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Chucalissa: Past and Present

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CHUCALISSA: PAST AND PRESENT

The Prehistoric Inhabitants

Chucalissa is the site of a prehistoric Native American town on the Mississippi River bluff at Memphis, a few miles south of the downtown area. The town was occupied and abandoned several times between A.D. 1000 and A.D. 1500, but our discussion here will be limited to the last village, which was occupied during the few decades before and after A.D. 1500. It is estimated that the population during that time may have been as many as 1500 people. The name "Chucalissa" is Choctaw for "abandoned house," but this was not a Choctaw village. Since the original inhabitants left no written records and had vanished before the arrival of European explorers who could write about them, we do not know who these people were or what they called their town.

Through archaeology, however, we do know a great deal about the inhabitants' way of life. We know that these people were farmers who built permanent houses from local materials, conducted elaborate political and religious ceremonies, and supported skilled town craftsmen. The community included at least three social classes: the town chief and his family, the skilled craftsmen and secondary chiefs and priests, and the ordinary townspeople. Captives taken in warfare and adopted into the community may have formed a fourth social class.

Corn was the main crop, supplemented by beans, squash, and probably pumpkins, gourds, and tobacco. Hickory nuts and persimmons were important wild plant foods. Dogs were the only domesticated animal; meat had to be obtained by hunting and fishing. Deer, raccoon, and turkey were the primary game animals. Bear, opossum, rabbit, squirrel, turtle, and ducks and geese were also hunted and eaten. Catfish and gar from bottomland ponds and bayous were the most important fish.

The town was arranged around a central plaza where the games, dances, and ceremonies were held. The chief's house, which served as a religious temple and government center, stood on the large platform mound facing the plaza on the north side. This mound was periodically increased in height as the buildings had to be replaced. People of secondary status lived on smaller mounds, now eroded into a single ridge, around the plaza. Commoners lived in houses built on the ground surface beyond the houses around the plaza. All the houses had a pole framework with clay-plastered walls and thatched roofs. The area around each house served as the family cemetery.

Daily life revolved around the needs of the corn crop and the manufacture of the tools, clothing, and household goods necessary for each family. Crops were planted with the aid of hoes made from deer shoulder blades and pointed planting sticks, then tended until harvest time. In late summer the "Green Corn Ceremony" was held to give thanks to the Sun God for the crop and ask his blessing for future crops. This was a high point of the year and included feasting, dancing, and political conferences as well as solemn religious ceremonies. Usually the corn was planted over a period of several weeks, so the harvest continued well into the fall. Enough corn and other crops were produced to last well into the following year.

Having no stores, all material items had to be made at home or acquired through trade. Such items included clothing made of woven plant fibers and deerskin, baskets of split cane, pottery, bows and arrows, fishing nets, wooden mortars and pestles, dugout canoes, axes, and a wide variety of other things. Highly artistic pottery, feathered robes, and items used in ceremonies seem to have been made by craft specialists.

Sometime during the early 1500s, before Hernando de Soto reached the Mid-South, the people moved away from Chucalissa, never to return. The houses gradually decayed and collapsed, then rotted away entirely as the forest reclaimed the town. Centuries of rain and snow softened the contours of the mounds and even eroded away parts of the site. By the time the land was cleared again, probably during the mid-1800s, little remained to indicate to the untrained eye that this had once been a flourishing town.

Chucalissa Today

Chucalissa escaped scientific notice until 1939, when the site was recognized by members of a Civilian Conservation Corps crew sent to develop a new state park. The University of Tennessee, then the only school in the state with an archaeological program, conducted test excavations here in 1940, and plans were made to develop the site as part of the park. These plans were interrupted and almost forgotten during World War II, but development was finally begun in 1955 under Tennessee State Park sponsorship. By 1959, nine houses and a temple building had been reconstructed, two major archaeological exhibits developed, and a museum building constructed. Two Choctaw families joined the staff as guides and craft workers.

As the college student training and research programs developed, it was realized that Chucalissa could best fulfill its promise as part of a college or university. Therefore, the site became part of Memphis State University in January 1962 and is now a research and educational facility of the Department of Anthropology.

Chucalissa offers guided tours, traveling exhibits, and a variety of special events for students as well as the general public. The Choctaw Indian Heritage Festival is held annually in August. Other events include a Girl Scout Badge Day, an Archaeology Day, and various demonstrations of crafts and early technologies. For more information, call the museum at (901) 785-3160.