

Archaeological Sites and Site Types

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An archaeological site can be generally defined as a place where human activity occurred and materials were left behind. Prehistoric sites are those at which such activities occurred prior to the advent of written records. In Mississippi, sites falling into this category cover several thousand years beginning during the Paleolithic era (as early as 10,000+ BC) and continuing until the period of European exploration, trade, and colonization (initiated by the DeSoto Entrada in 1540).

A variety of types of sites are represented within the prehistoric archaeological inventory. Sites occupied for only short durations of time or during specific times of the year can be classified as **temporary camps**. Others, having a particular use are identified as **special purpose sites** while those inhabited year round might be classified as **permanent villages**.

Site types and frequencies vary through time. In general, temporary camps are more common during earlier prehistoric times when people were more transient, frequently relocating to take advantage of seasonally available food sources. Semi-permanent and permanent villages begin to appear as groups become more sedentary, coming to rely on the gathering and cultivation of specific plants for their dietary needs. As might be expected, sites occupied for greater lengths of time tend to have a greater size and depth than less permanent ones.

It is also at a later date that sites with mounds become more common. Such sites, used for burial and/or ceremonial and administrative functions are probably the best known of the prehistoric archaeological sites in the state because of their visually impressive mound features.

Mound sites however, represent only a very small portion of the total inventory of prehistoric sites. In fact, many of the prehistoric archaeological sites in Mississippi cannot be identified as to site type or temporal placement. Many are nothing more than scatters of lithic material (stone chips and flakes) on the surface of a field. This situation may be a reflection of the short duration of occupation at the site. In other instances it is a result of erosion whereby the soil at the site has been washed away.

Sometimes, the cultural deposits at a site do extend beneath the surface. These deposits, when undisturbed, have the potential for providing important scientific information. Often, however, such deposits have been mixed due to plowing. And all too frequently they have been spoiled by those that dig for artifacts with no regard or concern for the fact that they are destroying the site (and a part of our state's (pre)history in the process).