

Cahokia's Demise:

By AD 1200, the population began to decline, and former ceremonial areas became residential, but Cahokia continued as a major ceremonial center. By the mid-1300s, Cahokia was essentially abandoned. Depletion of resources, climate change, extended droughts, changes to political and economic power, and disease likely were all contributing factors to its demise. Where the Cahokians went, or what tribes they became, remain unanswered questions. 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 for operating schedule or visit www.cahokiamounds.org. Cahokia Mounds is administered by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

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

Admission: Admission by suggested donation.

Group Scheduling: All groups must book reservations through the Great Rivers and Routes Tourism Bureau at 800-258-6645 or 618-465-6676. We ask that one adult accompany every 10 students.

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

The Interpretive Center, picnic area, and some trails are accessible for the physically challenged. The picnic area is available on a first-come first-served basis. All pets must be on a leash; only registered service animals are allowed in the Interpretive Center.

For additional information:

Site Superintendent, Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site
30 Ramey Street
Collinsville, IL 62234
Phone: 618-346-5160
Cahokia.mounds@sbcglobal.net
www.cahokiamounds.org



State of Illinois
Department of Natural Resources

CAHOKIA MOUNDS

STATE HISTORIC SITE



U.S. National Historic Landmark
UNESCO 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 72 of the 80 remaining 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.

Birger Figurine
Female flint-clay figurine found in the Cahokia region.



Ramey Tablet
Found just east of Monks Mound in the 19th century.



First Settlements

The first settlements at Cahokia were around AD 700 by Late Woodland Indians. Living in small villages along Cahokia Creek and the surrounding area, they hunted, gathered plants, and cultivated crops.

From around AD 1000, the Mississippian culture began as highly structured communities arose with complex ranked social and political systems. 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. "Greater Cahokia" included major mound complexes in East St. Louis, Illinois and St. Louis, Missouri.

Cahokia was organized around Monks Mound, the 40-acre Grand Plaza, and several smaller plazas where public gatherings and ceremonies took place. Around these were clusters of mounds and organized neighborhoods of single-family dwellings. Agricultural fields surrounded the city for many miles.

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, and many borrow pits can still be seen. It is estimated that over 50 million cubic feet of earth was moved for mound construction alone. Most mounds show several construction stages.

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. A sidewalk leads from the parking lot adjacent to Monks Mound to the 156 stairs to the top of the mound.

Mound 72

Excavations in this small ridgetop mound revealed nearly 300 ceremonial burials, mostly of young women, many in mass graves, apparently sacrificed. An elite man and woman in their mid-20s were laid on a deposit of 20,000 marine shell disc beads formed in the shape of a raptor bird. Several burials were around them and nearby were other burials and a large cache of grave offerings. Three small mounds covered these burial complexes, then a final cap of soil joined the three to form a ridgetop mound about seven feet tall. Recent isotope studies indicate that nearly 30 percent of the people were non-local immigrants.

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 perhaps some of the elite residences. Bastions (guard towers) projected from the wall at regular intervals. The Stockade was built four times from AD 1175-1275, a new wall replacing an old decaying one as threats continued, with an estimated 15-20,000 logs required for each wall.

Small portions of the walls have been reconstructed north of the Monks Mound parking lot and south of the Twin Mounds. A gravel "Stockade Trail" traces much of the projected route where the walls once stood.

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 number of large, evenly spaced, red cedar posts. Constructed sequentially from AD 1100-1200, they were an impressive example of science and engineering. Certain posts align with the rising sun at the Spring and Fall equinoxes and Summer and Winter solstices. The reconstructed Woodhenge represents the third construction with a large central observation post and 48 perimeter posts.

The Woodhenge reconstruction is about one-half mile west of Monks Mound on Collinsville Road with a parking lot and signage.



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 clay and cut 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.

