Poverty Point joins Heritage list

By Greg Hilburn
Gannett Louisiana

MONROE — Poverty Point State Historical Site in West Carroll Parish was selected as a World Heritage Site Sunday, taking its place beside other iconic cultural landmarks such as Stonehenge in England, the Pyramid Fields at Giza in Egypt and the Great Wall of China.

The U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s World Heritage Committee inscribed the site by acclamation at its convention in Doha, Qatar, said Lt. Gov. Jay Dardenne, who sent a two-person delegation to the Middle East to advocate for Poverty Point.

“This is a huge win for Louisiana,” Dardenne said Sunday. “We’re going to trumpet it to the world.”

Poverty Point is a vast complex of earthen mounds and ridges built by inhabitants 3,500 years ago.

“My district will never be the same,” said state Sen. Francis Thompson, D-Delhi, an early proponent of the site. “I can’t think of better news. I’ve been praying for this outcome every day since the committee began meeting last week.”

Poverty Point State Historic Site, a vast complex of earthen mounds built by inhabitants 3,500 years ago, was selected as a World Heritage Site Sunday. GANNETT LOUISIANA FILE PHOTO

“My district will never be the same,” said state Sen. Walsworth, R-West Monroe, in whose district Poverty Point is located. “It will shine a bright light on northeastern Louisiana.”

Poverty Point is the 22nd World Heritage Site in the United States and the first in Louisiana. It was the only site to be nominated by the United States this year. There are 1,001 World Heritage Sites.

“This designation brings immediate global recognition to Poverty Point,” Dardenne said. “To have this finally happen after so many years is overwhelming. I’m so proud of our staff,

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some of whom have been working on this since before I was lieutenant governor.”

Dardenne and U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-New Orleans, said the news was made even more exciting because of obstacles Poverty Point faced, both political and scientific.

Both feared the committee might reject Poverty Point because the U.S. hasn’t paid its UNESCO World Heritage Fund dues since 2011.

The U.S. withdrew its funding from UNESCO about $77 million per year in 2011 after the Palestinian Authority was admitted as a full member of the cultural agency.

Current law prevents the U.S. from paying dues to any U.N. body that accepts Palestine as a member.

Landrieu has tried twice to include a provision that would allow the U.S. to pay only its World Heritage Fund dues, which are about $700,000. The House stripped the provision in January, so Landrieu inserted it from her seat on the Senate Appropriations Committee last week.

“Poverty Point is a historic gem that deserves World Heritage site recognition, and (Sunday) the World Heritage Committee agreed,” Landrieu said.

Poverty Point is a C-shaped earthwork located on the Macon Ridge in the Mississippi River trench. The site consists of a semicircular or semi-octagonal series of five or six concentric rings or ridges, cut by three or four radial aisles. These ridges circle around an artificially raised plaza.

Poverty Point was built and occupied by Archaic period hunter-gatherers between 1700 and 1100 B.C.

TO GO

Poverty Point State Historical Site: 6859 Louisiana 577, Pioneer
Directions: From Interstate 20, take the Delhi exit and travel north on Louisiana 17, east on Louisiana 134 and north on Louisiana 577.
Hours: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily
Tours: Guided tours are offered daily.
Trails: 2.6-mile hiking trail
Cost: $4 per person; free for seniors and children 12 and younger.
Information: 926-5492; http://www.crt.state.la.us/louisiana-state-parks/historic-sites/poverty-point-state-historic-site/index
Poverty Point attracts the world’s attention

David Griffing, Poverty Point Historic Site manager, gives a tour of the 3,500-year-old site in West Carroll Parish on Wednesday. Poverty Point was recently designated as a World Heritage Site.

MARGARET CROFT/THE NEWS-STAR

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WEST CARROLL PARISH — Elaine Allen of El Dorado, Arkansas, had a vague awareness of Poverty Point State Historical Site in northeastern Louisiana, but until it was inscribed as a World Heritage Site last month, she’d never been motivated to visit.

“When I heard about it becoming a World Heritage Site, I knew I had to come,” said Allen, who visited the ancient earthworks here Wednesday with her sister Evelyn Kemper, of Monroe. “It’s pretty amazing to have something of that stature here, and I wasn’t disappointed.”

After the U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s World Heritage Committee inscribed the site by acclamation at its convention in Doha, Qatar, on June 22, National Geographic published a story calling Poverty Point “Louisiana’s Best Kept Secret.”

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But thanks to its newly earned lofty stature as one of only 22 World Heritage Sites in the United States, the secret is out.

"You've probably never heard of it," National Geographic's reporter wrote, "but that's about to change."

The Poverty Point complex comprises five mounds, six concentric semi-elliptical ridges and a central plaza. It was created and used for residential and ceremonial purposes by a society of hunter-gatherers between 3,700 and 3,100 B.C.

Its population's achievement in earthen construction in North America wasn't surpassed for at least 2,000 years.

Lt. Gov. Jay Dardenne, the state's culture and tourism chief, said he believes Poverty Point's inclusion as a World Heritage Site will attract visitors globally.

"Now we have to get busy and take advantage of it from an economic, jobs and tourism standpoint," Dardenne said. "It creates a whole new dimension for marketing northeastern Louisiana and consequently the entire state."

Dardenne said tourism tripled at Chaco Culture National Historical Park in New Mexico to about 30,000 visitors after its inscription as a World Heritage Site.

"And Chaco isn't easily accessible," Darden said. "Poverty Point is located in a rural area, but it's easily accessible to the touring public."

Park manager David Griffing said about 11,000 tourists visited Poverty Point last year.

"I'm still soaking in what it means," said Griffing, who was hired by retired park manager Dennis Labatt almost 30 years ago after Griffing kept hanging around the site as a young man. "It's been a dream come true."

Griffing said he's already seen an increase in visitors, "and with this world recognition, I expect we'll see even more," he said.

Poverty Point archaeologist Diana Greenlee just returned to the site from Doha, where she and Pam Breaux, Dardenne's assistant secretary for the Louisiana Office of Cultural Development, shepherded the nomination along with a federal delegation.

"Poverty Point is finally getting the recognition it deserves, and the best thing about that is more people are going to want to learn more about it and the amazing things the people did here so long ago," Greenlee said. "A wider audience is going have an appreciation for the site and understand that it is a treasure."

Alana Cooper, executive director of the Monroe-West Monroe Convention and Visitors Bureau, said she and her staff have long steered visitors to Poverty Point, about an hour drive from Monroe.

"I think you'll see more tour buses stop there and a considerable increase in overall visitors," Cooper said.

"It will create an impact throughout the region, both in the rural Delta and in the regional hub of Ouachita, where many people will stay and drive to the site."

As Allen and Kemper stepped off the Poverty Point touring tram and began walked to their car, Allen told her sister, "I'm so glad we came. It's an amazing place."