



LOUISIANA'S ANCIENT MOUNDS HERITAGE AREA AND TRAIL

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In 1997, the Ancient Mounds Heritage Area and Trail was established to make an inventory of earthworks in northeast Louisiana. The long-term goal was to create a self-guided Mounds Trail on which visitors would be directed to historic markers that would describe the earthworks visible from the highway at those locations. A total of 360 earthworks was listed in 15 parishes in northeast Louisiana. A preliminary survey was conducted to assess the visibility of major mound sites from paved roads. In 2001–2002, 33 of the sites were selected for inclusion in the initial phase of the Mounds Trail program. The following year, 21 sites were added; of the 54 selected, 40 will have received markers by the end of 2005. During the entire selection process, only four site owners declined to participate.

The markers provide minimal information about the site (number of mounds, age, period of prehistory) because the text is limited to approximately 50–60 words (Figure 1). A self-guided tour booklet will provide additional information about each site as well as a color topographic map of the earthworks. Once a site is added to the Mounds Trail, a review and summary of previous work at the site is compiled, total station mapping of the earthworks is completed, and, when possible, the mounds are cored to define their stratigraphy and to recover radiometric samples for dating. Through 2005, radiometric dates have been obtained from 10 mounds of previously unknown age.

The Lagniappe

An unforeseen consequence of the Ancient Mounds Heritage Area and Trail in northeast Louisiana has been the conservation ethic exhibited by many of the owners participating in the program. Mound sites have been cleared of brush and thickets to improve their appearance, and earthworks have been removed from cultivation to prevent further damage to the site (Figure 1). What was envisioned as a means for the public to inspect many of the magnificent earthworks in northeast Louisiana has become a modest movement by landowners to protect the sites under their stewardship.

Twelve of the owners of the 40 marker sites have taken steps to enhance and/or preserve their earthworks. The most common action has been to remove underbrush and abandoned farm machinery from the mound site to improve its appearance and visibility. Two owners have stopped running cattle on mound sites to prevent further “hoof damage” to the mounds. Dead trees have been removed, site areas excluded from further cultivation, and house plans revised to protect the sites. Most of these activities were instigated by the owners, with only a few acting in response to suggestions by the archaeologists.

One site in particular exemplifies the attitude and response of the northeast Louisiana landowners. Insley (16RI3) is a mound group that dates from Poverty Point times (1700–1200 B.C.) to the Coles Creek period (A.D. 700–1200). Major portions of the site are owned by Lee Dell Lynch and James Foster Bullock (Figure 2). Mr. Lynch, a veteran of the Korean war, owns the best preserved mound, Mound K. Mr. Bullock, a veteran of Vietnam, owns four mounds, including a midden/mound that is Poverty Point in age, and Mound A, the largest mound on the site.

In 2003, archaeologists received permission from Mr. Lynch to map Mound K. The top of the platform mound was mapped, but the underbrush and thickets on the flanks of the mound were so dense that mapping was curtailed. Mr. Lynch told the archaeologists to return in a year and he would have the mound cleared for mapping. A year-and-a-half later, the archaeologists returned, and the underbrush and thickets were cleared. The mound had been transformed into a park-like setting—not only Mound K, but the adjoining property as well. After Mr. Lynch completed clearing Mound K, he received permission to clear the property next to his mound. As he continued, Mr. Bullock began to clear the area around Mound A. Where once was a mound obscured by trees and brush along its base, now is a mound visible from a distance of a half mile or more—and an impressive view it is. Mr. Lynch continues his project to this day.

Insley Mounds

Getting there: From I-10, travel south on LA Hwy 17 for approximately 4 miles. Turn east onto Martin Rd. and north onto Frankie Lofton Rd.



The Insley Mounds are located on the east edge of Macon Ridge just south of the confluence of Bayou Macon and Joe's Bayou. The number of mounds at Insley is unknown. Investigations in 1913 and 1935 identified four mounds and three have been verified archaeologically. However, other mounds may have existed along the terrace edge and to the west. The two largest mounds at Insley are visible from the road. Mound A is the largest mound and may have been a platform mound, but historic activities and erosion have altered its shape. At least five feet of fill were removed from the top, reducing its height to 20 feet, with an approximate diameter of 200 feet. Radiocarbon dates from under the mound suggest it was constructed during the Coles Creek Period, sometime around AD 1000. Mound K is a well-preserved platform mound that is 10 feet tall, 175 feet by 135 feet at the base and 140 feet by 70 feet at the summit. Radiocarbon samples from beneath Mound K date to AD 1025, suggesting that it also was constructed during the Coles Creek Period. Poverty Point Period (ca. 1500 BC) artifacts from the north end of the site (Locus D and Md. E?) show that people lived here more than 2000 years before the mounds were constructed.



Figure 2: Mr. Lynch (left) and Mr. Bullock (right) in front of the Insley marker. The mound in the background is the one cleared by Mr. Lynch.

What's Next?

As the Mounds Trail continues to grow, additional examples of ownership pride will occur. The program was developed as an alternative to the purchase of mound groups for public access, something neither the state nor the Archaeological Conservancy could afford. Instead, State Representative Francis Thompson of Delhi suggested the Trail, which would provide the public with visual access to the variety of earthworks in Louisiana. State Archaeologist Dr. Tom Eubanks has directed the project to its successful conclusion, as the last marker was cast in January.

Many of the sites have had their markers for more than a year, and not one complaint about trespassers has been expressed by the owners. But the added bonus of the protective stance many owners have shown alone makes the Mounds Trail a success. Unfortunately, mounds still are leveled for farming and urban development, so these cultural resources are fewer in number each year. The Mounds Trail initiative seems to offer a sanctuary to extant mounds by raising their public profile. Hopefully, its success will encourage more Louisiana landowners to enroll their mound sites in the program and also serve as a benchmark and incentive for other states considering similar initiatives.

Figure 1: A mock-up page from the self-guided tour booklet, which will provide additional information about each site as well as a color topographic map of the earthworks.