

David W Fletcher, February 1999

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A VISIT TO THE OLD STONE FORT

The visitor enters the Old Stone Fort from state highway 41, just before the highway crosses the Duck River, which is approximately one mile northwest of the historic downtown of Manchester, Tennessee. Manchester, the centrally located seat of Coffee County, lies some 65 miles southeast of Nashville in the Highland Rim area of Middle Tennessee.

The “Old Stone Fort State Park” sign, which has the appearance of a picket fence except that it is framed in stone, greets the visitor. A small black and white sign calls attention to the “Old Stone Fort State Archaeological Area.” Pine trees line the immediate entrance, after which the split paved drive joins to form a single road, with thick brush full of ash, maple, oak, and poplar trees on each side. The entranceway passes a campground and a nice picnic area—both on the right—as the road winds its way to the park museum and historical site. The approach to the campsite is especially fine, as the access road provides a splendid view of the Duck River.

Today is January 24th—midwinter. The trees resemble large irregular wooden poles jutting forth from the earth. A thick cover of dark-brown leaves blankets the ground. Here and there are specks of green from moss, sprouting blades of grass, and the occasional evergreen tree. Lots of small branches litter the landscape. These are broken remnants of nature’s fury during the recent Christmas ice storm.

After about a mile, the entranceway comes to the parking lot for the museum and the site. Parking lot features include visible lines, an asphalt sidewalk, lampposts for night lighting, two

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handicapped parking spaces, and a circle around four large evergreens at the end of the parking lot for easy departure. The road to the “fort” rises gently until it reaches the parking area, then it descends more sharply to the museum. Here something caught my attention. The terrain to both left and right falls off abruptly to the river valleys. Opposite the rivers, the wooded slopes rise just as sharply. This “ridge” surrounded by deep valleys gives the “fort” its topographical definition and is clearly visible when there is no foliage on the trees.¹

Upon leaving the automobile, the visitor’s first impressions are the *sound* and *view* of the Duck River, which is right in front of you. The constant swishing of the rapids and falls of the river is soothing, refreshing, and relaxing. The view, about 75 feet above the river, overlooks a bend of the Duck where the river flows out of the north and cuts westward. After a short walk of about 100 yards, a wooden platform built into the riverbank allows the visitor a close-up view of the Duck. After heavy rains in central Tennessee this weekend, the Duck is full and the current is strong. On this crisp winter day, one easily imagines the presence of ancient native settlers going about various activities along the riverbank.

The visitor center and museum is about fifty yards from the platform. It is open daily 8:00 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. There is no charge for entry. The museum offers interpretative tours, as well as various other activities, but only on weekends in the summer. Access for handicapped visitors is provided, and restrooms in the museum are clean and maintained. The park receives

¹The Barren Fork (Big Duck) and the Bark Camp Fork (Little Duck) flank a pear or heart shaped “enclosure” of about 50 acres.

David W Fletcher, February 1999

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about 300,000 visitors each year, and many of these are from countries other than the United States. Europeans, Asians, South Americans, and Africans come to Manchester just to see the “Old Stone Fort.” Of special note are the German visitors who relish the park’s “just like home” natural beauty and who take to the trails for a bit of “volksmarch.”

Attractive book displays greet the visitor to the museum. They are filled with volumes about Native American culture and history. Disappointingly, only one or two pamphlets about the “fort” were available for purchase. The museum director, however, seemed very happy to answer just about any question relevant to Indian culture, the site history, the museum, and even resources that were out of print. She provided me with an interpretive path guide, a simple brochure about the state park, brochures from parallel sites in Ohio (Fort Ancient and Serpent Mound), and a copy of *Tennessee Anthropologist* detailing early descriptions and maps of the site (for a small fee).

In the museum, displays are small but neat, attractive, and instructive. Signs or placards describe artifacts thoroughly enough and on a level that can be appreciated by school age children to adults. These exhibits, for the most part, detail the site’s scant material remains left by Middle Woodland Indians, who built the walls of the *ceremonial enclosure* about 2000 years ago, the time of Christ.² “Artifacts & Technologies: Tools, Weapons and Technologies of

²See Charles H. Faulkner, *The Old Stone Fort: Exploring An Archaeological Mystery* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1968), 9-10. He notes that “local legends giving Norsemen and the Welsh as builders are not based on fact, since there is no historical or archaeological evidence of European migrants in the southeastern interior of this continent during the first four or five centuries of the Christian Era.” These theories are detailed by Basil

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Tennessee's Prehistoric Cultures" shows flint knapping, drills, the atlatl (a spear throwing stick), blowgun darts, trade items, coil work pottery, etc. A nice collection of "arrowheads" is found in "Flintknapping: The Art of Making Stone Tools." "The Hopewell Phenomenon" displays interesting art (e.g., beads, copper and mica cut outs, clay figurines and pottery, and an engraved adena tablet), trade (e.g., copper from Lake Superior, obsidian and grizzly bear teeth from the Rocky Mountains, marine shells and shark teeth from the Gulf of Mexico, and mica from the southern Appalachians), burial practices, and earthworks of the amazing Hopewell people, an identifiable southern Ohio native culture.³ "The Woodland Tradition" captures some of the basic materials used by these early agriculturalists. Other exhibits include a meager display on archaeology,⁴ wall photos including an aerial shot of the entire site, scenic seasonal photos of the park, an interesting economic comparison called "If Old Stone Fort Were Built Today," and a ceramic relief map of the site.

Of special importance are the series of black and white historical maps, mostly from the 1800s, by various historians and interpreters of the area. Not only do these maps reveal early curiosity in the area by the first settlers, they also illustrate valuable evidence not apparent

B. McMahan, *The Mystery of the Old Stone Fort* (Nashville, TN: Tennessee Book Company, 1965).

³See Faulkner, *The Old Stone Fort*, 11ff.

⁴The field work photo needs to be identified and dated. The placard on ethics is a good inclusion. You hardly ever see this.

David W Fletcher, February 1999

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through modern research and technology.⁵ Also significant are the pictures of paper mill and other mill industries that flourished along the Duck River during the last half of the nineteenth century.⁶

Two floor exhibits deserve a word of praise. The first is a marvelous tile relief of Middle Woodland Indian settlements that date back 2000 years and stretch from what is present day Normandy to the Old Stone Fort. This relief graphically conceptualizes, in exquisite detail, the Indian enclosure as a place of regional consequence (i.e., that it was not, nor belonged to, an isolated settlement). The other notable floor exhibit is a large (8' by 20') plastered relief map detailing the topography of the enclosure. The visitor can quickly visualize all the details of the enclosure in relation to the physical geography.

Finally, a “Time Tunnel” illustrates the correlation in time between major geologic periods of Tennessee⁷ and parallel world events, individuals, inventions, peoples, and technologies.⁸ “The Past” exhibit is a zig-zag wall or corridor, under black light, that spans

⁵See C. Ward Weems, “The Old Stone Fort Site: A History of the Early Descriptions and Maps and Their Relevance to Modern Research,” *Tennessee Anthropologist* 20:2 (Fall 1995), 96-125.

⁶These mills influenced cultural, economic, and social development of the local area, the region, and in an indirect way the nation. *Old Stone Fort: State Archaeological Park Interpretive Path Guide* (Nashville, TN: Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, n.d.), 11.

⁷*Paleo*, 10,000 - 8,000 BC; *Archaic*, 8,000 - 1,000 BC; *Woodland*, 1,000 BC - AD 800; *Mississippian*, AD 800 - 1540; *Historic*, AD 1540 - Present.

⁸For example, domestication of animals, bronze, pyramids, Stonehenge, alphabet, Great Wall of China, Mohammed, Crusades, Shakespeare, computers, etc.

David W Fletcher, February 1999

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12,000 years of time from the present backwards. Illuminated wall insets, with audio interpretation, give the visitor historical information and cultural characteristics from each of the major time periods. Large white lettering on black walls describes the story. As one goes backward in time, the decrease in significant historical events is impressive.⁹

A small theater, which seats only 32, is provided for various interpretative videos of varying lengths (i.e., Old Stone Fort, Legacy of the Moundbuilders, Rituals of the Mounds, Myths and the Moundbuilders, The Early Americans, Indians of the Eastern Woodlands). I asked to see “The Old Stone Fort” and the park ranger promptly started the video. The video, properly titled “Looking Glass,” taught me that thirteen generations of Woodland Indians span a longer time than the history of the United States, that the typical population of a Woodland village might be 20 to 30 persons, that the enclosure is most certainly a collective effort of Woodland peoples, and that the particular use of the site still remains an enigma, a mystery.¹⁰

With “Interpretive Path Guide” in hand, I now take to the outdoors. The exterior of the museum fittingly blends in with the landscape. It is constructed entirely of rock and somewhat in the shape of a “fort,” that highlights the misnomer of the whole site. The roof forms an open

⁹This time tunnel is great for children. I had a good time, too. However, I initially went through backwards (i.e., forward in time from the past). I think the big arrow pointing to the right under the caption “Take A Trip Through Time” pointed me in the wrong direction (the entry to the tunnel was to the left).

¹⁰For a celestial interpretation, see James E. Pearsall and Clyde D. Malone, “A Middle Woodland Solstice Alignment At Old Stone Fort,” *Tennessee Anthropologist* 26:1 (Spring 1991), 20-28.

David W Fletcher, February 1999

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plaza that serves as an observation point for another great view of the Duck River and the falls created by a concrete dam.

The enclosure entrance is impressive. The sign placed there is instructive.

IN FRONT OF YOU IS THE ENTRANCE WAY OF THE ANCIENT INDIAN CEREMONIAL ENCLOSURE CALLED THE OLD STONE FORT. AMERICAN INDIANS BEGAN WORK ON THE SITE 2000 YEARS AGO. RADIO-CARBON 14 DATING INDICATES THAT INDIANS OF THE WOODLAND CULTURAL TRADITION USED THE SITE FOR OVER 400 YEARS.

THE WALLS HAVE DOUBLE STONE CORES IN MOST PLACES. THEY WERE CAPPED WITH EARTH WHICH HAS SPILLED OVER HIDING THE ROUGH STACKED STONE. THE WALLS AND CLIFFS ENCLOSE AN AREA 1 1/4 MILES AROUND OVER 40 ACRES.

The tall oaks along the ancient enclosure entrance rise as towering sentinels watching all who proceed. Did ancient trees so guard the enclosure entrance? If so, perhaps their descendants could unlock the mystery of this ancient site. As one approaches the open plateau, the feel of something magical fills the air. The sound of the rushing waters, the warmth of the afternoon sun, and the open grassland completely surrounded by forest all speak out, "This is a special place!"

The main trail, which is covered with wood chips, is a fairly easy walk. It parallels the walls and circles the enclosure. From the trail are outstanding views of both rivers and the falls. Side trails, some accessed by wooden steps, give great views of the sharp bluffs and cliffs. Secondary trails delight any hiker's fancy. Some of these trails, I noticed, were closed due to downed trees from the recent ice storm.

Favorable impressions from the hike around the enclosure include the power of the waterfalls, the scenery from trails along the Duck River, the sun glistening in the river valley,

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streams with cascading waterfalls feeding the larger rivers, and the remnants of the paper mills.

Those large, hewn stones of the mills are impressive. Some are still neatly set in place, but

others are only a pile of rubble. Covered with moss and hundreds of saplings growing

everywhere, is it not “mother nature” reclaiming from humanity what rightfully belongs to her?

In all, this was a very enjoyable visit. I will return again and again, and I always recommend the Ancient Indian Enclosure, known officially and popularly as “Old Stone Fort,” to others.

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