LEWIS MOUND AND VILLAGE SITE (9BN39) AND THE PREHISTORIC ARCHAEOLOGY OF FORT STEWART MILITARY RESERVATION

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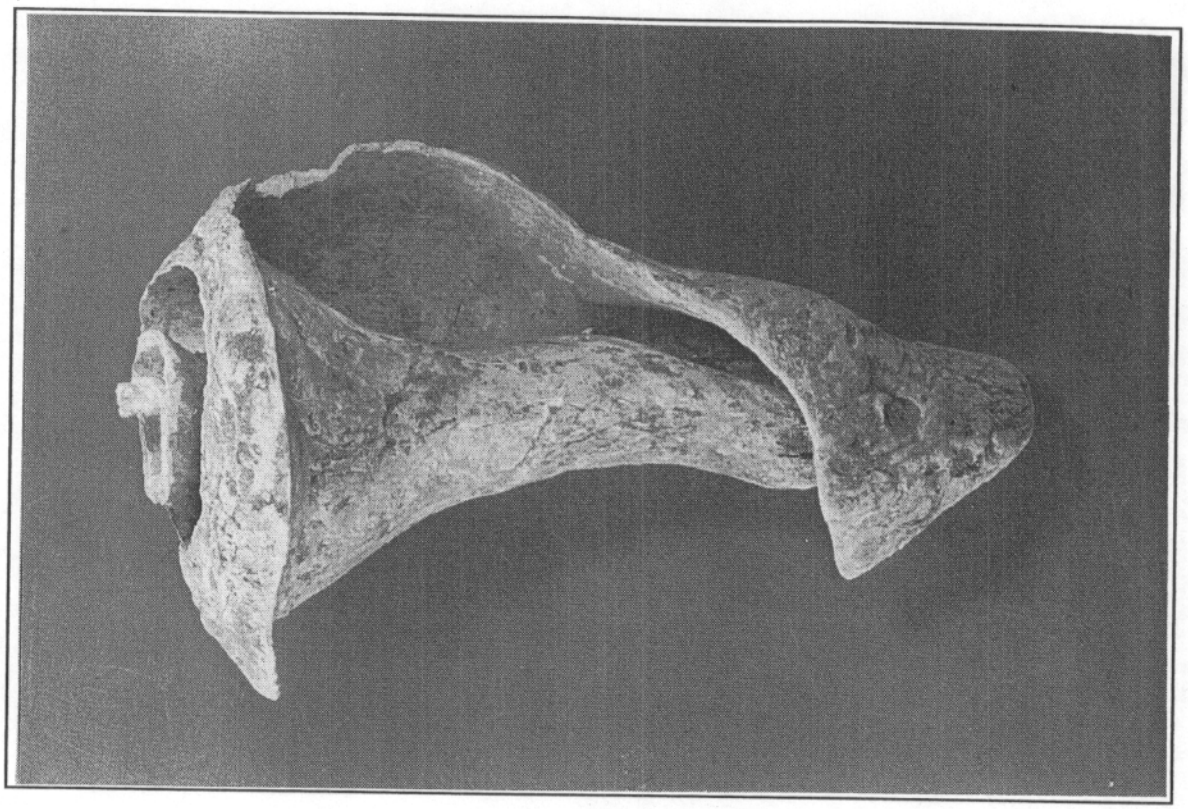


Frontispiece: Whelk shell recovered from Shovel Test North 570 East 520 on the Lewis Mound and Village Site (9BN39)

A.D. 1200 - 1300.

The long period known as the Middle Ages was beginning to draw to a close in Europe. In England in 1215, King John was forced to sign the Magna Carta, bringing an end to the age of royal privilege. In Italy, the city-states of Venice and Florence began to emerge. To the east, Genghis Khan and the Mongols had invaded much of Asia. To the west in the Americas, Mayan civilization was on the wane as the Aztec empire emerged.

Meanwhile, in the area that would much later become Fort Stewart Military Reservation, a tribe of Native Americans gathered to construct a memorial to a fallen leader. After an elaborate ritual, perhaps including the cremation of the body, the remains were sealed in a mound of earth that had been gathered by the basket load by the family and subjects of the deceased. Miraculously, the memorial they created, which we have designated as the Lewis Mound, survives to this day on a wooded portion of Fort Stewart.

We are familiar with the developments in Europe and Asia during the thirteenth century because they were recorded in written documents. But what of the history of North America before the arrival of Europeans? While the Aztecs and Mayans in Mexico developed written languages, the native populations of the United States did not. Although Native Americans recorded their histories in stories that were repeated from generation to generation, even the strongest of these stories, or *oral traditions* become diluted over the course of time.

Most of our knowledge of the native societies that flourished in Georgia before A.D. 1500 comes from small bits of pottery and stone, the only record of the countless generations who lived in the area prior to the arrival of Europeans. These artifacts allow archaeologists to date the Lewis Mound site, and to reconstruct the types of activities that took place on the site.

The Legacy Program

In order to find out more about the Lewis Mound site, the Department of Defense recently sponsored limited archaeological testing of the village area surrounding the mound. The project was funded by a grant from the Department's Legacy Program, which promotes stewardship of the environment. The work was completed in support of the nomination of the site to the National Register of Historic Places. In addition to recognizing the importance of the site, placing the site on the National Register will afford it greater protection from development or vandalism.

Figure 1. View of the Lewis Mound.

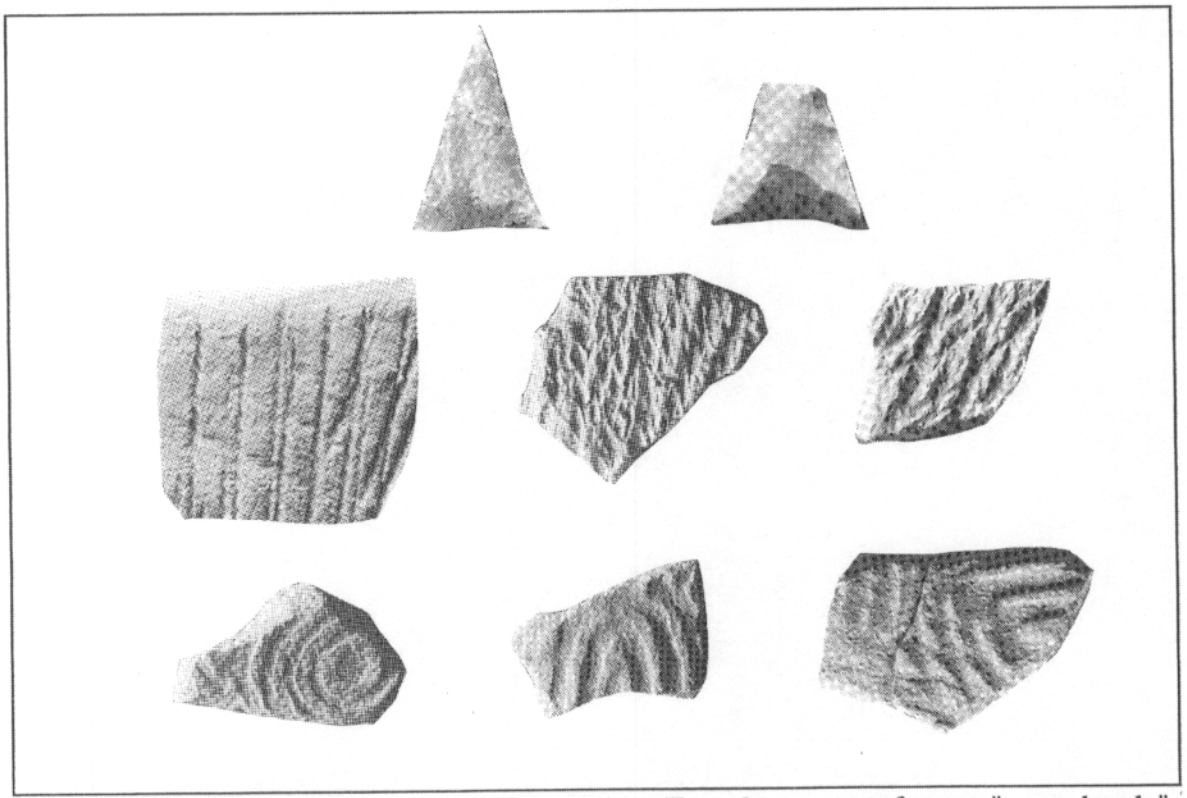


Figure 2. Artifacts from the Lewis Mound site. Top: fragments of stone "arrowheads", or projectile points. Middle: fragments of pottery impressed with a cord wrapped paddle. Bottom: pottery impressed with a carved paddle.

Archaeological Testing of the Lewis Mound Site

The first step in this testing program, as in virtually any archaeological excavation, consisted of mapping the site with a surveying transit. Figure 3 is a map of the Lewis Mound site. The production of a detailed topographic map such as this one is important, as the map serves as a permanent record of the site. In addition, mapping allows for the precise placement of excavation units.

With mapping complete, the next step in the project involved taking samples every ten meters (roughly 30 feet) across the site. These samples were retrieved from *shovel tests*, or small holes measuring about 30 centimeters (about 1 foot) wide and up to one meter (around 3 feet) deep. The soil from these holes was sifted through one-quarter inch mesh screen in order to recover bits of pottery, flaked stone, and any other artifacts. The shovel tests recovered many artifacts; in one instance over a hundred sherds of pottery were found in one hole. The soil conditions in each test were recorded, and the artifacts were bagged separately.

After all the tests had been excavated, the number and type of artifacts from each test were tabulated. The count for each type was plotted on the site map, and distribution maps for different types of artifacts were prepared. Two computer enhanced representations of artifact distributions (Figure 4) show how pottery and stone artifacts were scattered across the site.

As these maps demonstrate, the Lewis Mound is, in a sense, actually composed of many small, overlapping "mini-sites." The numerous concentrations of artifacts show that the site was reoccupied many times, with the Indians living and performing activities in slightly different places through time.

A comparison of these distribution maps reveals other facts about the site. While the distribution of pottery and stone debris generally overlap, there are several distinct concentrations of stone artifacts that probably represent *knapping* stations, or places where people went to manufacture stone tools. Concentrations of pottery, on the other hand, may represent cooking areas.

In many cases, these artifact-rich portions of a site represent areas where houses were formerly located. On the Lewis Mound site, the shovel tests data suggested that the heaviest concentration of artifacts was about 30 meters (100 feet) southeast of the mound itself, on the edge of a slight rise. Shovel tests on this portion of the site also contained a layer of dark

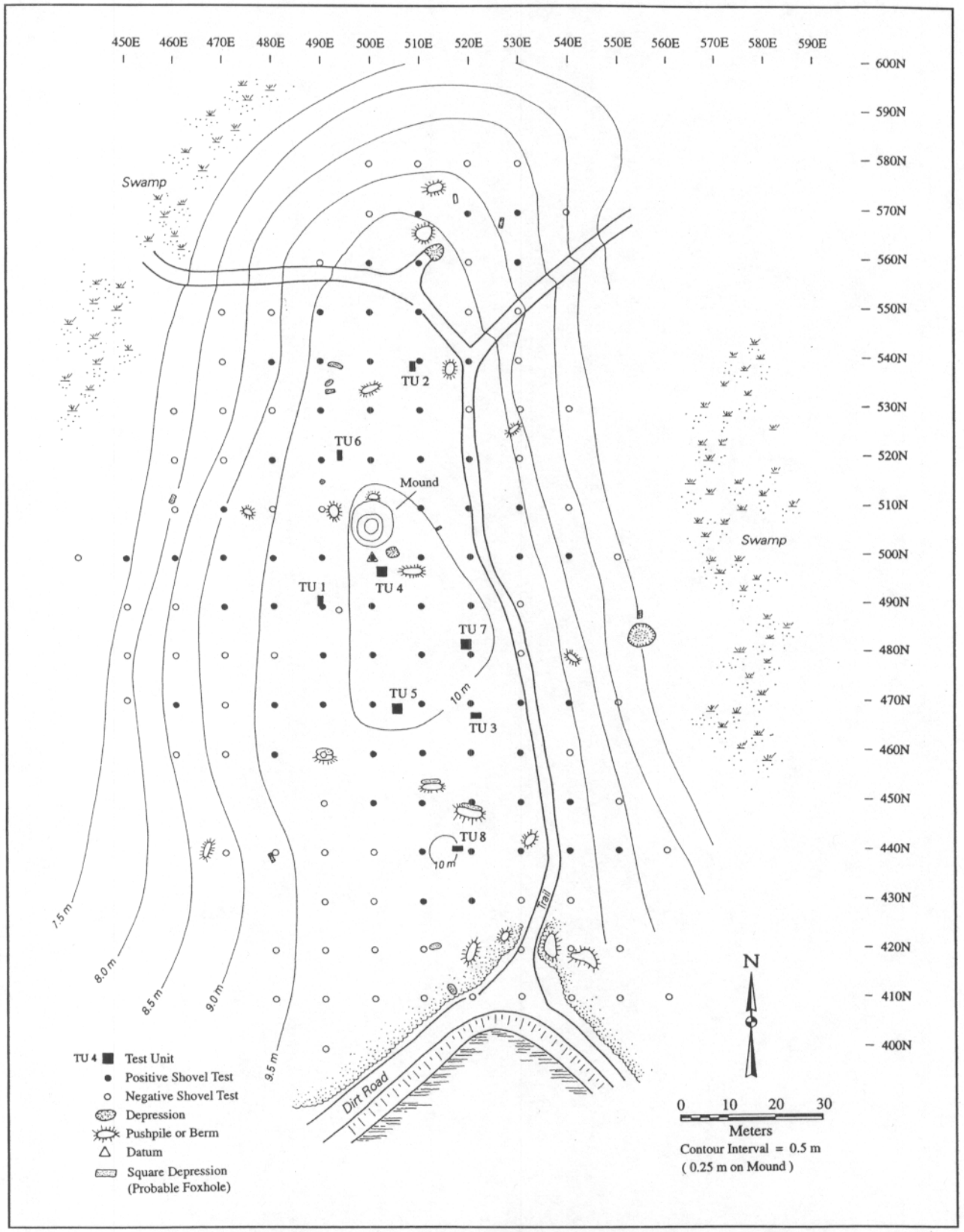


Figure 3. Map of the Lewis Mound Site Produced During Archeological Testing. As indicated in the key at bottom left, the circles represent shovel test locations, while squares and rectangles indicate the placement of test units.

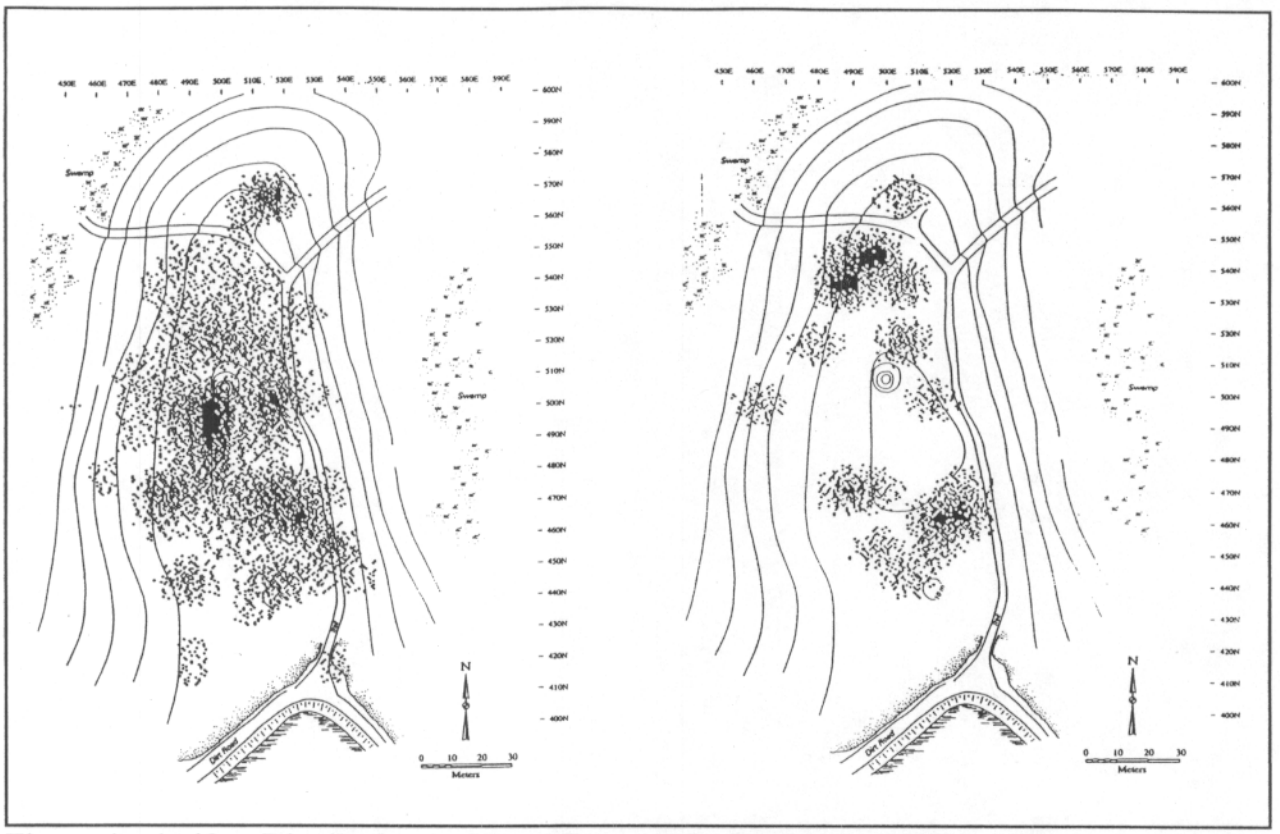


Figure 4. Artifact Distribution in Shovel Tests on the Lewis Mound Site. The map on the left shows the distribution of pottery. The one on the right shows the dispersal of stone artifacts.

black soil that probably resulted from the steady accumulation of organic debris from food waste and other trash. Interestingly, the area immediately surrounding the mound itself appeared to be relatively low in artifacts.

The distribution of artifacts revealed by the shovel testing guided the placement of larger *test units*. These excavations measured one by two meters (approximately three by six feet) and two by two meters (around six feet square or 36 square feet) in size. Test units were excavated very carefully, in levels exactly ten centimeters (or about four inches) thick. In this manner the upper, more recent artifacts can be separated from those that are older and more deeply buried. Again, the soil was sifted through one-quarter inch screen so that even very small artifacts would be recovered.

Archaeologists take great care in precisely measuring and recording the location and depth of their finds. Knowing which artifacts were found together or which artifact was found above or below another can be just as important as the artifacts themselves. The positioning of artifacts can help archaeologists determine when the they were used or what the artifacts were used for.

Figure 5. Excavation of a test pit on the Lewis Mound site.

One of the principal goals of excavating test units was to find and record *features*. Features are such things as trash pits, burials, hearths, and stains left by rotted or burned posts. Features reveal more about how the Indians were living than do artifacts. Pit features often contain food remains (such as charred seeds and bits of animal bone) that tell us what they were eating and what time of the year they were at the site. Post features can tell us what sort of houses they lived in. For example, a 20-foot ring of many small, round features might be indicative of posts from a circular Indian house.

As the excavation of test units on the Lewis Mound site progressed, stains indicative of possible features were occasionally noted in the soil. These areas were mapped and photographed, and excavated separately from the rest of the test unit. In some cases, these appeared to be the residue from pits or posts, while in others they were interpreted as simply old root molds or animal burrows.

Very few of the features identified on the Lewis Mound appeared to be the remains of Indian trash pits or posts. Generally, the sandy soils in this area do not preserve features well. Also, it should be noted that only a very small fraction (less than one percent) of the total site was excavated.

Analysis, Curation, and Report Preparation

Excavating a site is only the first step for the archaeologist. Usually for every day spent in the field, three or four days are spent in the laboratory cleaning, sorting, and describing the artifacts. Soil samples and pieces of charred wood are sometimes sent to special laboratories for dating. Bone fragments and charred plant remains are identified by specialists.

Patterns of where and what type of artifacts were found across the site are studied and compared to other sites. The end product of this work is a technical report that presents and interprets the data. This report is used by other archaeologists working in the area.

The artifacts, notes, and other material generated by the testing project will be permanently stored at Fort Stewart or another curation facility. This way, future archaeologists can use new techniques and theories to restudy the Lewis Mound site.

Careful, controlled, and well-documented excavations such as these preserve information, even as a portion of the site is disturbed. The taking of notes and photographs during fieldwork, the production of a report, and the curation of the artifacts assure that the work that is conducted will be useful for archaeologists in the future. In contrast, poorly controlled (and illegal) excavations, or *pothunting*, by those seeking artifacts for their own collections can destroy such information forever.

The History of Settlement at the Lewis Mound Site

From the various types of pottery and stone tools that were recovered during archaeological testing, it appears that the Lewis Mound site was settled a number of times over a period of a few thousand years. The favorable location of the site, on a hardwood hammock above the swamps adjacent to the Canoochee River, undoubtedly made it an attractive home site throughout much of prehistory.

Archaeologists recognize four major periods in the prehistory of the southeastern United States (Table 1). Although the area that is now Fort Stewart was visited by nomadic bands of hunters and gatherers as early as the *Paleoindian* period (9500 - 8000 B.C.), the results of our testing indicate that the first habitation of the Lewis Mound came several millenium later, near the end of the subsequent *Archaic* period (8000 - 1100 B.C.). More specifically, this initial settlement of the site occurred during

Table 1. Prehistoric Periods Recognized by Archaeologists for the Georgia Coastal Zone. Phases in italics are those during which the Lewis Mound site was inhabited.

Periods	Phases	Dates
Protohistoric	Altamaha	A.D. 1550 - 1700
Mississippian	*Irene*	A.D. 1300 - 1550
	Savannah	A.D. 1150 - 1300
	St. Catherines	A.D. 1000 - 1150
Late Woodland	*Wilmington*	A.D. 600 - 1000
	Walthour	A.D. 500 - 600
Middle Woodland	*Deptford*	400 B.C. - A.D. 500
Early Woodland	*Refuge*	1100 - 400 B.C.
Late Archaic	*St. Simons*	2200 - 1100 B.C.
Middle Archaic	Morrow Mtn.	6000 - 2200 B.C.
Early Archaic	Kirk	6000 - 5000 B.C.
	Palmer	7000 - 6000 B.C.
	Dalton	8500 - 8000 B.C.
Paleoindian	Suwanee	9000 - 8500 B.C.
	Clovis	9500 - 9000 B.C.

the *Late Archaic* period, broadly dated to around 2200 - 1100 B.C.

The Late Archaic period was a time that witnessed a number of significant changes over previous periods. First, shellfish became an important item in the diet, as the sea level finally stabilized after years of fluctuation. This allowed people to settle in one place for at least a few months out of the year. Many of the large shell rings on the Georgia Coast, such as those on Sapelo and Skidaway Islands, date to this period. Secondly, the first ceramic vessels were produced during the Late Archaic. This early pottery has Spanish moss added to the clay to facilitate drying and prevent cracking during the firing process.

A few sherds of this Late Archaic fiber tempered pottery were found at the Lewis Mound site. In general, however, Late Archaic artifacts proved to be fairly rare in our excavations, indicating that the site was only occupied for brief intervals during this period. The mound itself was not constructed for some time to come.

The Lewis Mound site continued to be occupied intermittently, probably for visits that lasted no more than few days, with the transition to the *Woodland* period, beginning around 1100 B.C. and continuing to about A.D. 1000. The use of cultivated crops increased during the Woodland period, and pottery technology became more advanced. Throughout most of the period, social organization probably operated at the tribal level, with individual groups sometimes consisting of 50 or more people. Ceremonial activities became more elaborate during the Middle Woodland, as evidenced by the long distance trade of exotic artifacts such as copper and marine shell. The earliest burial mounds in Georgia also date to the Middle Woodland period.

But the most substantial habitation of the Lewis Mound site occurred during the *Mississippian* period, generally dated from around A.D. 1000 to the time of European contact in the mid 1500s. Most of the artifacts on the site, as well as the mound itself, are attributed this occupation. The Mississippian period witnessed the cultural peak of prehistoric societies in the Southeast. Many of the changes during the period can be traced to the development of corn agriculture. Although corn was introduced to the Southeast during the Woodland period, it was not until sometime later that it became a dietary staple. The cutivation of corn, together with beans and squash and a variety of other crops, led to a rapid population growth and permitted the development of large, permanently settled agricultural villages.

As Mississippian populations began to live in larger settlements for longer periods of time, distinct social classes developed. At the top of this hierarchy were powerful chiefs. In contrast with earlier periods, where positions of authority were acquired through charisma or acts of bravery, these Mississippian chiefs usually inherited their positions, and served not only as political rulers but also as religious leaders or priests. They ruled by a sort of divine right, and backed up their claim to power by tracing their ancestry to the sun itself. In many cases, these "priest-chiefs" lived in large "temples" on flat topped earthen mounds, reflecting their elevated positions in society.

Unlike these temple mounds of the Mississippian period, the small burial mound at the Lewis Mound site was probably not that of such an all-powerful chief. However, we can say that it was probably constructed during the Mississippian period, and that it was undoubtedly built to commemorate a respected leader.

Burial ceremonies similar to that which took place at the Lewis Mound were recorded by early European explorers in the Southeast. Figure 6 is a copy of a 1591 engaving of a burial ceremony of the Timucua Indians of Florida. Note the whelk shell on top the mound. This is

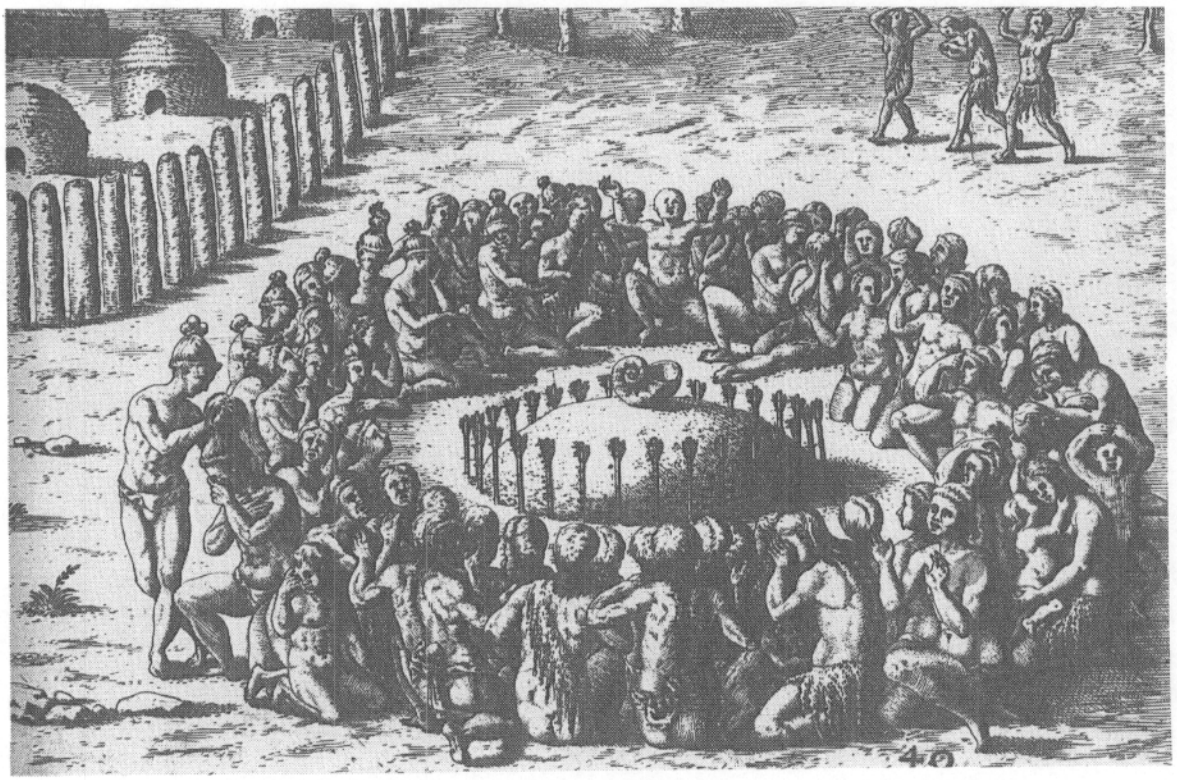


Figure 6. A 1591 Engraving of a Burial Ceremony of the Timucuan Indians of Florida by Theodore de Bry. Courtesy of the Hargrett Library, the University of Georgia.

similar to the shell from the Lewis Mound site on the cover. Although the example from the Lewis Mound is unworked, these shells were often carved into drinking cups for use in ceremonies associated with the taking of black drink, a tea made from the leaves of a coastal shrub. In an elaborate cleansing ritual, Mississippian Indians sometimes drank this tea after fasting for several days.

Mississippian Settlement of the Fort Stewart Area

Archaeological investigations in the portions of Fort Stewart surrounding the Lewis Mound site have revealed that it was one of a number of Mississippian period settlements on Fort Stewart. In contrast with the Lewis Mound, many of the surrounding Mississippian period sites on Fort Stewart contain fewer artifacts. These may simply represent the locations of less permanent homes, such as those that might be expected adjacent to garden plots during the summer, or near nut gathering locations in the fall.

As the largest of the Mississippian habitations in the area, and the only one known to include a burial mound, it seems likely that the Lewis Mound site was the social and political center of this cluster of settlements. The individual families based at the smaller sites probably congregated at the Lewis Mound at certain times of the year for important social occasions. The largest of these gatherings probably would have taken place during the summer, after the first harvest of corn and other vegetables. Other festivities would have coincided with the autumn nut-gathering season, and perhaps at other times of the year when fish were running up the Canoochee River. During the winter and early spring, the populations based in the area that is now Fort Stewart probably moved east to the marshes in order to collect shellfish and other marine animals.

It must be noted, however, that relatively little archaeology has been undertaken on Fort Stewart to date, and this picture of prehistoric settlement in the area must be considered preliminary. As more archaeological sites are identified, and as more sites are tested and excavated, our understanding of Native American life in the area will be greatly enhanced.

Mississippian Period Life at the Lewis Mound Site

Excavations in the area surrounding the Lewis Mound revealed relatively heavy deposits of Mississippian pottery and stone tools across a broad area of the site. The density of artifacts indicates that

it was a fairly permanent settlement, occupied throughout most of the year.

No direct evidence for houses was identified during our testing. From the distribution of artifacts on the site, it may be reasonable to suppose that the Mississippian settlement consisted of at least four or five small houses, probably the dwellings of a few related families.

On some other sites in the region, archaeologists have found evidence that fairly substantial homes (with plastered clay walls and ceilings) were constructed during the Mississippian period. However, the absence of such plaster, or *daub*, in our test pits suggests that the houses on the Lewis Mound site were probably less substantial. The reconstructed prehistoric house in Figure 7 may be a fairly accurate estimate of the type of post and thatch houses that were constructed on the Lewis Mound site.

Through our archaeological investigations of the Lewis Mound site, and by comparison with what we have learned from other Mississippian villages in the region, we can imagine what daily life must have been like on the site around the time the mound was constructed, at about A.D. 1200.

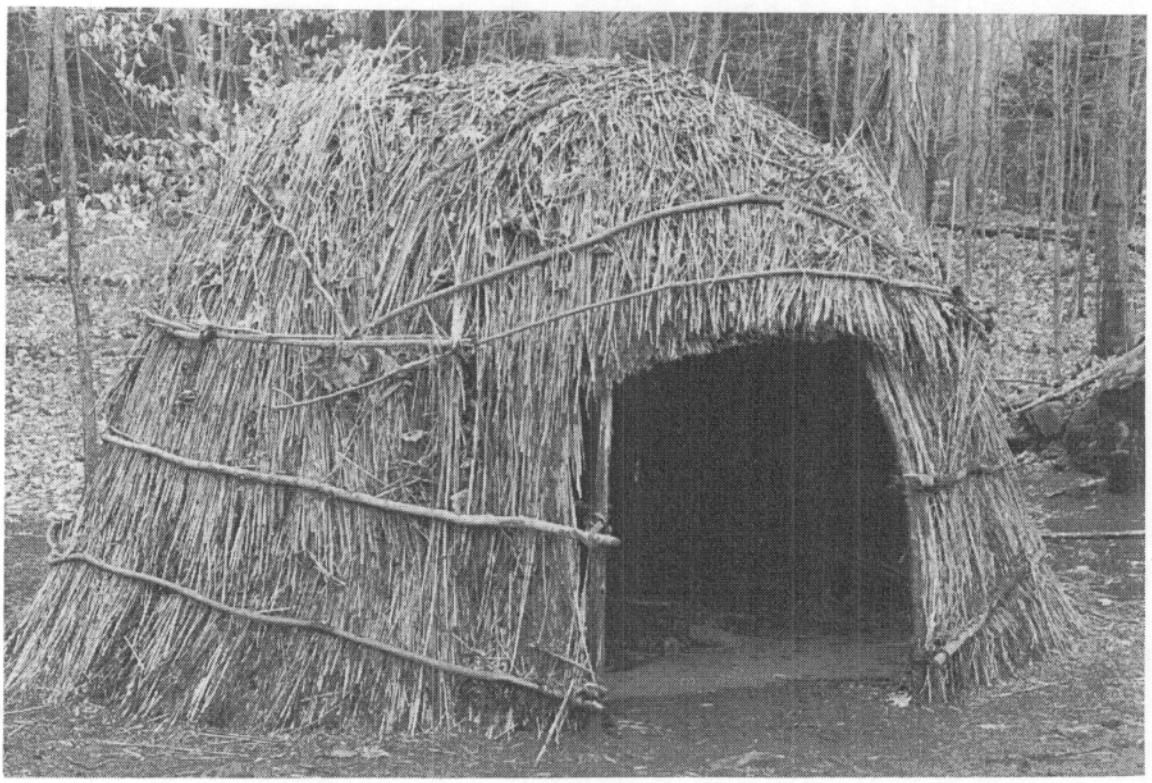


Figure 7. Reconstruction of a Prehistoric Home.

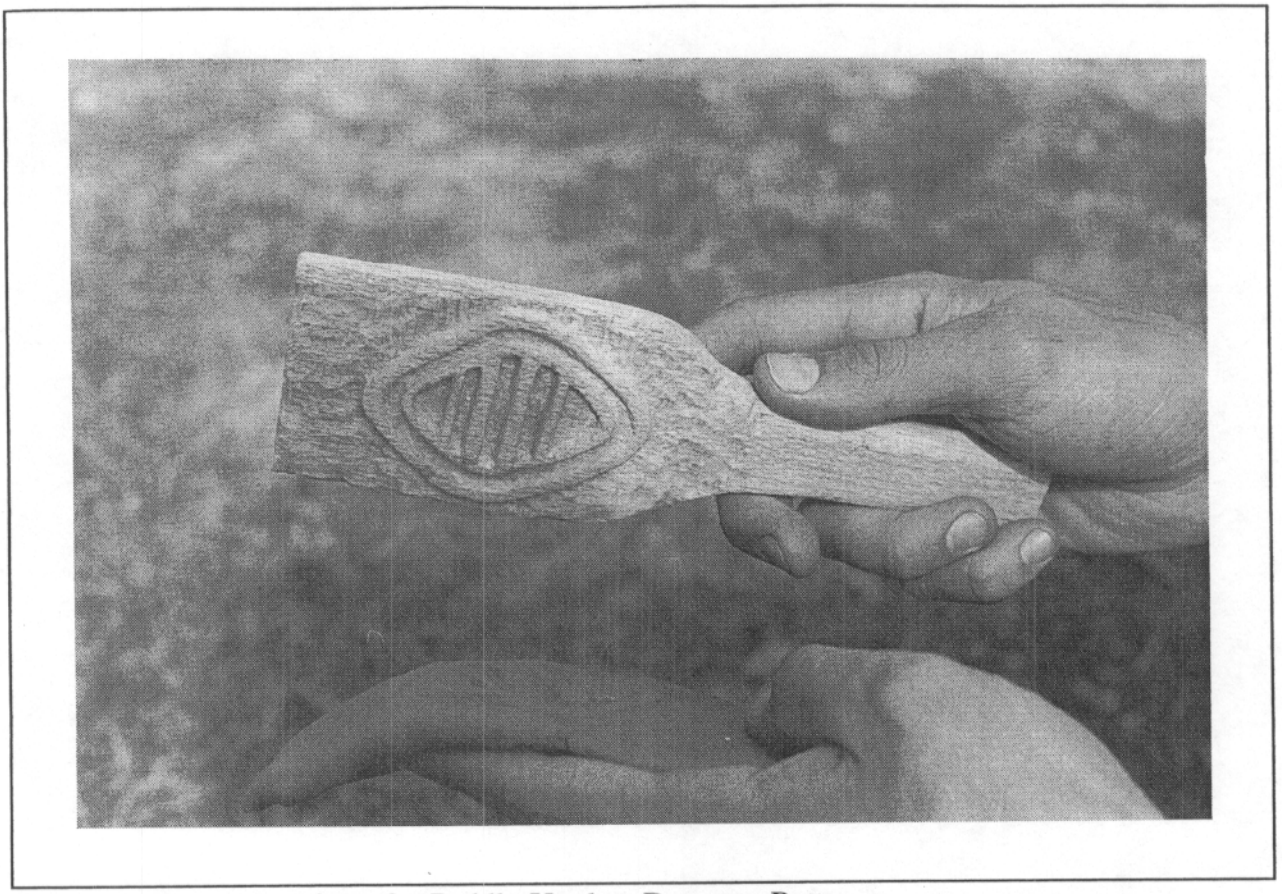
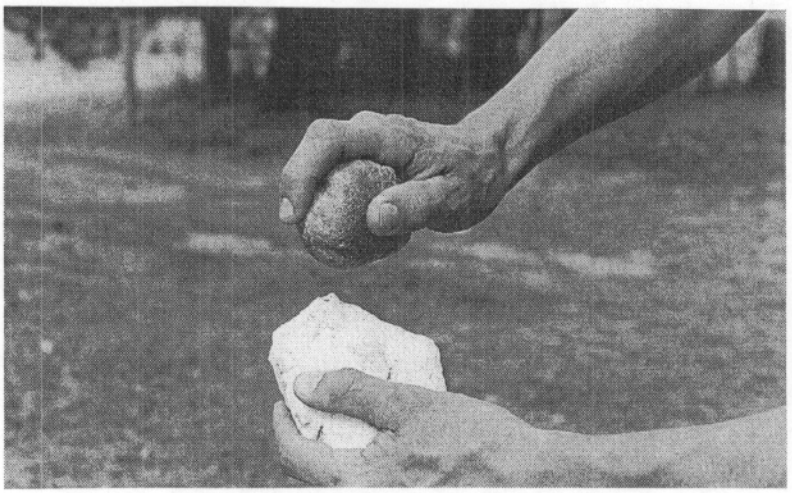


Figure 8. Reconstruction of a Paddle Used to Decorate Pottery.

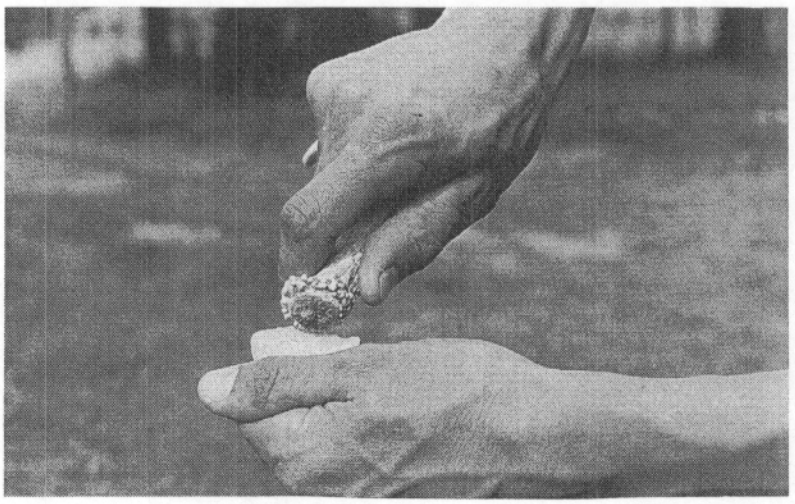
Although both men and women probably worked together to clear the fields for planting in the spring, women were responsible for tending the fields once they were in cultivation. Women also collected most of the wild plants for food and medicine. Some of the women of the village would have have been occupied with making pots, others would have been busy cooking, repairing houses, or any other number of activities in the village.

Although women may have sometimes participated in hunting, we know from the accounts of early explorers in the region that this was principally the domain of men. The animal bones that have been found on many Mississippian sites in the region indicate that deer were the favored game during the period, but other animals like turkey, racoon, and bear were also hunted. The men of the settlement at the Lewis Mound site would have busied themselves with preparations for hunting, either by sharpening the arrow tips that had grown dull through use or by knapping new tools from quartz and chert rocks they had quarried or obtained through trade with Indians further into the interior.

Using a hard stone as a hammer, a suitable piece of stone (usually either quartz or chert) is reduced to a smaller shape (called a *preform*).



An antler billet is used to shape the preform.



The antler is pressed against the edge of the blade to finish or resharpen the tool.

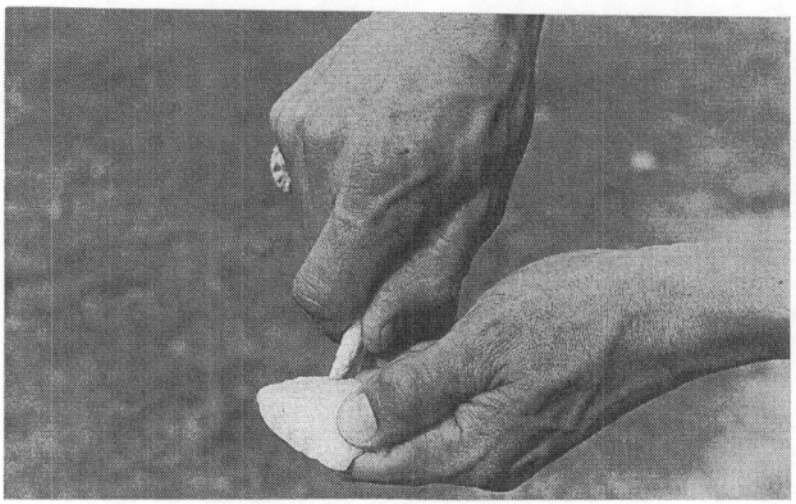


Figure 9. Steps in the Production of Stone Tools.

Of course, life was not all work for the Mississippian Indians who lived at the Lewis Mound site. They likely enjoyed a great deal of free time, probably more than we are accustomed to today. Daily life at the site would have certainly included plenty of story-telling, dancing, and game playing. During important holidays, such as the summer harvests, related groups would have come together for religious and social ceremonies that included feasting, trade, marriage arrangements, and sports competition.

Early European explorers in the Southeast like Hernando de Soto and Ponce de Leon left valuable records of their contact with the Mississippian cultures they encountered. Unfortunately, the brutal treatment the Indians received at the hands of the Europeans, coupled with the introduction of diseases for which they had no resistance, ultimately led to the collapse of Mississippian societies in the late 1500s and early 1600s. Although Native Americans would continue to live in the area of Fort Stewart for another century or more, their culture was forever changed.

Archaeology on Fort Stewart

The archaeology of Fort Stewart is not limited to Native American sites like the Lewis Mound. The long history of settlement in the area by Americans of European and African descent has resulted in a rich and varied archaeological record that includes the former locations of slave houses, plantations, tenant farmer homes, turpentine camps, saw mills, and other historic era archaeological sites.

The United States Army and Fort Stewart take an active role in the preservation of significant archaeological sites. Following the procedures outlined by a number of federal regulations (perhaps most importantly, the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966) all new construction and land clearing activities are preceded by an archaeological survey to locate any archaeological sites. Whenever possible, those that are deemed significant (or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places) are preserved and protected for future investigations. Occasionally, preservation may not be practical, and archaeological excavation is undertaken to mitigate the loss of the site.

The continued preservation of important archaeological sites on Fort Stewart assures that the past will not be forgotten. While the Native Americans who constructed the Lewis Mound may have left no written record, the artifacts they left behind can continue to tell their story for years to come.

Doing Archaeology

Archaeology is a destructive science. The position of artifacts and features that is so important to archaeologists is gone forever if a site is excavated without careful, detailed record keeping. The digging of sites should only be conducted under the guidance of a professional archaeologist. Unscientific digging robs all Georgians of important pieces of the past and in many cases is illegal.

Collecting artifacts from the surface is usually not as destructive since these artifacts have already been displaced by agriculture or other land disturbances. However, it is illegal to collect artifacts from federal properties such as Fort Stewart.

If you surface collect artifacts from other property, you should keep a record of the location of the site. Separate artifacts from different sites in bags or boxes labelled with the name or location of the area where they were found. It is also helpful if you can mark the location of your sites on a county road map or USGS topographic map. If you do thesse things, the information you gather can be of great use to archaeologists.

Suggested Reading

The following are well-written books that provide more information on the archaeology of the Southeast.

Frontiers in the Soil: The Archaeology of Georgia by Roy S. Dickens and James L. McKinley. This is an illustrated, comic book style overview of archaeological methods and Georgia prehistory. It is informative and accurate.

The Southeastern Indians by Charles Hudson. This is the most comprehensive book available about the Indians of the southeastern United States. It covers their prehistory, social and political organization, daily lives, and belief systems.

Beneath These Waters: Archaeological and Historical Studies of 11,500 Years Along the Savannah River by Sharyn Kane and Richard Keeton. This is a summary of the archaeological work completed prior to the construction of Lake Russell. Although focused on the upper Savannah River valley, it provides an overview of prehistoric and early historic life in the Southeast.

Handbook of Alabama Archaeology, Part I: Point Types by James W.Cambron and David C. Hulse. This book provides a guide to the various types of projectile points found in the Southeast.