

Cahokia Mounds

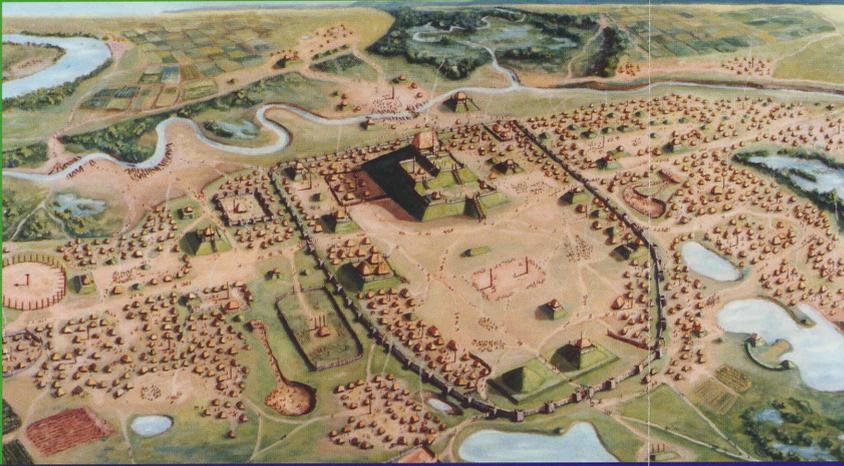
Collinsville, Illinois



State Historic Site

National Historic Landmark

World Heritage Site



CAHOKIA MOUNDS

As the largest prehistoric Indian site north of Mexico, Cahokia Mounds covered about 4000 acres and included at least 120 mounds. The State of Illinois now protects 2200 acres of the central portion of the site and 70 of the remaining 80 mounds. The site was named a U.S. National Historic Landmark in 1965, and in 1982, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization designated Cahokia Mounds a World Heritage Site for its significance in the prehistory of North America.





Travelers, scholars and students from around the globe visit Cahokia Mounds and its world-class Interpretive Center to learn about the highly sophisticated civilization that built this urban complex.

T

he first settlements at Cahokia were around AD 700 by Late Woodland Indians. Living in villages along Cahokia Creek and the surrounding area, they hunted, fished, and cultivated gardens.

From AD 800-1000, the Mississippian culture began as highly structured communities arose with a complex ranked social and political system. They grew corn, squash and seed-bearing plants. This stable food base, combined with hunting, fishing and gathering, enabled them to support larger populations in more permanent communities.

After AD 1050, Cahokia became a regional center, surrounded by farmsteads, villages, and satellite towns with several mounds. It peaked from AD 1050-1200, sprawling over six square miles with a population of 10-20,000 people; the largest community north of Mexico.

Cahokia was organized around Monks Mound and the 40-acre Grand Plaza, where public gatherings took place. Archaeological testing indicates that most of this plaza was artificially filled and leveled. Nearby were clusters of mounds and organized neighborhoods of single-family dwellings. Agricultural fields surrounded the city.

The Mounds

The mounds were made of earth dug from “borrow pits” with stone and wood tools, and transported in baskets on people's backs. It is estimated that over 50 million cubic feet of earth was moved for mound construction alone. Most mounds show several construction stages, and many borrow pits can still be seen.

Most common was the rectangular platform, which served as a base to elevate ceremonial buildings and residences of the elite. Conical and ridgetop mounds were often used for burials of important people, or they marked important locations. Most Cahokians were buried in cemeteries, not in mounds.

Monks Mound

Monks Mound is the largest prehistoric earthen construction in the Americas, containing an estimated 22 million cubic feet of earth. The base covers more than 14 acres, and it rises to a height of 100 feet. A massive building once stood on the summit where the principal chief would live, conduct ceremonies, and govern.

Monks Mound was named for the French Trappist monks who lived on a nearby mound from 1809-1813, and farmed the terraces of the large mound.



Mound 72

Excavations in this small ridgetop mound revealed nearly 300 ceremonial burials, mostly of young women, in mass graves. An elite male about 45 years old, was laid on a platform of 20,000 marine shell disc beads formed in the shape of a raptor bird. Nearby were other burials and a large cache of grave offerings. Three small mounds covered these burial groupings then a final cap of soil joined the three to form the ridgetop mound.

The Stockade

The Stockade, or Palisade, is a log wall built for defense. Nearly two miles long around the central ceremonial precinct, it also served as a social barrier, segregating the more sacred precinct and the elite who lived within. Bastions (guard towers) projected from the wall at regular intervals. The Stockade was built four times, a new wall replacing an old decaying one, with an estimated 20,000 logs required for each wall. The enemy is unknown, but the threat was real enough to require the wall to be replaced several times from AD 1175-1275.

Woodhenge

Excavations have partially uncovered five circular sun calendars called Woodhenges, used to determine the changing seasons and ceremonial dates. Each circle had a different diameter and a number of large, evenly spaced red cedar posts. Constructed AD 1100-1200, they were an impressive example of science and engineering. The reconstructed Woodhenge represents the third construction and a large central observation post. Certain posts align with the rising sun at the Spring and Fall equinoxes and the Winter and Summer solstices.

Special sunrise observations are held at the Woodhenge on the Sunday morning closest to these events; contact the site for specific dates and times.



Houses and Structures

Mississippian buildings were of pole and thatch construction. The walls were covered with layers of woven mats, or they had saplings entwined around the posts that were plastered with a mixture of clay and grass. Bundles of prairie grass thatching covered the roofs. Most dwellings housed single families. Other structures included council lodges, communal buildings, and grain storage. Those on top of mounds were ceremonial structures or homes of the elite and rulers. Small circular structures appear to have been sweat lodges.



Cahokia's Demise

Around AD 1200, the population began to decline and former ceremonial areas became residential, but Cahokia continued as the largest ceremonial center. By the late 1300s, Cahokia was essentially abandoned. Where the Cahokians went or what tribes they became remain unanswered questions. Depletion of resources may have been a factor, as wood, game, and soil fertility declined. The political and economic power of Cahokia may have been challenged or leadership weakened, resulting in social unrest. Stockade construction indicates an increase in conflict. Climate changes and disease also may have contributed. It was probably a combination of the above that led to Cahokia's demise. Although the site was named after the Cahokia tribe of the Illiniwek (Illinois) confederacy, they did not build the mounds and were late arrivals to this area during the 1600s.

Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site

Hours of Operation: Interpretive Center hours vary and the site is closed on many holidays. Please call (618) 346-5160 to confirm or consult www.cahokiamounds.org.

Site Grounds Hours: 8 a.m. to Dusk every day

Admission: Admission by suggested donation.

Group Scheduling: All groups must have reservations. A two-week notice is required. For reservations call 618-398-5995 or download the reservation form from our website. Groups with minor children must have one responsible adult for every 10 children.

Events: Special events are held year-round. Visit www.cahokiamounds.org or call (618) 346-5160.

The Interpretive Center and Picnic Area are accessible for the physically challenged. The picnic area is available on a first-come basis. All pets must be on a leash; no animals are allowed in the Interpretive Center

For additional information

Site Manager, Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site
30 Ramey St.

Collinsville, IL 62234

Phone: (618) 346-5160

cahokia.mounds@sbcglobal.net

www.cahokiamounds.org

The Illinois Historic Preservation Agency is an Equal opportunity Employer.

Printed by the Cahokia Mounds Museum Society at

Columbine Printing Company, Saint Louis, MO.