Unit 2

Native Americans: Poverty Point
Outcomes:

I can identify cultural elements that have contributed to the state's heritage.
*Poverty Point

I can engage effectively in collaborative discussions.
*using appropriate voice level
In the previous unit, we learned about the geography of Louisiana. We will now look at how Louisiana's resources and geography attracted people to settle in this area.
Poverty Point
Take a look through pages 46-63.

Using the cardinal and intermediate directions, where is Poverty Point located in Louisiana?
Now we will use the Poverty Point Culture handout on page 78.

In Unit 1, we learned about culture and how we see elements of culture in our state today. Today we will be looking at characteristics of the Poverty Point people.
POVERTY POINT
1700 B.C. — 1100 B.C.

The unusual artifacts and earthworks of Poverty Point kindle the imagination. Understanding the site takes more than imagination, though. Archaeologists use the tools and methods of science to interpret the site and make sense of the things people left behind.

Poverty Point became a World Heritage Site in 2014. That honor goes only to the most exceptional places around the world. Built by American Indians 3,400 years ago, Poverty Point is unlike any other site. Its design, with multiple mounds and C-shaped ridges, is not found anywhere else. In its time, it had the largest earthworks in the Western Hemisphere. Many people lived, worked, and held special events at this huge site over hundreds of years. This has led some to call it North America’s first city.

Archaeologists have found out that this community achieved things once thought impossible in its day and age. For example, it was at the heart of a huge trade network, the largest in North America at that time. The trade and site design are more unusual because the people did not grow crops or raise animals for food. No other hunting and gathering society made mounds at this scale anywhere else in the world. Now it is your turn to discover more about this one-of-a-kind site.
At the same time, most American Indians north of Mexico lived in small, mobile bands of hunters and gatherers. Things were different at Poverty Point. Although the people were hunters and gatherers, they lived year-round in a large community. They built earthworks and made tools and decorative objects with rocks and minerals brought from afar. Nearby sites, and even some more distant ones, from the same time period as Poverty Point reveal a strong cultural influence coming from Poverty Point.

The soils at Poverty Point do not preserve bone well. As a result, archaeologists have not found many animal bones at the site. Those they have found show that people ate deer and lots of small animals like fish, squirrel and turtle. Overall, researchers have found more fish bones at the site than any other kind of bone. They probably used bones to make tools, but archaeologists have only found a few of them.
Like any big settlement, people likely came to the site for different reasons. Some came to exchange goods and news or to meet people. Others were attracted by the site’s natural resources. Still others came to create the site’s mounds and ridges or to take part in ceremonies. Most probably had deep family ties in the area.

The only major drawback to living at Poverty Point was that there were no rocks near the site. This would have been a problem for people who relied on stone tools. Without trade or travel, people at Poverty Point would not have been able to make the things they needed to survive.

Archaeologists are not really sure how things like stone arrived at the site. People either brought items to the site for trade or went from the site to get them. Perhaps they did both. In any case, Poverty Point may have received over 70 tons of rocks and minerals! These materials came from as far north as Iowa and as far east as the Appalachian Mountains.
Poverty Point was at the heart of a huge exchange network. This was in no small part due to its location. American Indians built the site on Macon Ridge in northeast Louisiana. This ridge, which is naturally elevated, is surrounded by many rivers. The largest of these is the mighty Mississippi River. Directly along the eastern edge of the site flow the waters of Bayou Macon.

Given the risk of flooding, it may seem foolish for people to have built the site near so many rivers. In reality, the elevation of Macon Ridge kept the site safe from floods. Plus, rivers were the highways of the ancient world. People used them to trade, travel and share news.

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Poverty Point Culture

- traded
- hunted
- fished
- gathered plants
- used natural resources
- Mississippi River was important

MOVE

Map of Poverty Point:
- Mound A
- Mound B
- Mound C
- Mound D
- Mound E
- Mound F
- Plaza
- Bridges
- Dock
The people lived in Poverty Point sites a long time ago. It was so long ago, that we don't have any written records of them. Even though there were no videos or books from that period of time, we know a great deal about the Poverty Point people.

Artifacts

Archaeologists have an interesting way of looking at the world. When they see a bowl, bead or stone spear point they do not just see an object, they see a piece of a story and the choices people made. The things archaeologists find are the data they work with to learn about people in the past. Take a look at some of the things found at Poverty Point — things made with purpose, skill, and maybe even affection.
Beads and Pendants

Archaeologists have found many different kinds of beads and pendants at the site. Some are made of clay and some are of rock or copper that came from far away. Similar kinds of beads have been found at other sites in Louisiana, suggesting, if not contact with the people at Poverty Point, at least a strong cultural influence from the site.

Figurines

Archaeologists have found more than 100 small, clay figurines at Poverty Point. Most resemble women, and some were made to look pregnant. Some have very fine details, like hair styles, head bands or belts. Some of the faces even look like they are smiling. Often the figurines are missing their heads, but it is unclear if they were made without heads, if the heads were snapped off on purpose, or if they just broke off.

Pottery

The people at Poverty Point were among the first in Louisiana to use pottery. Some of the pieces, or sherds, of pots and bowls found at the site are similar to ones archaeologists have found on the Gulf Coast of Florida and in the Tennessee River Valley. The people at Poverty Point probably traded for those ceramics.

American Indians also made pottery at Poverty Point. This pottery was the earliest ever made in the Lower Mississippi Valley. Poverty Point pottery was simple in design and often had no material mixed in with the clay. Some pottery had plant fibers mixed in with the clay to prevent cracking during firing. Spanish moss, which grows on some of the trees around the site, was used in this way. Firing is the process of placing the pots in or near a fire to harden them.
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Can you think of an artifact that you use daily or that is important to you?
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