

Alabama's Archaeological Sites: A Fragile Responsibility

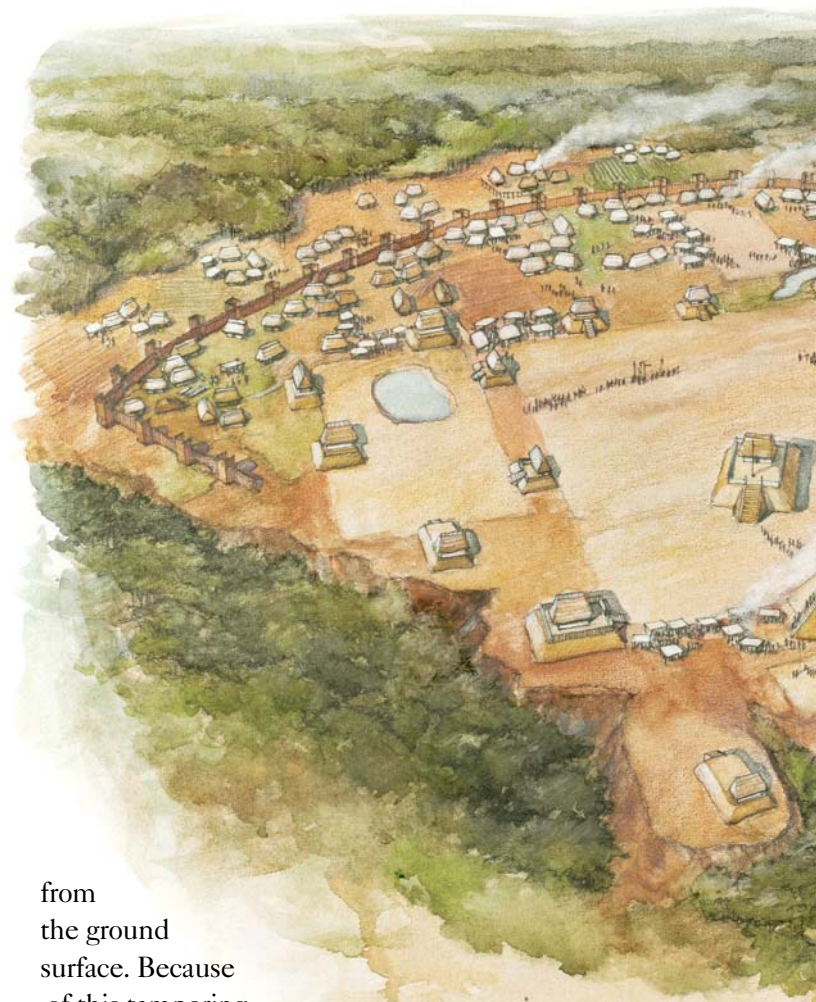
The archaeology profession often becomes a race to beat hurricanes and hobbyists to the dig. Our knowledge of the prehistoric past depends upon who gets there first.

By Ian W. Brown

Avast portion of Alabama's story lies neither in documents nor in memories. Buried in the landscape are the priceless clues as to who came before us. There we find evidence of the beliefs, social and political structures, health, diet, mortality, and the rise and decline of ancient southeastern societies. Buried and submerged artifacts—when responsibly analyzed—give a voice to the slaves, children, women, and men who never took up a pen to record their existence. But the remnants are fragile. They can be erased in a moment by man or nature. Floods, erosion, storms, cultivation, construction, theft, and vandalism all threaten irreversible damage—a past forever lost.

The early occupants of Alabama, like us, often chose to locate their homes and fields near water, leaving vestiges of their culture both beneath and near the state's waterways. The materials left underwater are often the safest from deterioration. Many dug-out canoes and Civil War-era boats survive today because they remain submerged, removed from the effects of air. They are endangered less by the water than by the risk of being removed without expertly controlled conditions. Sites on land, however, are threatened by the forces of water in a number of ways.

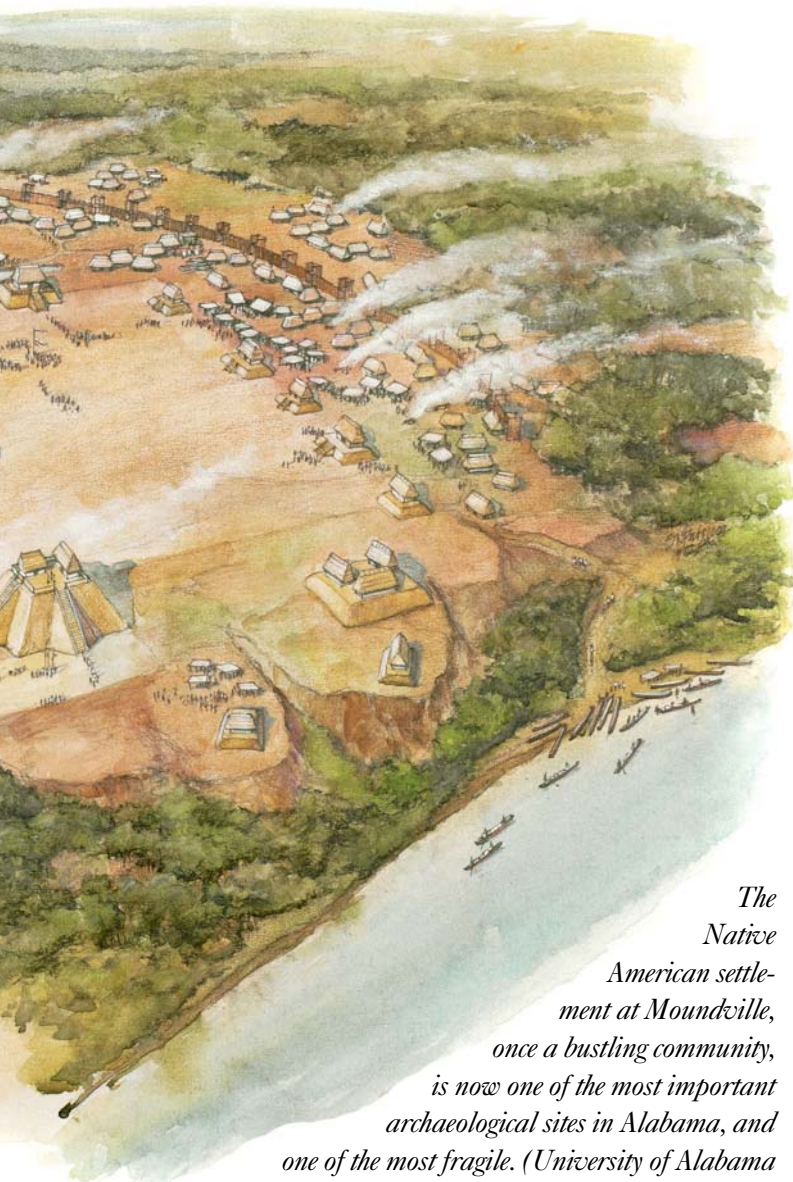
Blackwell's Bend on the Alabama River, southwest of Selma, presents a fascinating and disturbing example of the destructive capabilities of both nature and humans on prehistoric sites along rivers. Archaeologists looking for villages visited by the early Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto were unable to detect the presence of a site at Blackwell's Bend, because looters had removed artifacts



from the ground surface. Because of this tampering, experts did not know the value of the site until the river flooded in 1990, washing away several feet of topsoil to reveal strange pedestals—the compacted surfaces where Native Americans had dug and refilled the earth throughout the centuries, creating fire hearths or storage pits. Much of what we might have learned from the site was washed away, perhaps taking with it irreplaceable clues about one of history's most enduring mysteries: the route of Hernando de Soto through Alabama.

While floods may bring rapid destruction before protective measures can be taken, erosion is a comparatively slow process that, if detected in time, can be

halted. Countless numbers of archaeological sites in Alabama are slowly being eroded, falling into the rivers that long ago attracted people to settle along their banks. Moundville, one of Alabama's most precious archaeological sites, was threatened by serious erosion. The site lies on the outer bank of a bend in the Black Warrior River—



The Native American settlement at Moundville, once a bustling community, is now one of the most important archaeological sites in Alabama, and one of the most fragile. (University of Alabama Museums, Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Image by Steven Patricia)

a location that once offered the Moundville community a commanding view of the area and a fluid highway for interaction with other people.

The effects of erosion at this sharp bend of the river are accelerated by two factors. First, the water flowing downstream strikes the riverbank as it rounds the curve. Second, barges traveling on the Black Warrior River often fail to navigate the bend effectively and become

stranded in this area. When towboats attempt to free them, the forceful wake of their propellers causes further instability and slumping of the shoreline.

Preventive measures have been undertaken to protect the Moundville site from further destruction. The shoreline along this bend in the Black Warrior River has been stabilized with rip-rap—an embankment of loose stones. Meanwhile, unknown numbers of other sites along Alabama's waterways continue to be washed away.

Further south, archaeological sites face the more ferocious effect of hurricanes. Millions of dollars in property damage have resulted from wind, rain, and flooding associated with these powerful storms. Harm to archaeological sites is well documented, though the full impact cannot be known. Hurricanes Ivan in 2004 and Katrina in 2005 inflicted damage on sites across the entire northern Gulf coast, even harming excavated collections stored in facilities inundated by storm surges. Archaeologists with the University of South Alabama's Center for Archaeological Studies witnessed firsthand the effects of powerful hurricane winds, well in excess of a hundred miles per hour, as they uprooted thousands of trees and literally tore archaeological deposits from the ground. Over the past thousand years, it is thought that about 230 major hurricanes have impacted the Alabama coastal region.

Although the destructive forces of nature will not be stopped, protective measures can reduce the damage. Our best hope lies in early identification of critical sites and reinforcement of fragile embankments, river bottoms, shorelines, and storage facilities.

Beyond the forces of nature, many of the risks to archaeological sites are man-made. Whether for purposes of economic progress, exploitation, vandalism, or misguided scavenging, many potential treasures have been destroyed or rendered meaningless by conscious human decisions.

Industrial development, including logging, mining, highway construction, and hydroelectric plants all have played important roles in the economic development of our state. Unfortunately, such activities often have had a devastating effect on Alabama's cultural resources. During the past thirty years, new federal laws have curbed the impact of some development on archaeological and historic sites. These laws, however, do not apply to development on private land if there is no federal involve-

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ment in the project. As a result, the fate of many sites is in the hands of individuals or industries.

The Fusihatchee site, located in the Tallapoosa River valley near Montgomery, represents the remains of a historic Creek Indian town. Following the defeat of a Creek faction at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend, Gen. Andrew Jackson burned the town of Fusihatchee. Though this site offered valuable information on the development of historic Indian tribes, a gravel mining operation has almost entirely obliterated it. Fortunately, the gravel company did allow Auburn University archaeologists to excavate a major portion of the site, and in 1991 and 1995 Fusihatchee was also the focus of the Alabama Museum of Natural History's Expedition program. This program brought together archaeologists, students, and volunteers to excavate Fusihatchee and obtain data prior to the site's destruction.

Ian W. Brown examines archaeological deposits exposed by a deeply eroding gully at the Patricks Landing site (1Ba346), Baldwin County, 1996. (Gulf Coast Survey, University of Alabama Museums, cat. no. GCS/96/N13/24)



Volunteers on the Alabama Museum of Natural History's Expedition help excavate portions of the Fusihatchee site (1Ee191), Elmore County, 1995. Note how the quarry has destroyed most of the site. (Gulf Coast Survey, University of Alabama Museums, cat. no. GCS/95/P1/19)

Industry also threatened the historic site of Old Mobile but with a different outcome. Established by the French, the original Mobile settlement, located north of the modern city, was occupied from 1702 to 1711. Its location was not known for years, so the site experienced very little vandalism. Once identified, the main landholder, DuPont, granted an easement to the Archaeological Conservancy, a nonprofit organization dedicated to purchasing and preserving archaeological sites throughout the United States. This easement allows the conservancy to have continual access to and control over the archaeological resources at Old Mobile. This example of cooperation between industry and archaeology illustrates that economic development and cultural heritage are not necessarily incompatible.

Industrial activities such as logging and coal mining also have had a destructive effect on archaeological sites in Alabama.

More Than a Bottle: The Vital Importance of Context

In the field of archaeology, context is vital. Where an artifact lies, and what lies around it, are as important as the item itself. Two artifacts from Old Cahawba, the archaeological site that was once Alabama's capital city, illustrate what is lost when looters remove relics from sites. A whole wine bottle was dug up at Cahawba by a collector. The shape of this bottle suggests that it was manufactured during the early 1820s when Cahawba was the capital of Alabama. Unfortunately little else can be learned from this object, because it was carelessly ripped from its archaeological context. It will forever be mute about the lives that were once associated with it.

Conversely, another identical wine bottle, although only a broken fragment, speaks volumes about the long-dead people of Cahawba. Volunteers working with professional archaeologists carefully peeled back the soil layers around this broken bottle. They precisely noted artifacts within the same soil layer, and recorded the complex relationships that tied it to other artifacts and other observable features in the soil. Like crime scene investigators, the archaeology team uncovered a long lost story, because they were as interested in the context of the artifact as the artifact itself. The team discovered this broken bottle in the bottom of a shallow rectangular pit in the far back corner of the lot on which Alabama's first statehouse was built. The pit was located just inside a fence that enclosed the grounds of the statehouse. None of this was visible above ground, but archaeologists, trained to see and feel significant soil differences, used small trowels to carefully expose the darkened soil from the rotted fence posts, the churned mottled soil from post holes, and the fill from the rectangular pit—all features that were constructed nearly two hundred years ago by the residents of Cahawba.



The ca. 1820s bottle on the right, excavated by a collector, is lovely but, having been removed from its environment, tells us little about the world that left it there. The bottle fragment on the left, carefully excavated and studied by experts at Cahawba, offers a fascinating peek into frontier life and evidence to support the stories of costly “parties of pleasure” in the state’s capitol. (Both courtesy Old Cahawba Archaeological Park)

Archaeologists usually find many broken plates on early nineteenth-century sites, but these excavators found none. Instead, they found this bottle lying among a dozen or more other broken wine bottles, a broken whiskey decanter, and some broken glass tumblers. All were forms used in the early 1820s. The most intriguing bit of evidence, however, was the many broken pieces of thin, pale blue window glass stacked in the bottoms of the broken bottles. Alabama's first statehouse would have had windows made of exactly this type of glass.

The Cahawba statehouse was a large brick building within a new settlement of small log cabins. For a while, it was the only building in Cahawba suitable for large gatherings. Taken together, this assemblage of broken artifacts and associated features tells a story of a drinking party at the statehouse that apparently became rowdy enough to break some windows. The last person to have touched these artifacts before they were excavated apparently found that stacking the broken window glass in the bottle bottoms was the safest and most efficient way to transport all those sharp glass shards outside. Historical documents provide more contextual data, telling us of a ruling by Alabama's legislators that the townspeople could hold church and school in the statehouse, but that they could have no more “parties of pleasure” in the building because of broken furniture. A doorkeeper was hired, and rooms were locked. Archaeology, by revealing the material evidence of one of those historic “parties of pleasure,” reminds Alabamians in a very tangible way of the frontier character of their first capital.

One can only wonder what fascinating story the unbroken wine bottle could have told if it had been left in context and professionally excavated. Sadly, its story, a story left behind by an early Cahawba resident, can never be retrieved.

While the peripheral impacts of industry and heavy machinery are disturbing, the conscious destruction of archaeological sites by looting is inexcusable.



Vandals have used graffiti to damage pictographs at Painted Bluff, located near Guntersville Dam. (Jean Allan)

Many areas of Alabama are cut by logging companies prior to mining activities. Archaeological surveys are often conducted before mining operations begin, but since the areas have usually been repeatedly logged, most sites have been destroyed before these systematic surveys can be conducted. Once trees are removed, the ground becomes very susceptible to erosion. Rainfall or severe winds that occur after an area has been logged often will wash away much of the topsoil. As this soil is washed away, innumerable archaeological deposits are often eroded, too. Remaining sites may be impacted by the construction of the roads used to remove the logs.

The recent BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico is threatening archaeological sites on Alabama's beaches as well as submerged shipwrecks. Sunken ships, coastal Civil War fort sites, and prehistoric shell mounds could become toxic and too hazardous for archaeological inves-

tigation. If oil seeps into the mounds, it will also contaminate any carbon 14 samples, making the dating of these ancient sites difficult. Additionally, heavy machinery associated with clean-up crews poses a serious threat to archaeological sites along Alabama's coast.

While the peripheral impacts of industry and heavy machinery are disturbing, the conscious destruction of archaeological sites by looting is inexcusable. In Alabama, organized groups of "pot hunters" systematically locate and destroy sites in order to obtain artifacts that they either keep or sell illegally. Sites also are sometimes dug by curious individuals who do not realize that their actions are destructive. An archaeologist must be able to relate each artifact to others on the site to reconstruct a picture of what happened in the past. Artifacts removed from their locations without proper documentation instantly lose their interpretive value. Amateur scavenging retrieves items at the cost of knowledge.

Beyond moral conscience, though, are those who vandalize archaeological treasures. Paintings or carvings on cave walls and rock outcrops, for example—rare and valuable archaeological resources—suffer more than enough damage from weather, rock-splitting plants, and pollution. Shockingly, though, vandals have posed the primary threat to the preservation of rock art sites in Alabama. In the northwestern portion of the state, many sites have been covered with graffiti or totally removed. A human figure painted on a bluff near the Guntersville Dam is now obscured by the names and writings of recent visitors. The panels of geometric symbols that once covered the walls of the Sun Circle site in Dekalb County have been drilled and chiseled away. Vandalism has robbed us of some of the most wondrous evidence of our state's early inhabitants and how they lived.

These destructive activities are happening at an alarming rate across our state—far more occurrences than could be detailed here. At the current rate of destruction, it is estimated that over the next fifty to one hundred years there will be only a handful of prehistoric sites left. The responsibility is ours to harness the damaging forces of man and nature, or the stories of those who came before us will be silenced forever. **AH**

Archaeology and Taking Responsibility

So, what can you as an Alabama citizen do to help preserve Alabama's archaeological heritage? First, do not attempt to dig a site on your own. This would be very destructive. The techniques and skills for correctly digging a site are quite complex and require extensive education. However, there are opportunities to participate in Alabama archaeology under the supervision and guidance of trained archaeologists. The Alabama Archaeological Society and the Alabama Museum of Natural History both offer field opportunities for individuals interested in professionally supervised excavations of important archaeological sites.

Archaeology is often hot, dirty, and tiring, so the Alabama Archaeological Society also offers less strenuous ways to participate. Through its journal, newsletters, and meetings, archaeologists share recent discoveries. Alabama also has several significant archaeological parks, such as Russell Cave, Moundville, Old Cahawba, and St. Stephens, which make excellent family outings. The Alabama Archaeological Society web page is a great place to find appropriate ways to participate: <http://www.alabamaarchaeology.org/>.

Secondly, get involved with archaeological issues on the local or state level. Several Alabama laws have been enacted to help preserve valuable sites. In 1966 the National Historic Preservation Act was passed, acknowledging the commitment of our nation to save archaeological sites and other historic places for future generations. This enabling act allowed for the creation of the Alabama Historical Commission to oversee and protect the cultural resources of our state. A 1989 act allows any municipality in Alabama to create a historic preservation commission to address the specific preservation issues of a local area. Beginning in 2006 the Alabama Underwater Cultural Resources Act offered protection to archaeological sites and artifacts that lie under state waters. Recent measures also help protect all human burials equally, including ancient graves of Native Americans. You can be a positive force for Alabama's heritage by encouraging your elected officials to maintain or strengthen the laws that protect



Student volunteers painstakingly sort through artifacts collected from the archaeological dig at St. Stephens. (Robin McDonald)

our shared archaeological heritage. Also, if your town has a historic preservation commission, remind them that their enabling legislation covers archaeological remains as well as historic structures.

While these laws have helped save thousands of archaeological sites, even they are not sufficient to prevent damage to many cultural resources. With your help, however, more of our history can be preserved. If you find archaeological remains, leave them in place, note the location, take a picture if you can, and report it to archaeologists at a nearby university or at the Alabama Historical Commission. Remember, the removal or disturbance of archaeological materials is destructive and, in many cases, illegal. Your role in preserving Alabama's cultural heritage is a crucial responsibility.