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A Visitor's Guide to Chucalissa

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A Visitor’s Guide to Chucalissa

Aiokpanchi [I-OAK-PAN-CHEE] is the Choctaw for welcome. This guidebook has been prepared to assist you in your exploration of Chucalissá. This is a self-guided tour of the museum, the mound group, and the nature trail. We hope that you enjoy your visit to Chucalissa and will return again soon. Words that are underlined in this guide are explained in the glossary at the end of this booklet.

Chucalissa

Chucalissa [CHUCK- AH- LIZZA] is a Choctaw word for “abandoned house.” The village on this site was deserted when Europeans moved through this area in the late 18th century. Archaeology shows us that the site was occupied, abandoned and reoccupied several times between 1000 and 1550 AD. Chucalissa was part of a larger political and cultural system that archaeologists call the Mississippian culture. At its height in the 15th century Chucalissa was home to 800 to 1000 people.

C.H. Nash Museum Exhibits

The museum is named for its founding director, Charles H. Nash, who served Chucalissa from 1954 to 1968. The museum curates an extensive collection of artifacts recovered through the systematic excavation of the site. The museum exhibitions discuss the history of Native Americans in the southeastern United States and their life-ways as interpreted through the science of Archaeology. The displays also discuss the contemporary Native American people of the region.

IT IS A VIOLATION OF STATE AND FEDERAL LAW TO REMOVE ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIALS FROM THIS AND OTHER PUBLIC LANDS.

Take nothing but photographs, leave nothing but footprints.
Chucalissa: The Self-Guided Tour

To Chickasaw Bluff Interpretive Trail
(see trail guide in back)
The Self-Guided Tour

This tour begins through the rear entrance of the museum and up the steps to your right. The building to your left is the Entrance Trench Stratigraphy exhibit. This exhibit is currently closed for renovation.

A. Dugout Canoe and Herb Garden

Starting at the top of the steps we see a canoe to the left of the path. This canoe was constructed from a single cypress log by repeatedly burning and scraping out small sections. This canoe is similar in shape and design to canoes we use today. The herb garden represents a small sample of medicinal plants used by Native Americans.

B. Corn Crib and Garden

To the north, along the path are the garden and corn storage crib. The corn crib was used to store dried foods such as corn and wild grains through the winter months. The legs of the storage crib were polished to keep mice and other small animals from climbing inside. In addition to meat and wild plants, the Native American gardeners could produce enough food to feed the whole village throughout the year. The high yields from these gardens allowed some members of the village to become full-time political and religious leaders, craftsman, and artisans.

The Three Sisters (corn, beans and squash) were the staple crops for the residents of Chucalissa. Other crops included tobacco, sunflowers, pumpkins, and gourds. These are all crops that were domesticated by Native American peoples, and were introduced into the Mid-South region around 300 AD. The reliability of these crops allowed the Mississippian people to develop permanent settlements and towns. Native Americans used the rich fertile soils of the flood plain located at the base of the bluff to grow a variety of crops. Gourds were grown and dried for use as jars, bowls, cups and dippers. Wild plants including nuts, berries, roots and seed grasses were gathered and provided diversity to the diets of Mississippian people.
C. House Life

Next on the path are examples of two houses. Hundreds of years ago this area was the site for dozens of structures similar to the houses you see here. These reconstructions approximate the dimensions and building pattern for a typical late Mississippian house. The average Mississippian household included 4 adults and several children. Their houses were constructed from a log framework that was covered with sticks and river cane. The walls were then plastered on both the inside and outside with mud and clay to provide strength, fire protection, and insulation. The roofs were covered with grass thatch that was 16-20 inches thick to shield the occupants from rain. Smoke from the cooking fire would filter through the thatch and drive off bugs and pests. With maintenance a thatched roof can last from 10 to 15 years.

In addition to cooking and child care, Mississippian women harvested cane and other plants for use in woven mats, and tanned hides for clothing. Men worked together to clear fields and to hunt and fish. Turkey, deer, bear, duck, rabbit, and other game animals were hunted and trapped for their meat, hides, and fur. Traps, poisons and darts were all used to catch a variety of fish, shell fish, and turtles. Archaeologists discover what the people of Chucalissa ate by examining their midden deposits.
To the north you will find the Chickasaw Bluff Interpretive Trail. This trail is a little over 1/2 mile in length and will take approximately 30 minutes to complete. Please use the trail guide in the back of this booklet to explain the various points of interest.

**Mound Group and Plaza**

Mississippian towns, including Chucalissa, were arranged in a common pattern. A mound complex marked the center of the village with a large open area, or plaza. Chucalissa had a Chief, but may have been under the control of a “Big Chief” from a larger mound site. It is possible that Chucalissa, along with other nearby mound sites (DeSoto, Walls, Commerce Landing, and Hollywood) were all members of one political group and governed by the political power of a “Big Chief.”

**D. Platform Mound**

Flat-topped, rectangular mounds are a prominent feature of Mississippian Period village and town sites in the Southeast. Such mounds, often called “temple mounds” were used as platforms for temples and the houses of chiefs, shamans, priests, and other town leaders. Mound groups served as cultural and ceremonial centers for larger areas. Most people associated with Chucalissa lived outside the village just as many people today live in the rural areas around Memphis and other cities.

Constructed in stages from around 1350 – 1600 AD, the large platform mound at Chucalissa was constructed from basket loads of dirt carried from a borrow pit.
This mound measures over 150 feet across at the base, about 100 feet long at the top, and 25 feet tall. A mound of these dimensions would have taken over 350,000 basket loads to build! Archaeological excavations indicate that two large structures stood on top of this mound. These were the chief’s house and another structure for formal gatherings. Postmolds indicate that these houses were 50 foot square structures with internal support poles. The structures had hard floors and a large central hearth. Excavations also revealed large storage pits near the outside walls, abundant food remains, and sherds of many high-quality household pots and dishes. From the top of the mound you can see a palisade wall behind the houses that provided defensive protection for the village.

E. Plaza

This space was used for religious, political, and social events. One important use of the plaza was the stick ball games held during community gatherings. Stick ball is a game similar to lacrosse; two teams try to move a small leather ball using two long sticks with baskets on the end. Without using their hands, they would pass the ball to one another and try to score points by hitting the pole in the corner of the plaza with the ball. Stickball matches between villages, called “little brother of war,” provided a way to settle disputes without resorting to actual warfare.

The plaza was surrounded by the houses of dignitaries, leaders, artisans, and shamans. Charnel houses, where deceased leaders and their family members were prepared for their journey to the afterlife, were also often located in or near the plaza.
F. Small Mound

This smaller mound is dome shaped and predates the platform mound by 100 years. Archaeologists have determined that it was at one time a platform mound. The mound has been subjected to farmer’s plowing and natural erosion for hundreds of years causing it to take on its current shape. Archaeologists have excavated this mound and found that around 1500 AD, an addition to the east side of this mound was added.

G. Residential Ridge Mound

This mound is a little harder to recognize as a mound since it is long, narrow, and not very tall. Built in phases between 1050 and 1600 AD, the residential ridge was the site for several houses. These houses were occupied by people of great importance and provide evidence of a royal or caste society where the chief was above everyone and the people that lived on this ridge mound were slightly above other village members in their rank and status. The people that lived on the ridge mound were probably involved with village politics and had front row seats to social events like feasts and stickball games.

Yakoke ("Thank you" in Choctaw language)

We hope you have found this tour helpful during your visit of Chucalissa. If you have any further questions about what you have seen here today please ask the attendant at the front desk. For further reading about Chucalissa and other Native American people and cultures or the Archaeology of the Southeast please visit our gift shop in the lobby of the museum.

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Glossary

Archaeologist- is a scientist who studies archaeology.

Archaeology (sometimes spelled archeology)- is the scientific study of past human cultures through the analysis of sites like Chucalissa and the artifacts that people left behind. Archaeologists use survey, excavation, detailed mapping, laboratory analysis, and typological comparison to piece together the past. Archaeology studies the evidence left by human beings to understand the life ways and cultures of the people who made and used these objects. Archaeologists study the entire assemblage of objects excavated from a site in terms of environment, technology, subsistence and belief systems.

Artifacts- are objects manufactured, used, or modified by humans such as pottery sherds and lithic tools. These artifacts are used by the archaeologist to understand the past.

Borrow Pits- are pits in the ground formed when the workers removed baskets of dirt to build mounds. One of the borrow pits used to build the mounds at Chucalissa is across from the picnic area you passed on your drive into the museum parking area.

Ceramic- The use of fired clay to make bowls, bottles, and jars. Effigy vessels are pots made in the shape of a person, animal, or other natural object. Mississippian ceramics are characterized by a crushed, freshwater shell temper which adds strength to the vessel making it less likely to crack when drying or firing.

Culture- is a set of learned beliefs, values, and behaviors (life ways) shared by the members of a society.
**Excavation**- is a term for the scientific digging and recording of an archaeological site. The archaeologist only excavates as a last resort to gain knowledge. An excavation can only be performed once because the placement of an artifact, its relation to other artifacts, and the stratigraphy is as important to the archaeologist as the artifact itself.

**Horticulture**- is the growing of fruit, flowers, ornamental plants, and vegetables in gardens. This is different from agriculture as they did not use machinery or domesticated animals in the cultivation or harvesting of the garden.

**Lithics**- are stone tools made and used by human beings. Stone tools include arrow points, axe heads, knives, scrapers, pipes and many other types of tool. You can see examples of these in the museum exhibitions.

**Midden**- is a scientific name for a garbage heap, or refuse pile. Today our garbage is picked up and taken to the city dump, but when the Native Americans were living here at Chucalissa, people put their garbage near their house or in a community pile. This garbage tells the archaeologist what kind of food, clothing, tools, and even toys they used.

**Mississippian**- is the general name given to the cultural period of the American southeast between 900 and 1600 AD. Mississippian traits include triangular lithic points, shell tempered ceramics, and flat-topped earthen mounds like those found at Chucalissa.

**Palisade**- is a strong, high wall made of logs intended for defense. Palisades were covered with mud plaster to make the wall fire resistant. A wall similar to this may have encircled the village at Chucalissa.
**Postmolds**- form when a wooden post decays, or is removed, leaving in its place a different colored dirt. The archaeologist recognizes the “U” shape of the postmold in the stratigraphy from an excavation. A series of postmolds may indicate a wall.

**Shamans**- are known by many names: medicine men; healers; spiritual leaders; *Huna* in Hawaii; *Babalawo* of the Yoruba people of Nigeria, West Africa; *Alikchi* in Choctaw; *Heles-haye* in Creek and many more. The term is used for an individual who derives power directly from the natural and supernatural worlds in order to heal sickness and to interpret events.

**Sherds**- are individual pieces of broken Native American pottery. The Archaeologist can learn much about how pottery was made and what it was used for by studying sherds.

**Stratifications**- are layers of dirt that provide Archaeologists with one of the major tools or clues for interpreting sites like Chucalissa. The Archaeologist is able to look at a cross-section, or wall, in the excavation and see how over time, debris, dirt, and soil stack up in layers. Color, texture, and contents may change with each layer. The archaeologist tries to determine how and when each layer was added. With this tool Archaeologists are able to determine that different people lived at Chucalissa over hundreds of years.

**Three Sisters**- are corn, beans, and squash that are grown together and protect each other. The corn stalks provide a pole for the beans to grow up and provide shade for the squash. The squash provide groundcover to prevent weeds and maintain moisture in the soil. Corn, beans and squash also complement each other for nutrition. Corn gives us fiber and carbohydrates, beans provide protein, and squash has vitamin A.
Chickasaw Bluff Interpretive Trail Guide

The Chickasaw Bluff Interpretive Trail is over 1/2 of a mile long and will take approximately 20 to 30 minutes to complete. Those individuals with health conditions or clothing that may inhibit safe hiking of the trail are encouraged to view only the section from numbers 8-14 that begins on the left side of the trailhead.

Chucalissa is a National Historic Landmark.

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Village Area closes at 4:30
1. Trailhead
This is the beginning of the Chickasaw Bluff Interpretive Trail. Please remember to stay on the designated trail and be aware of ticks, poison ivy and snakes. Remember, it is unlawful to remove archaeological material from state or federally protected property.

2. Hairy Vines
On the tree located behind this numbered post, you will see a thick, “hairy” vine. DO NOT TOUCH IT!! This vine is Poison Ivy. The thousands of hairs on the vine are actually rootlets that contain enough oily sap to cause an allergic reaction.

3. Borrow Pit
This is one of the many sites from which the people of Chucalissa dug the soil that was used to build the mounds at the site.

4. Ravine Overlook
Deep ravines, which surround the bluff, provided the inhabitants of Chucalissa with a defense from other tribes. From this point until you reach marker number 11, the trail winds through these ravines. The trail at some points is very steep and slippery. You may find it easier to return to the trail head at marker 1 and continue backwards to the overlook at marker 13.

5. Bluff Environment
Protection from annual flooding of the Mississippi River may have been one of the reasons that the Mississippian built their villages on the bluff top. Today the bluff is forested with a mix of deciduous trees including oak, elm, sweet gum, maple and hickory. The bluff-top was lumbered off in the 1920’s to create open areas of farmland.
6. Native Plants

Several patches of fiddlehead ferns can be seen growing in this area. The name for this plant comes from the fact that the young, tender shoots resemble the curved neck of a fiddle. The young plants are edible if prepared correctly. This plant is also known as the buckhorn and the cinnamon fern. Native Americans valued the new shoots as a delicacy to be added to soups and stews.

7. Tulip Poplar Trees

The tall trees in this area are tulip poplars, adopted as the state tree of Tennessee in 1947. The tulip poplar was selected because it was a major source of lumber used to construct the homes and barns built by the early settlers of the region. Tulip Poplars grow to over 200 feet in height without any branches for the first 50 – 100 feet.

8. Plant Road

400 - 500 years ago the bluff top was much larger than it is today. When the road way below was built the bluff was leveled out. Natural erosion and human activities, including those of Native Americans, have changed the landscape. The areas near the road are forested with fast growing species, including several types of locust trees.

9. New Ravines

Notice the shallow and steep-walled ravines under the bridges. These are relatively new ravines as they do not appear on survey maps from the 1970’s. It is estimated that ½ foot of the bluff washes away each year.

10. Native Plant

This is a patch of Sassafras trees. Different parts of these trees were used by Native Americans for a range of medicinal uses. The roots from the saplings are often used as flavorings in drinks such as root beer.
11. Bluff Overlook

300 feet to bluff edge, Continue trail.

12. Native Plants

This is an example of the berry patches that provided seasonal variety in the diets of Native Americans. Look closely for thorny blackberry and elderberry plants. Be careful, as rattlesnakes often “nest” in these patches.

Mississippi River

13a. In historic times, Horne Lake Creek was diverted away from the bluff edge to make room for the Yazoo and Mississippi Valley Railroad Line. This rail line is legendary in blues music lore as the “Yellow Dawg Line” named after the yellow boxcars. A few houses and a logging road were located 200 yards to the north. Please remember that these bluffs are very steep and are made of very loose soil. Be safe and do not go close to the edge of the bluff.

13b. A thousand years ago, this bluff stood at the bank of the Mississippi River. Today the river lies several miles north beyond the power plant. This bluff is made from wind blown silt, called Loess, which accumulated over thousands of years. Loess soils are easily eroded but are capable of holding almost vertical faces. Please be extremely careful of the bluff edge and the 75 foot drop to the railroad track.

14. Native Plant

This is the Pawpaw. Native Americans introduced this plant throughout the eastern portion of the United States. In the right conditions this plant provides an edible fruit that gives this species many names including the Pawpaw, Poor Man’s Banana, Hoosier Banana and Indiana Banana. They will typically grow 12-20 feet in height.
15. Agriculture
At the bottom of this bluff lies the rich fertile soil of the flood plain. The Native Americans used the flood plain to plant and grow a variety of crops. This provided the inhabitants of Chucalissa with a steady supply of food.

16. Village Site
Dozens of houses for the inhabitants of Chucalissa were located in this vicinity. The majority of the village population did not live near the mound group.

17. Wildlife
Today a large variety of animals inhabit the surrounding woods. While Chucalissa was occupied, several animals were hunted for food and for hides including rabbit, squirrel, raccoon, turtle, fox, bear, opossum, turkey, deer, and elk. If you are quiet, you may catch a glimpse of a deer or wild turkey.

18. Grape Vines
Behind this sign are shaggy, reddish brown vines. At times they seem to smother the trees. These vines provided the Native Americans with a seasonal supply of fruit.

19. Trench Site
Behind this sign you can see the remains of a trench that was excavated in 1940 by the University of Tennessee in conjunction with the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC).

As you enjoy the trail, keep in mind that the museum closes at 4:30 p.m. Therefore please return to the museum before 4:30 p.m. Thanks!
Chucalissa Events:

C.H. Nash museum and Chucalissa village is an active educational and archaeological facility. We offer several major events throughout the year that we invite you to attend, experience and enjoy.

- 5K Relic Run in March is a benefit fundraiser 5K (about 3.2 miles) competitive/fun-run coordinated with Memphis Runners Track Club (http://www.memphisrunners.com/).
- Powwow in April is a Native American cultural gathering with representatives of many Tribal Nations that includes music and dance exhibition and competition as well as authentic food and craft vendors.
- Summer Educational Program in June and July is designed to teach kids about archaeology, Native American traditional food, medicine, arts, crafts, hunting techniques, and much more.
- Choctaw Festival in August is a gathering of Choctaw to celebrate social dance, music, stick-ball, food, and spiritual activities.
- Native American Heritage Days in October is a youth program designed to allow K-12th grades to be entertained and educated through hands on activities, storytelling, and demonstrations that celebrate Native American heritage.

For information about the site, special programs and public events please contact us at (901) 785-3160 and on our website at www.chucalissa.org.
Charles H. Nash was born in 1908 and raised in Chicago. In 1932, he graduated from Beloit College in Wisconsin with a Bachelor’s degree in Anthropology. Nash then enrolled in the graduate program at the University of Chicago, working towards a Master’s degree in Anthropology.

In 1935, C.H. Nash left his graduate studies to work with the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) on their archaeological projects and was quickly promoted to Principle Investigator (PI). Nash continued working on TVA projects under the authority of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville on projects throughout the mid-south and southeast until 1942, when the onset of World War II halted all excavations within the program. One of the last projects conducted by UT prior to WWII was at the Ensley Plantation site, located 10 kilometers south of Memphis, Tennessee, in preparation for T.O. Fuller State Park. Although Nash was not involved with this excavation, he would eventually dedicate much of his career to this site.

In December 1954, renewed interest by UT, the Shelby County Board of Commissioners, and the Memphis Archaeological and Geological Society in the Ensley Plantation/T.O. Fuller mound site, spurred Tennessee State Governor Frank Clement and the State Department of Conservation to renew exploration of the site. C.H. Nash was recommended to head the T.O. Fuller mound site excavation and the development of a reconstructed Indian village. In 1957, Nash was appointed Tennessee State Parks Archaeologist overseeing the T.O. Fuller site, re-named as Chucalissa. Administration of Chucalissa was transferred to Memphis State University (MSU) in 1962, and due to Nash’s efforts, MSU (currently the University of Memphis) developed a major course of study in Anthropology, eventually leading to a Master of Arts program in 1968.

In 1967, C.H. Nash enrolled in the University of Mississippi’s Master of Arts program in Anthropology to complete what he had begun in Chicago, thirty-five years earlier. Nash completed his studies and thesis in one year while not ignoring his duties at Chucalissa. Charles H. Nash died on February 16, 1968, due to complications of influenza. His Master’s degree was awarded posthumously the following May. The museum at Chucalissa was named in Nash’s memory to honor his contributions to the site, his research in southeastern archaeology, and his commitment to public education.