bundy and submitted to the University of Memphis in fulfillment of his masters degree.

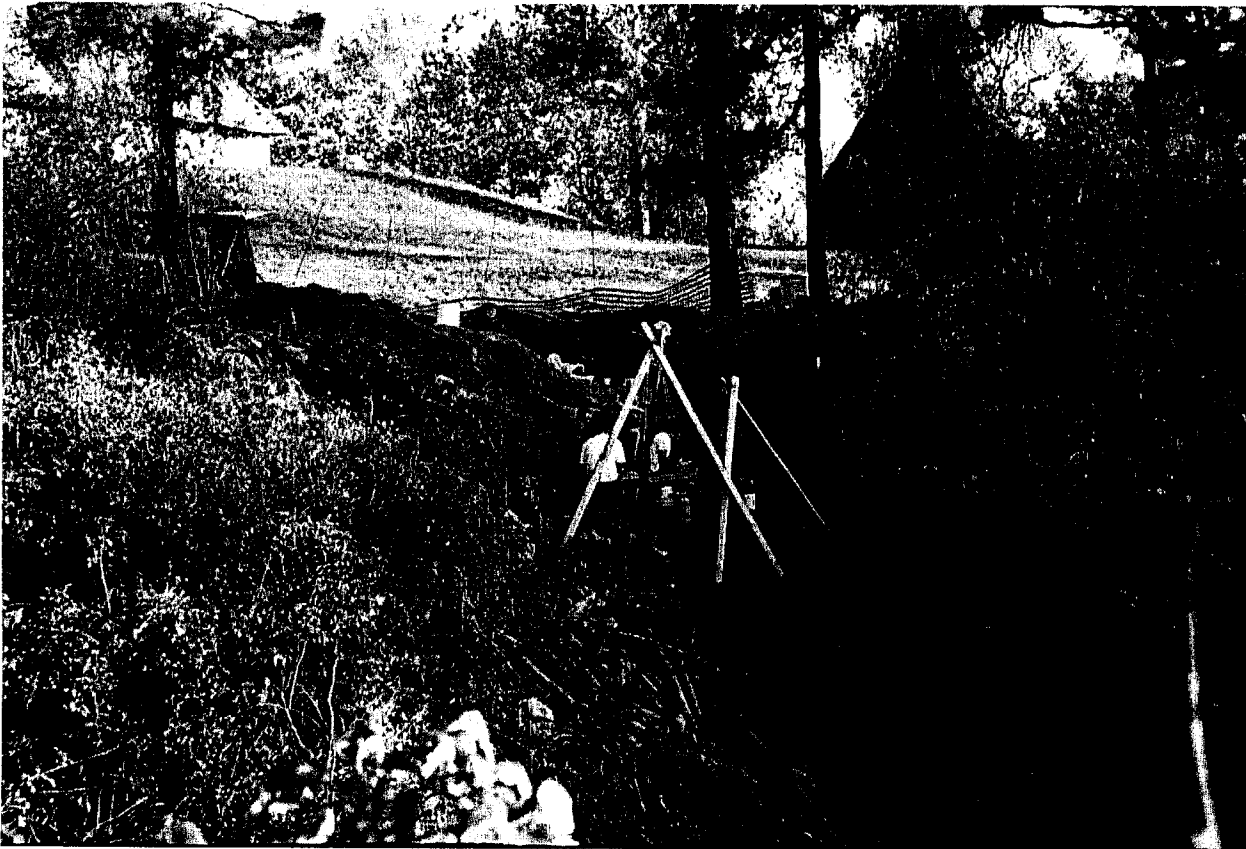


Figure 7. 1999 Keller Construction excavation.

POINT E

Point E is located north and east of the primary mound in the grassy, generally level area between the mound and the wooded area. Excavations in this area were conducted by the Memphis Archaeological and Geological Society (MAGS) in 1952 and consisted of ten 10 foot by 10 foot excavation units. The fieldwork lasted about thirteen months and resulted in the removal of about 73 cubic meters of fill, unearthing the majority of a house floor and four

hearths. Additionally, three extended and three bundle burials (containing at least 9 individuals) were uncovered.

Beginning in 1961, MSU began investigating this portion of the site (see *Figure 8*). In 1961 and 1962 MSU excavated trenches in this area down to the underlying subsoil. From 1963 to 1967 MSU excavated a large block measuring 50 feet by 40 feet to the top of stratum IV. During the fieldwork they encountered a high density of artifacts, at least six structures, sixteen burials, and ceramics representing each of the five ceramic complexes identified by Gerald Smith. One unusually large structure and strong evidence for the presence of an early occupation of the site were unearthed. Between 1977 and 1986, MSU opened another series of excavation units extending eastward from the earlier block unit. These excavations exposed a series of house floors and a structure that was atypical for the site. The purpose of the Memphis State University excavations was two-fold, as the majority of the excavations were conducted during classes to educate students in archaeological field methods.



Figure 8. Memphis State University excavation in progress (Photograph on file in the museum archives).

POINT F

Point F is the last point observed on the tour and is located north and east of primary mound within the wooded area (at the head of the hiking trail). This portion of the site was investigated in 1940 by the University of Tennessee (UT) and excavations were carried out primarily to explore the site. These first excavations consisted of a series of trenches measuring approximately ten feet wide and of varying lengths, but generally dug to the base of the deposit

and oriented in cardinal directions (N/S or E/W). Evidence of many of these early trench excavations may still be seen in the woods around the hiking trail.

TWO OTHER LOCATIONS OF MAJOR EXCAVATION NOT LOCATED ALONG THE TOUR

POINT G

Point G is located south and east of the museum. This area is on the right as one exits the museum. This is the location of excavations conducted by Tennessee State Parks (TSP) in 1959. The archaeological remains in this portion of the site are described as equally dense to the area north of the primary mound.

POINT H

Point H is located near the apartments just north and east of the museum. This area is easily visible on the left as one leaves the museum parking area. This is the part of the site that was discovered by CCC workers in 1939, before any archaeological involvement at the site. The density of the archaeological remains were dense enough to prompt CCC workers to contact the University of Tennessee with news of what seemed like an important site. Interestingly, excavations by Memphis State University in 1985 uncovered midden deposits in this area that were considered shallow when compared with the rest of the site.

A HISTORY OF CHUCALISSA BASED ON ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

The earliest occupation of the site, beginning sometime prior to A.D. 1000, is referred to as the Ensley Phase. The site's inhabitants likely lived in scattered villages on and around the ridge on which the site lies, and the construction of the smaller mound at the site was begun. Archaeologists believe that some horticulture was practiced during this time, although hunting and gathering were the primary means of subsistence. The inhabitants of Chucalissa would likely have only occupied the site seasonally in their rounds of collecting and gathering wild foods.

At around A.D. 1185 changes occurred in the lifeways of the inhabitants of Chucalissa, and a short occupation of the site referred to as the Mitchell Phase is observed by archaeologists. During this phase the smaller mound at the site may have been expanded, and the use of crushed mussel shell to temper ceramics was begun. The use of shell in the production of ceramics increases the plasticity of the clay, and pottery shapes, decorations, and handles were produced that would have previously been impossible. Shell-tempered ceramics in the Mississippi Valley are generally associated with a more organized and hierarchical social structure, which is manifest in settlement and burial patterning at archaeological sites. As dependence upon horticulture increased, the inhabitants of Chucalissa may have become increasingly sedentary.

The time period referred to as the Boxtown Phase lasted from approximately A.D. 1250 to 1400. By the end of this period the secondary mound at the site was completed; no additions were made to the mound in subsequent Phases. Pottery vessels became increasingly decorated during this period, and highly decorative strap handles were often added to jars. Bottles, bowls,

and jars of this Phase were commonly decorated with painting, punctating, and incising, and at least some ceramic effigies were being produced.

The final occupation of Chucalissa, from about A.D. 1425 to 1500, is referred to as the Walls Phase. During this Phase the construction of a second mound was underway, which would eventually become the large platform mound to the north of the plaza. The construction of this mound may have taken place in an area of the site already associated with high-status elites and /or ceremonial activities. Although it is unclear exactly when the construction of the primary mound began, it was during the Walls Phase that the majority of the mound was constructed. Upon completion of the mound, at least two structures occupied its summit. On the western half of the mound was a very large structure approximately 50 feet square, and to its east was a smaller structure. These structures have the highest incidence of decorated and trade ceramics in the entire site, and were probably associated with high status individuals and important ceremonial activities. The circumplaza ridge was created during this Phase, and appears to be a series of structures constructed with basket-loaded dirt between each successive rebuilding episode. Structures on this ridge were in the order of 18 to 22 feet square, and average 2 to 4 rebuilding episodes each. Individuals were buried in clusters just outside of the structures in the circumplaza ridge, and were frequently accompanied by finely-crafted pottery vessels and occasionally shell gorgets. In comparison, houses in the outlying village areas of the site were 15 to 20 feet square, grave goods were infrequent, and the areas have the lowest incidence of decorated and trade ceramics of the site. This suggests that the individuals buried on the circumplaza ridge may have had a higher social status than those in the outlying village areas. Chucalissa must have seen a population increase during the Walls Phase, as the village was extended to areas across ravines from the central portion of the site. During the Walls phase, ceramics reached a decorative climax. Handles added to jars resembled the earlier strap handles, yet many appear to have become more of a decorative gesture than a functional appendage. Decorations also included more emphasis on punctuation and incising, as well as intricately engraved designs. Effigies became more common and included human and animal figurines, and others that may have represented mythological creatures. Chucalissa's inhabitants had probably become more reliant upon horticulture than in preceding Phases, particularly maize horticulture, but archaeological investigations have shown that wild plants and animals still represented an important part of the diet. Archaeological investigations indicate that Chucalissa was abandoned sometime around A.D. 1500, within half a century of the De Soto expedition into the Mississippi Valley.