Russell Cave

National Monument
Alabama

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Cover illustration by Louis Glanzman

It met their first need—a refuge from the elements. The cave mouth faced east, away from the cold north wind but letting in the morning sun. It would be cool in the summer. Nearby were an excellent water source, abundant game, and a good supply of rock for shaping into weapon points. For the group of travelers making their way through the small valley some 9,000 years ago, the cave was tailor-made. American Indians had probably already lived in the area for at least 2,000 years, but it was not until roof falls raised part of the floor above the stream flowing through the cave that it had become permanently inhabitable.

For hundreds of generations to follow, the cave continued to draw Indians. Over so long a time, it is difficult to generalize about how it was used. Since the first excavation here in 1953, it has been thought that the cave was used in winter by people who in warmer months moved to villages along the Tennessee River. But the evidence is not conclusive, and it seems likely that some groups used it as a permanent home, perhaps for years at a time. Others did use it as winter quarters, while for year-round nomads it was simply a convenient stopover. The archeological evidence does indicate that in the 1,000 years before European contact in the 16th century, the cave was used primarily as a hunting camp.

Most groups inhabiting the cave would probably have numbered no more than 15 to 30—their size limited by the need for mobility and by how many people the land could sustain. They were likely extended families or several related families. Certainly some groups would have used the cave year after year, but varying styles of spear and arrow points tell us that it was inhabited by different bands. Twenty-four burials have been found in the cave, ranging from an infant to a 40- to 50-year-old woman. From the remains it appears that these people were short and muscular. In appearance they probably resembled the peoples Europeans first encountered in the 16th century.

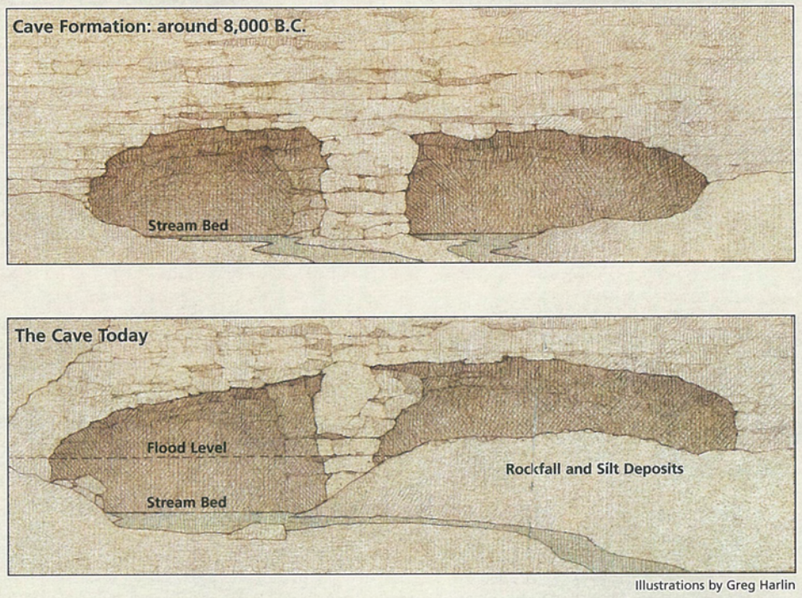
The artifacts they left behind tell the story of the cave: the ebb and flow of habitation, whether the users were family groups or hunting parties, what they wore, what they ate, the tools they used. As archeologists dug down to the deepest artifacts more than 30 feet below the cave's present floor, they traced the emergence of pottery more than 2,000 years ago, introduction of the bow and arrow, increasing sophistication of tools and weapons, and growing trade with other peoples for tools and ceremonial goods.

The inhabitants of Russell Cave practiced what anthropologists call "forest efficiency," using all the resources of the land. The wildlife they hunted—except for the porcupine and the peccary—are still found in the area: deer, turkey, black bear, turtle, raccoon, squirrel, and other small animals. They took fish from the Tennessee River and probably stored supplies of shellfish from the river in nearby streams. Nuts, acorns, roots, wild fruits, and seeds were staples, as were seeds from goosefoot, a small flowering plant they raised in gardens.

Although times could be hard, especially during the winter, we should not think of these people as constantly struggling, living on the margin of existence. This was a good time for American Indians in the Southeast. In small family groups they harvested rich food sources according to the season, fully exploiting their environment without destroying what sustained them.

Geology of the Cave

The rock out of which Russell Cave was carved was formed more than 300 million years ago at the bottom of the inland sea then covering the region. A layer of carbonaceous deposits (skeletons and shells) was transformed into limestone by the pressure of overlying water, sand, and mud. After the sea retreated, water dripped through fissures in the limestone. The drips became rivulets and then underground streams that cut thousands of tunnels and caverns. About 9,000 to 11,000 years ago, the collapse of a cavern roof beneath a hillside in Doran Cove created a sinkhole and exposed a tunnel carrying water deeper beneath the ground—Russell Cave. Part of the tunnel entrance was raised above water level by continuing rockfalls, and it was here that humans sought shelter as early as 7,000 B.C. It grew higher with silt deposited by flooding of the creek that still drains into the cave. The combined processes—deposits and ceiling rockfalls—caused the cave mouth to migrate up the hillside. Although the deposits eventually raised the floor above flood level, human debris and a steady rain of fine material from the roof raised it another 7 or 8 feet. Today the floor of the upper entrance is some 30 feet above the original rockfall.



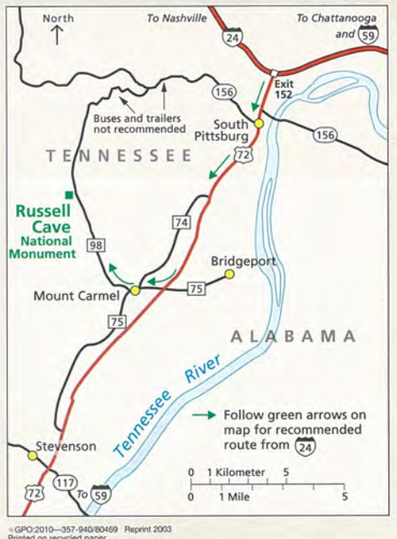
Illustrations by Greg Harlin

The Archeological Record

Russell Cave offers one of the longest and most complete archeological records in the eastern United States. The artifacts found here indicate intermittent human habitation for almost 9,000 years. Using carbon-14 dating techniques, researchers have dated to within 300 years the charcoal remains from fires uncovered at various depths. They could then date objects found at the same depth as a fire, gradually building up a continuous record. The initial excavation by the Tennessee Archeological Society in 1953 unearthed a great number of bone tools, jewelry, and pottery fragments to a depth of six feet. The Smithsonian Institution, with financial support from the National Geographic Society, undertook another dig from 1956 to 1958. These excavations reached a depth of more than 32 feet. A third and final 10.5-foot excavation was done by the National Park Service in 1962, both to fill out the archeological record and establish an on-site exhibit.

Do not remove or disturb any item in this park. The Archeological Resources Protection Act specifies serious felony and misdemeanor charges for the removal or disturbance of archeological or historical artifacts on federal lands.

About Your Visit



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Russell Cave National Monument was established on May 11, 1961 when 310 acres donated by the National Geographic Society to the American people were set aside to protect the site and its surroundings.

Some of the artifacts found in the cave are displayed at the visitor center museum. On request and depending on park staff availability, interpreters give demonstrations on weapons and tools from the Archaic period and on food preparation and cooking methods. Entrance into cave passages, except on the walkways around the archeological exhibit, is allowed by permit only. Near the cave are a 0.6-mile trail featuring plants used by the cave's inhabitants and a 1.2-mile hiking trail. Visitors can picnic in a designated area, but no fires, cooking, or camping are allowed.

Russell Cave is closed Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1. Organized groups may arrange for guided tours. Russell Cave is eight miles west of Bridgeport, Ala. From U.S. 72, follow County Road 75 north to Mount Carmel. Turn right on County Road 98 and follow it to the park entrance on left.

Russell Cave National Monument
3729 County Road 98
Bridgeport, AL 35740
256-495-2672; www.nps.gov/ruca
Visit the National Park Service website at www.nps.gov.

For Your Safety: Please do not run on the trails. Stay on them and do not take shortcuts. The hiking trail is steep and arduous. There are hidden dropoffs, sinkholes, and other natural hazards.