

CADDO MOUNDS

state historic site

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TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION

Welcome to Caddo Mounds State Historic Site. People have lived in the Neches Valley of East Texas for thousands of years. Archeological evidence suggests nomadic hunter-gatherers passed through and camped in this alluvial prairie near the Neches River prior to Caddo settlement around A.D. 800. The most successful prehistoric group in the area, the Caddo

established a permanent settlement that survived about 500 years in this location. The fertile soil, abundant water sources, surrounding forests, and position on trade routes were the perfect setting for a community that, at its peak, covered about 90 acres and served as a ceremonial center for the Caddo. The three earthen mounds stand as testament to their legacy.



Cover: carved stone effigy pipe



THE CADDO

When Caddo peoples moved into the Neches Valley area around 1,300 years ago from the east and northeast, they brought with them mound-building traditions of cultures spread throughout portions of the modern-day South and Midwest during the Late Woodland-Mississippian periods. A group of Caddo known as the Hasinai inhabited this plain and built the three prominent mounds as focal points of religious and civic rites. Temples and houses for community leaders were built on the largest mound. The lower mound was a platform mound where ceremonies were held, and the third mound was used for the burial of religious or political leaders. At the height of their civilization, circa A.D. 1100, the Caddo were the most highly advanced society within the boundaries of present-day Texas. It is unknown why the Caddo abandoned this site around A.D. 1300, but it was premeditated, as evidenced by the final layers of clay capping the mounds.

Trade

The Hasinai Caddo had an extensive trade network that connected this village to others throughout the Caddo territory of northeastern Texas, eastern Oklahoma, western Arkansas, and northwestern Louisiana. Various stones used for tools and arrow points were imported from regional partners, while certain other recovered materials such as marine shells and copper likely hailed from such far-flung locales as Florida and the Great Lakes region. In exchange for imported goods, the Caddo may have traded bows from bois d'arc trees and salt from local salt springs.

European explorers and settlers encountered the vast trade networks of the Caddo in the 17th century, and the Spanish established outposts along the routes. Eventually, the main corridors became known collectively as El Camino Real de los Tejas. Part of El Camino Real is still visible at Caddo Mounds State Historic Site.



A marine shell necklace

Life at Caddo Mounds

Surrounding the mounds were two spheres that divided classes within Caddo society. The inner village closest to the mounds was where the political and spiritual leaders lived. The remainder of the village housed the commoners, who provided the labor force for mound- and temple-building and food production. Round, beehive-shaped houses were made of thatch and ranged in size from 25–45 feet in diameter, housing 30–40 people in each.

The spiritual and political center of the village, the High Temple Mound provided a base for public buildings of worship or government. It was at least three times its current length and reached 35 feet tall. Archeological evidence suggests that, from time to time, the buildings on top of the temple mound were ceremonially destroyed by fire and then rebuilt on a layer of fresh dirt brought in to cover the charred remains. In this way, the mound grew over time. A peculiar, large structure located nearby was deemed “The Maze” by archeologists, who surmise that its purpose was likely ceremonial.

Archeologists do not know the reason for the burns on the Low Platform Mound or its connection with the burial mound, but fire played an important role in Caddo spiritual life and their creation story. It is believed that special ceremonies took place on the Low Platform Mound. Historical accounts indicate there may have been a perpetual flame kept in one temple and guarded over by the *xinesi*, or village leader. Other heads of the community were the *caddi*, or chief, who was supported by the *canabas*, or council of elders.

The burial mound was about 20 feet tall and 90 feet in diameter when the village was abandoned. A series of archeological excavations beginning in 1939 has determined that it was built in successive stages and contained around 90 bodies in about 30 burial pits. Refined objects found buried with the dead suggest the mound was reserved for community leaders, and evidence suggests family members or servants may have been sacrificed and interred along with them.

Borrow pits located around the perimeter of the village provided soil to construct the mounds. Laborers hauled the earth in baskets. Additional local natural resources were used in daily Caddo life: trees and thatched brush from the

forest became construction materials for temples and homes; clay and cane were culled from rivers for ceramic pottery and baskets; sandstone was used for milling and grinding. The Caddo were accomplished farmers, and the rich, sandy loam soil yielded crops of corn, beans, squash, pumpkins, amaranth (a grain), and sunflowers. The dense forest contained nuts and other wild edibles, as well as deer, turkeys, squirrels, and other wildlife, while the nearby Neches River provided catfish and bass for the Caddo diet.

Living Legacy

After abandoning this site, Caddo groups remained in East Texas for a few centuries. The common historical view of the origin of the Texas name is that Hasinai groups that encountered Spanish explorer



Caddo youth perform a traditional ceremony.

Alonso de León called him *tejas*, meaning friend. Over the next couple centuries, tension with Anglo colonists caused the Caddo to move west toward the Brazos River. In 1859, the U.S. government moved the Caddo to Indian Territory in present-day Oklahoma, where the Caddo Nation remains today. Caddo Mounds State Historic Site remains a sacred place for many Caddo, some of whom return to connect with their heritage.

Many of the ceremonies and traditions that the Caddo people practiced during their settlement at the Caddo Mounds site are kept alive today by members of the Caddo Nation. Caddo culture clubs, societies, and craftspeople are working to preserve and practice traditional dances, language, ceramics, and other cultural elements. These are shared with younger members of the Caddo Nation and others who have an interest in early Caddo heritage and culture.