

# WELCOME TO CAHOKIA MOUNDS HISTORIC SITE

Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site preserves the remains of the central section of the largest prehistoric Indian city north of Mexico. Cahokia Mounds has been recognized as a World Heritage Site by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) due to its important cultural significance in the prehistory of North America. The 2,200 acre (890 hectares) state site is under the management of the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency.

Cahokia Mounds was first inhabited around A.D. 700 by prehistoric Indians of the Late Woodland Culture. Around A.D. 800 another culture emerged called Mississippian (Woodland and Mississippian are names assigned by archaeologists; they are not tribal names), lasting to around A.D. 1400. These people developed an agricultural system with corn, squash and several oily and starchy seed bearing plants (sunflower, marshelder, lambsquarter, maygrass, knotweed, little barley) as the principal cultivated crops. This stable food base, combined with hunting, fishing, and gathering wild plant foods, enabled them to develop a very complex community with a highly specialized social, political and religious organization. What is now known as the Cahokia site became a regional center for the Mississippian culture.

The city of Cahokia covered nearly six square miles and had a population as great as 10,000 to 20,000 in extensive residential sections. Houses were arranged around open plazas and courtyards. The main agricultural fields were outside the city, but small garden plots probably were to be found in the residential areas.

Originally, there were about 120 mounds, but the locations of only 109 have been recorded. Many have been altered or destroyed by modern farming and urban construction. Of these, about 70 are preserved in the historic site boundaries. The mounds are made entirely of earth. The soil was dug with tools made of stone, wood or shell, and transported on people's backs in baskets to the mound construction site. An estimated 50 million cubic feet of earth was moved by the Indians just for mound construction. We now know that much of the Grand Plaza area was also filled and leveled.

Mounds primarily were used for ceremonial activities of the living. Only a few were used for burial purposes. The most common type of mound at Cahokia is the platform mound, which is square or rectangular with sloping sides; the flat top served as a base for important buildings, such as temples or the homes of the leaders. The exact functions of conical and ridgetop mounds are not known, but both may have been used for burials of important persons or to mark significant locations. Most people would have been buried in cemeteries in and around the city.

The cause of the end of Cahokia is unknown. The Cahokians probably had depleted many resources in the area and had shortages of materials; a climatic change beginning in the 13th century may have adversely affected their food supplies. Conflict and warfare appear to have increased during this time and political upheavals may be involved. A gradual decline in population began before A.D. 1200 and by A.D. 1400 the site essentially had been abandoned. Where the people went or what tribes they became are not clear. The name "Cahokia" derives from the Cahokia subtribe of the Illinois (or Illiniwek) tribe, who were later immigrants into this area, arriving shortly before the French in the 1600s. The mounds were eventually named after them, even though they did not build the mounds.

## TRAIL MAP IS IN CENTER OF BOOK.

### FOLLOW THE TRAIL MARKERS THAT ARE **YELLOW** LETTERS AND ARROWS

(There are several different types of tour trails on the site, each marked with a different color and in several areas the trails overlap, so carefully watch for the **yellow** markers for this tour) Also, be sure to stop at and view the new interpretive signs along the trails and at the parking lots.

#### TOUR I: PLAZA, TWIN MOUNDS, AND MOUND 72

The tour begins outside the glass doors in the lobby of the Interpretive Center. The stops will be at wooden posts along the trail marked with yellow letters. **YELLOW** arrows will lead you to the first stop.

Along the trail west from the museum, you will pass two areas planted with native prairie plants. The first, on your left, has formal groupings of flowering plants and grasses. The second, farther along on the right, has the various plants intermixed. These plants were native to this area at the time of Cahokia's occupation and used for food, dyes, medicines, clothing, roof thatching, and other purposes.

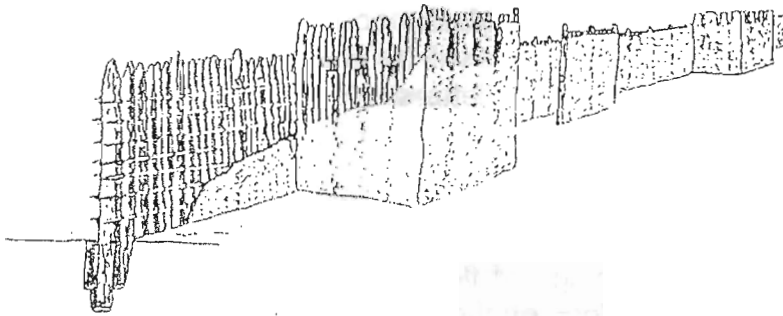
#### **STOP A**

You have just passed over a slight ditch and rise. The ditch represents an old natural depression, or slough, and the rise is believed to be a remnant of a soil ridge at the location of the Stockade as it angled through this area. West of you is Fox Mound, a large platform mound, a typical form of Mississippian mound. No excavations have taken place on

Fox Mound, but a large building would have been on top. To the north is the Grand Plaza and Monks Mound, both of which will be discussed in detail later.

## STOP B

Excavations in this area have confirmed the location of several Stockade walls running east-west, forming the southern boundary of the wall system used to defend the central ceremonial precinct of the city. Vertical posts were set in deep trenches to form a wall 12' high (3.7 meters) with guard towers (bastions) at regular intervals. A short segment of the Third Stockade has been reconstructed here.



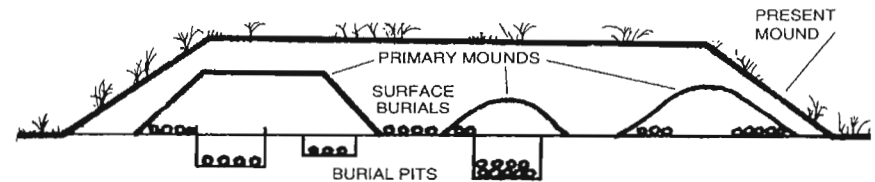
To the south is Mound 72 (you have the option of walking down to it, as there is an interpretive sign there), a small ridgetop mound that was partially excavated from 1967-1971. About two-thirds of the mound was excavated and nearly 300 burials were found under and around three small primary mounds, which were joined by a final covering of soil to form the ridgetop mound.

Most of the burials are considered to be sacrificial or ritual burials, and some appear to be associated with the burial of a leader at the east end of the mound. He was laid upon a blanket of 20,000 marine shell beads, had several people buried around and near him. A large deposit of grave

offerings, which included over 800 perfect arrow points, 15 chunky game stones, a large pile of unprocessed mica, and a roll of copper were all on top of 7 male and female burials.

Many burials were in mass graves and appear to be sacrificial, including 118 women between the ages of 15-25 in four pits, including one with 53 women. Another burial contained four men whose heads and hands had been removed. Carbon dates show that most of the burial activities occurred from A.D. 950 to 1050. Following the excavations, the mound was rebuilt to its original dimensions.

MOUND 72 CROSS-SECTION



## STOP C

As you look to the north you will see the Twin Mounds, with Roundtop Mound (#59) on the left and Fox Mound (#60) on the right. It is believed these were very important mounds due to their large size (about 40' high or 12.2 meters) and their location at the end of the Grand Plaza opposite Monks Mound. They appear to have been built upon a shared platform. A charnel house, where bodies of important persons were prepared for burial, likely stood on top of Fox Mound. The burials probably took place in Roundtop Mound. No excavations have been taken place to confirm this, but excavations at other Mississippian sites have shown this practice generally to be true.

Most of the area to the south is part of Cahokia's largest Borrow Pit. It covers nearly 17 acres (6-8 hectares) and dirt was carried from this location to build several nearby mounds, and possibly the Grand Plaza.

Originally it was 6' (2 meters) deeper in some locations, but it filled with water and over the hundreds of years while it was a lake, soil washed back in and partially refilled the pit. Later, farmers drained the lake and it became overgrown, but it still holds water during wet seasons. Other borrow pits are in this area, as it was too low and damp for fields or housing, but it had clay soils that were good for mound building. All the trees are of recent growth and most of this area would not have been forested.

Another very small mound (Mound 94) can be seen to the south on the small peninsula that juts out into the Borrow Pit. Testing in and around it proved it was a mound, but its purpose is unknown.

### STOP D

You are now on the west side of the Grand Plaza, which is marked by Roundtop Mound on the south and the small Mound 57 and large Mound 48 to the north. Neither of the latter mounds has been excavated, but it is likely Mound 48 would have had several buildings on its broad summit. This is where the Trappist Monks are said to have lived from 1809-1813. Apparently they never completed plans to build on the largest mound which bears their name (Monks Mound). Later, a farmer built his house on Mound 48.

It is believed that the Stockade continued its course northward just west of Mounds 57 and 48 and recent excavations have revealed evidence of at least two walls being built in this area, following a low north-south ridge.

As you cross the plaza to the next stop, imagine a large open area in the middle of the city where public gatherings, rituals, games and market activities would take place. There would be no trees or houses, but the edges of the plaza would be lined with large public buildings, council lodges, elite residences and other special buildings.

### STOP E

Excavations and remote sensing tests have shown that much of the Plaza was filled and leveled to create a large flat surface that formed the heart of the city.

In the 1920s, Warren K. Moorehead dug a trench through Mound 56, which originally was 15'-20' (4.5-6.0 meters) high platform mound. It and most other mounds were plowed down by farmers for almost 100 years. Moorehead found a few small pieces of copper and some highly finished pottery in the soft dark fill. Recent tests suggest this may have been a double-platform mound, with a lower terrace to the north.

Mound 49 to the north appears to be a ridgetop mound running east-west. The location of it and Mound 56 in the center of the Plaza indicates they had some special significance. Some believe, due to the similarity in shape and size to Mound 72, that mound 49 may also have ceremonial burials associated with it. Test excavations into its edges show that it was built in several stages, first as a platform, then a ridgetop mound, and had fences or screens around part of it.

### STOP F

At this point you are standing at the east edge of the Grand Plaza, which was marked by a line of four mounds: Mound 55, Mound 54, Mound 50 and Mound 51. Years of farming, construction of a subdivision, and the removal of mound soil for fill elsewhere, reduced these mounds to low rises. These mounds recently have been reconstructed to approximately resemble their original shapes.

Excavations in Mound 55 indicated that at one time it had two terraces and may have been as high as 33' (10 meters). Some of its corners had been "faceted" or flattened. Several

ceremonial buildings were constructed here prior to the construction of the mound, one being cross-shaped.

Mound 54 was a conical mound; no excavations have taken place there.

Excavations in Mound 50 indicate it was probably a low conical mound. At some time after it was constructed, several very large posts had been placed into the mound, as were several large pits for some unknown purpose.

Mound 51 was an oblong, flat-topped mound about 20' (6 meters) high. Excavations before its owner removed it for fill, showed it was built in at least two stages. Below it and predating the mound had been a borrow pit, perhaps used for soil to build Monks Mound. The borrow pit had been rapidly filled with community debris and capped with soil, which allowed excellent preservation of normally perishable materials. Wood, grasses, matting and food remains, were probably residue from feasting in the Grand Plaza. This is a good example of "urban renewal" at Cahokia.

As you return to the museum, look to the east and you will see a large open field, which was used as a residential area. Several small borrow pits are visible where dirt was removed, probably to build the four mounds you just passed.

**IF YOU WISH TO CONTINUE THE SITE TOUR, YOU SHOULD GET INTO YOUR VEHICLE AND PROCEED TO THE PARKING LOTS FOR TOUR TRAIL II (STOCKADE AND MONKS MOUND), AND TOUR TRAIL III (WOODHENGE), AND FOLLOW THE YELLOW MARKERS.**

## TOUR II - STOCKADE AND MONKS MOUND

**From the Monks Mound parking lot, we recommend that you visit the Stockade first and then Monks Mound.**

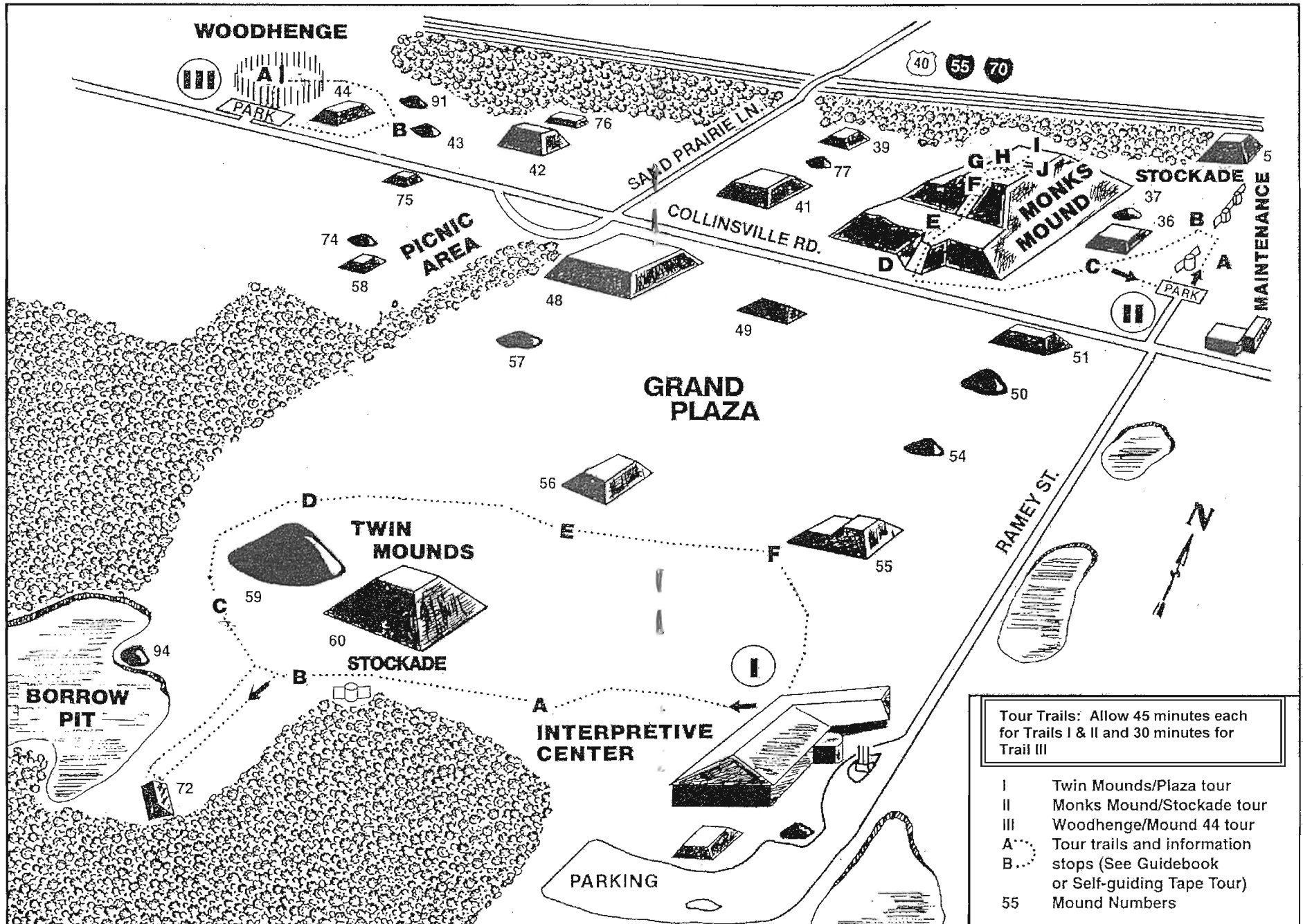
### STOP A

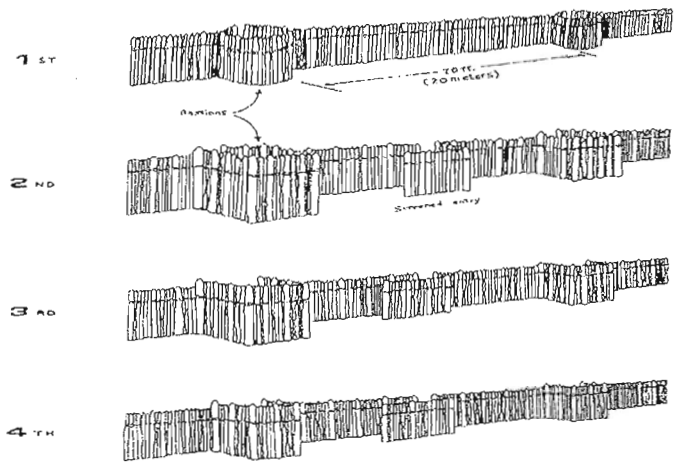
This reconstruction represents the first of four Stockades (Palisades) built around the central portion of the city. The Stockade probably served as a social barrier between classes, as the city continued for at least a mile beyond the wall. However, the presence of bastions indicates a primarily defensive function as well--an interior line of defense to protect the central ceremonial precinct. Other Indian groups must have posed a threat; perhaps people in the outlands rebelled at the demands being made on them to support this large city or challenged Cahokia's authority. The wall would have been nearly 2 miles (3 kilometers) long. Excavations continue to search for its northern and western limits.

The excavations, which extended from the parking lot area to the north beyond the other reconstruction, showed that all four Stockades ran in approximately the same location. The bastions were spaced at roughly 85' (26 meters) intervals. They were all built sometime between A.D. 1175 and 1275. At the same time many other Mississippian towns and villages were being fortified in the Midwest and Southeast, indicating warfare, or its threat, were becoming more common.

Trenches about 18" (45 centimeters) wide and from 3'-5' (1-1.5 meters) deep were dug and large posts inserted next to each other to form a wall at least 12' (3.7 meters) high above ground. The First Stockade, represented here, had the smallest trenches and distinctive round bastions. Bastions were like guard towers, with raised platforms inside where warriors could stand to launch arrows against attackers and protect the front of the wall.

Map of central Cahokia Mounds showing major site features and tour trails





### STOP B

The second Stockade, partially reconstructed here, had large rectangular bastions. A simulation of plastering has been applied to illustrate the finished appearance of a wall. A clay mixed with grass (daub) was applied to walls found at other Mississippian sites and may have been done here also, although positive evidence is lacking.

Both reconstructions are in the exact locations of the originals. Telephone poles have been used as they approximate the size of many of the posts used by the Prehistoric Indians. The Mississippians would have had to use rope lashings and other posts within the wall as support for the platform that would be inside. A ladder would be used to get to the top of the platform. There would be no gaps between the logs if it was plastered, except where they might leave some through which to shoot arrows.

The Third and Fourth Stockades had progressively smaller rectangular bastions that were not closed across the back as were the Second Stockade bastions. This was probably an attempt to conserve wood, since it took about 15-20,000 logs to build each Stockade, which was nearly 2 miles long,

severely depleting the local forests. The entire community probably was involved in cutting, trimming, transporting and erecting logs, as well as digging the trenches.

### STOP C

Mound 36 is a platform mound and would have had a ceremonial structure on its summit. A small conical mound, Mound 37, lies just off its northwest corner. Surface collections of artifacts to the north of these mounds indicated residential areas, while to the south, between Mounds 36 and 51, there appears to have been a plaza or open area.

From here you get a good view of the east side of Monks Mound, which is over 1000' (305 meters) long. Archaeological testing in the bulges near the bottom of the east side showed they were the results of ancient slumping, which reoccurred on the northern lobe in the 1980s and again in 2005. The Birdman tablet, which has become the logo for Cahokia Mounds (see cover), was found in excavations in the southernmost of these "East Lobes."

### STOP D

Monks Mound is the largest prehistoric earthen construction in the New World. Its base covers over 14 acres (6 hectares) and it rises in four terraces to a height of 100' (30.5 meters). The protrusion at the front of Monks Mound is called the South Ramp. Indentations in a buried ramp surface found in excavations, suggested that log steps had been placed there. The modern stairs are built in the same location so that you may ascend the mound in the same place as the Prehistoric Indians. We are not positive what the appearance of the original steps would have been. Excavations were conducted prior to construction.

**PLEASE, ONLY USE THE STAIRS WHILE CLIMBING AND DESCENDING THE MOUND; DO NOT CLIMB ON THE SIDES OF THE MOUND.**

**Help us protect this prehistoric monument.**

### STOP E

The First Terrace is the largest of four terraces on Monks Mound, extending completely across the front. Recent tests show it was a late addition to the mound. Notice that the west end is a little higher. Excavations on the southwest corner revealed that several large buildings had burned there and, subsequently, a small platform mound was built with a new building on top. This small mound was enlarged eight or nine times, with a new building on each new surface.

The First Terrace was used again 450 years later. Historical documents from the 1700s suggested that French priests built a chapel on this corner. Excavations uncovered hardware, artifacts and Indian burials with French trade goods dating to the mid-1700s, as well as post patterns indicating the location of the chapel. The historic period Illiniwek (Illinois) Indians had a small village on this terrace. Excavations at the base of the next flight of stairs uncovered several large refuse pits that date to the mid-1700s, supporting the idea there was a village here. The Trappist monks lived across the road on Mound 48 in the early 1800s. They planted gardens and fruit trees on the first terrace. The Monks had planned to build a monastery on top of the Mound. Illness and other problems forced them to eventually return to France. Later the name Monks Mound became attached to this mound.

### STOP F

Proceed up the next flight of stairs to the top of the mound. You are now on the Third Terrace. Go to the concrete sign

to the left (west) of the steps. As you look to the south, in front of Monks Mound was the Grand Plaza--a gathering place for festivals, games, markets, and other special occasions. It was a large open area bordered by rows of mounds on the east and west and by the Twin Mounds to the south. (See information about this area in the Plaza and Mound 72 Tour section.)

### STOP G

Proceed to the concrete sign on the west side of the Third Terrace. You will see the Second Terrace just below, which is somewhat irregular, due to ancient and modern slumping. There is one theory that this whole west side may have collapsed and slumped prehistorically. Looking straight west you will see several platform mounds, which once supported important buildings. At the far end of the field and just before the trees, you can see a circle of posts--the reconstruction of the Woodhenge sun calendar. We recommend that you continue your tour by visiting Woodhenge (**Tour III**).

On the horizon to the west you can see downtown St. Louis and the Arch (on a clear day). St. Louis was nicknamed "Mound City" because 26 mounds were in the downtown area until the city was built up in the late 1800s. It was a satellite town to Cahokia, as were other mound communities in East St. Louis, Mitchell, Dupon, and Lebanon, Illinois.

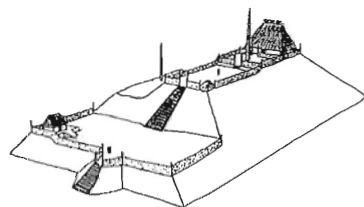
### STOP H

Proceed to the concrete sign in the center of the mound. Excavations on the Fourth Terrace found evidence of a large building or temple, 104' long and 48' wide (31.7 by 14.6 meters) that possibly served as the residence of the principal leader and would have been the scene of many important ceremonies and political decision-making. A very large post



stood in an enclosed courtyard in front of the main temple, probably the symbolic center of the city and a link between earth and sky.

### **STOP I**



Proceed to the back (north end) of the mound, to the fence. You have just walked across the Fourth Terrace and the highest part of the mound, 100' high (30.5 meters). Remember, this whole mound was built by human labor. Coring through the mound has shown it was built in many stages over a 200-300 year period, or perhaps less time.

Cahokia Creek, north of the mound, used to be the main access by water to the site. Interstate 55/70 follows the former course and the creek now runs in a drainage canal between levees along the north side of the lake and field across the highway. The lake is where earth was taken (a modern borrow pit) to build the highway. This has filled with water, as often did the borrow pits where the Prehistoric Indians dug soil for constructing the mounds. (See information about borrow pits in the Plaza and Mound 72 Tour section.)

Several small mounds are just across the highway, and others beyond the trees marked the northern edge of the city. Agricultural fields probably extended north along the sandy ridges and swales.

### **STOP J**

Proceed to the concrete sign at the east side of the mound. In the distance you can see the Stockade reconstructions visited earlier on the tour. The Stockade walls ran for nearly 2 miles (3 kilometers), from the reconstructions south along the east side of the four mounds bordering the Grand Plaza, then turned west behind the Twin Mounds. The wall turned

north and then behind Monks Mound at locations currently being determined by excavation and other testing.

Several mounds can be seen east of the Stockade reconstructions and into the housing subdivision. 1950s and more recent excavations in that area show this to have been a high status area outside the central precinct.

**AS YOU DESCEND THE MOUND, PLEASE USE THE STEPS AND PROCEED WITH CARE. WE RECOMMEND THAT YOU CONTINUE YOUR TOUR BY DRIVING TO THE PARKING LOT AT WOODHENGE AND TAKING THE SHORT TOUR TRAIL.**

### **TOUR III - WOODHENGE**

**Woodhenge is 1/2 mile west of Monks Mound on Collinsville Road. Drive to the Woodhenge parking lot and walk out to the post at the center of the circle.**

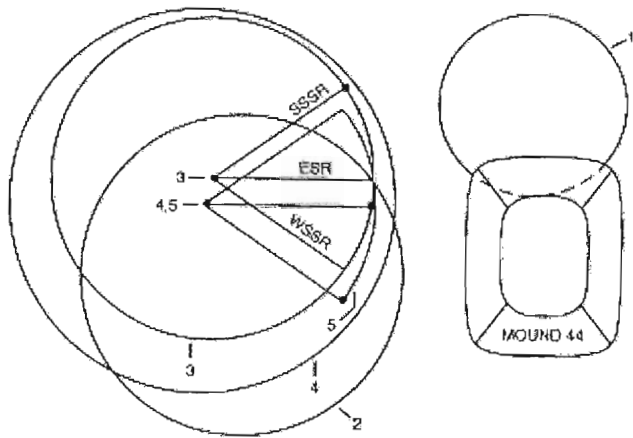
### **STOP A**

This reconstruction of Woodhenge was erected in 1985 in the exact location of the original, which was built about A.D. 1100. The principal purpose of Woodhenge appears to be that of a sun calendar, to determine when the seasons changed and when to make preparations for planting, harvesting and holding festivals associated with the agricultural cycle.

The existence of Woodhenge was unknown until excavations were conducted in the early 1960s for an interstate highway planned for this location (Interstate 255, built later, and the route was relocated a few miles to the east). During the excavations, archaeologists found many large posts pits. When plotted on maps, the pits formed

parts of large circles. As many as five different circles were constructed here, each with different center points, diameters, and number of posts. The number of posts increased by 12 with each construction, with 24, 36, 48 and 60 posts for the first four. The last one seems to be represented only by an arc of posts on the east, but would have had 72 posts if it had been a complete circle. Perhaps by that time there were not enough red cedar trees of proper size available to make a complete circle.

This reconstruction is of the third circle, which dates to around A.D. 1100. It would have had 48 posts. The circle is 410' (125 meters) in diameter and the posts are approximately  $27 \frac{1}{2}$ ' (8.38 meters) apart. The center post is  $5 \frac{1}{2}$ ' (1.7 meters) east of the exact center of the circle, which makes its alignments with the solstice sunrise posts more accurate for this latitude.



When the sun rises above the distant horizon, the posts on the eastern side of the circle are aligned with it. The posts with a single white stripe mark the positions of sunrises on the Summer Solstice (northeast), which are usually around June 21 and the Winter Solstice (southeast), around

December 21. The post with two stripes midway between these two and due east of the center post marks the equinox sunrises on the first day of Spring (around March 21) and Fall (around September 21). The equinoxes are the most dramatic sunrises, as the sun emerges from the front of Monks Mound, 1/2 mile due east. This positioning may be more than coincidence since the principal leader would have lived on the top of Monks Mound and may have been considered related to the Sun God. Since only the eastern arc of nine posts can align with sunrises, the other posts are really "extras." The complete circle probably marked the ceremonial area in which to hold rituals associated with the calendar cycle. Circles also symbolize the cycles of life and the earth.

In our reconstruction we have used red cedar and black locust logs and have painted the posts with red ochre, an iron oxide. From archaeological finds, we know that some posts were red cedar. The use of red cedar was significant, as this is considered to be a sacred tree by many Indian groups. Cedar is an evergreen; it resists insects and decay, lasting a long time, thus a symbol of continuing. Its core is red, which symbolized blood and life. Red stains in the soil around some post pits suggest the posts may have been painted with red ochre, another symbol of life.

### STOP B

Proceed from the center post toward the summer solstice post and follow the yellow trail markers for the interpretive trail. To your right will be Mound 44, originally a platform mound. It is possible that the home of the sun priest was located here or some other structure relating to Woodhenge. The mound actually covers part of the first Woodhenge, thus postdating it.

As you stand at the marker for Stop B, look to the north and you will see a small conical mound known as Mound 91. To the east is another small conical mound, Mound 43. There is some indication on old aerial photographs that still another small mound (#92) may have been to the south, just about where the ditch next to Collinsville Road is located. The area between these four mounds would have formed a small plaza.

Looking farther east you will see Mound 42 (Merrell Mound), a large platform mound. A small mound used to stand on its southwest corner, but apparently the former owners of a farmhouse on the summit removed the little mound. There would have been an important Mississippian building on top of Merrell Mound.

If you look carefully, you will see a small rise to the left (north) of Merrell Mound, which is the remnant of Mound 76, a small platform mound. The tree line along the edge of the field marks the drop-off into the low area where Cahokia Creek used to be. As you proceed back to the parking lot, look southeast across Collinsville Road and you will see Mound 75, which may have been a small platform mound.



We hope you enjoyed your tour. A longer (6.2 mile/10 kilometer) tour, the **Nature/Culture Hike**, is available. The trail guide discusses additional cultural features and also the plants native to the area that were utilized by the Indians. Copies of that guidebook are available in the Museum Shop.

