

# Cahokia Mounds North America's First City

To this day, archaeologists don't know for sure why the massive city of 20,000 people at Cahokia Mounds vanished quickly and left little trace behind.



Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site An illustration of Cahokia

Long before Christopher Columbus “discovered” North America, the mounds of Cahokia stood tall and formed the continent's first city in recorded history.

In fact, during its height in the 12th century, Cahokia Mounds was [larger in population than London](#). It spread across six square miles and boasted a population of 10,000 to 20,000 people — vast figures for the time.

But Cahokia's peak didn't last long. And its demise remains mysterious to this day.

## Who Were The People Of Cahokia Mounds?

Imagine an ancient Native American settlement where people built pyramids, designed solar observatories and, we must report, practiced human sacrifice.

These weren't the Maya or Aztecs of Mexico. This culture arose in the Mississippi Valley, in what is now Illinois, about 700 A.D. and withered away about a century before Columbus reached America. The ancient civilization's massive remains stand as one of the best-kept archaeological secrets in the country.

Welcome to the city of Cahokia, population 15,000.

Situated across the Mississippi River from what is now St. Louis, Cahokia was the biggest pre-Columbian city north of Mexico. Cahokia's citizenry had no standardized writing system, so archaeologists still largely rely on peripheral data to interpret any artifacts they've found that might unlock the city's mysteries.

The name “Cahokia” itself comes from the aboriginal population that inhabited its area in the 1600s.

Cahokia was the largest city ever built north of Mexico before Columbus and boasted 120 earthen mounds. Many were massive, square-bottomed, flat-topped pyramids -- great pedestals atop which civic leaders lived. At the vast plaza in the city's center rose the largest earthwork in the Americas, the 100-foot Monks Mound.

Half a millennium earlier, however, the land was home to another society — one which archaeological finds indicate had sophisticated copper work, jewelry, headdresses, stone tables (with engraved birdmen), a popular game called “Chunkey,” and even a caffeinated drink.

The most recent scientific research — a study of fossilized teeth — suggests Cahokians were largely immigrants from the Midwest who possibly traveled from as far as the Great Lakes and the Gulf Coast.

To the south of Cahokia Mounds lay Washausen, an ancient settlement that archaeologists believed to have been abandoned by the time of Cahokia’s peak around 1100.

It’s quite likely that Earth’s unusual, warmer climate during Cahokia’s popularity was no coincidence. There was more frequent rainfall in the Midwest during this time, and the planet’s temperatures substantially increased as Cahokia’s population grew.

“An increase in average yearly precipitation accompanied by the warmer weather, permitting maize farming to thrive,” wrote Timothy Pauketat and Susan Alt in a paper published in [Medieval Mississippians: The Cahokian World](#).

By 1200, however, the city was on a downturn. Once again, there seemed to have been a directly-correlated climate factor in play here, as a serious flood-plagued the land at the time. Cahokia Mounds was abandoned entirely by 1400, with much of the ancient city still buried under 19th- and 20th-century developments today.



*Monks Mound, the largest manmade pre-Columbian earthen mound in North America.*

In other words, underneath modern-day Illinois and its tangled web of highways and construction lies America’s first known city.

### **The Famous Monks Mound**

The most immediately-apparent remnant of ancient Cahokia near modern-day St. Louis is the 100-foot tall “Monks Mound.” The impressive structure was given this name because a group of Trappist monks lived nearby in historic times, long after the ancient city had thrived.

Much of American history taught in schools paints a broad and simplistic picture of the pre-colonial U.S. According to University of Illinois professor of anthropology Thomas Emerson,

however, Cahokia itself — and Monks Mound, specifically — indicates a far more nuanced, sophisticated past than many people realize.

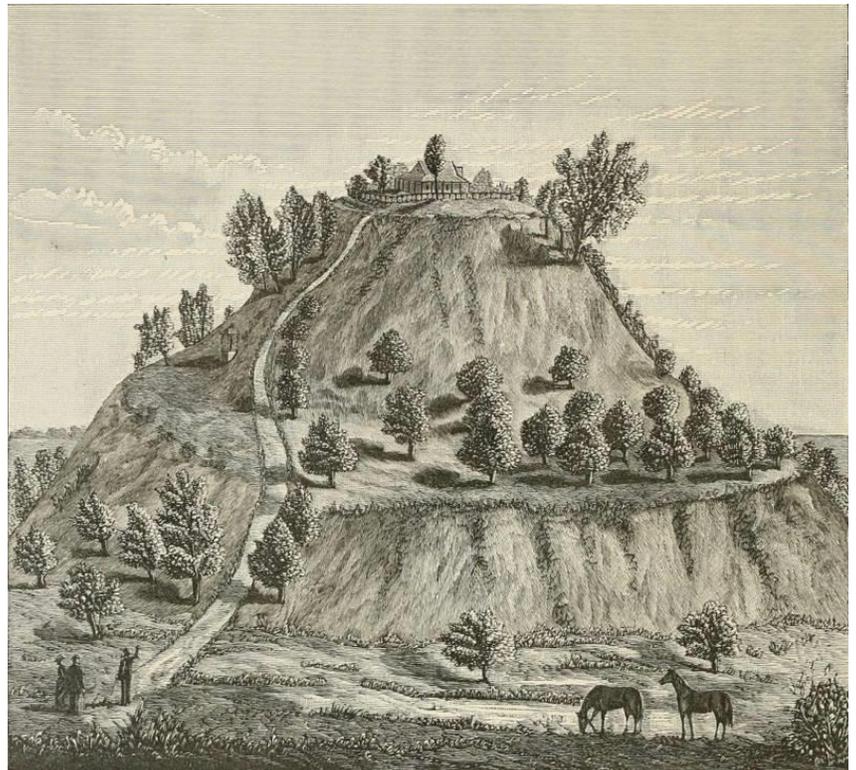
“A lot of the world is still relating in terms of cowboys and Indians, and feathers and teepees,” he told [The Guardian](#). “But in A.D. 1000, from the beginning, (a city is) laid on a specific plan. It doesn’t grow into a plan, it starts as a plan. And they created the most massive earthen mound in North America. Where does that come from?”

Monks Mound required more than 14 million baskets of soil, all hauled by human workers. Its base covers 14 acres.

Many of Cahokia's original mounds were destroyed by modern farming, road building and housing developments. The remaining 80 mounds still hold many ancient secrets because archaeologists have dug into fewer than two dozen. Among these, Mound 72 stands as one of the grisliest archaeological finds in North America.

Scientific tests conducted on teeth discovered in the area have indicated that Cahokia’s population was a mix of people from the [Natchez](#), the Pensacola, the Choctaw, and the Ofo tribes of indigenous peoples. They also indicated that a third of them were “not from Cahokia, but somewhere else. And that’s throughout the entire sequence (of Cahokia’s existence).”

Nonetheless, this fruitfully-coexisting group of Native Americans traded, hunted, and farmed together. Perhaps most impressively, they implemented rather sophisticated urban planning — using astronomical alignments to design this small metropolis of up to 20,000, replete with a town center, wide plazas, and handmade mounds.



*An 1882 illustration of Monks Mound*

Monks Mound, which covered 14 acres, is still intact today — 600 to 1000 years after its completion. Archaeologists even discovered postholes, suggesting a structure such as a temple may have once sat on top. Monks Mound, a cluster of smaller mounds, and one of the grand plazas were once walled in with a two-mile-long palisade made of wood that required 20,000 posts — just one feature of Cahokia that reveals its massive and sophisticated urban scope.

### **Religion And Cosmology In Cahokia Mounds**

Indeed, the remnants of Cahokia suggest that there were strong religious elements at play in this society.

A series of five wooden circles was constructed to the west of Monks Mound, each built at different times between 900 A.D. and 1100. These woodhenges vary substantially in size, from 12 red cedar wood posts to 60.

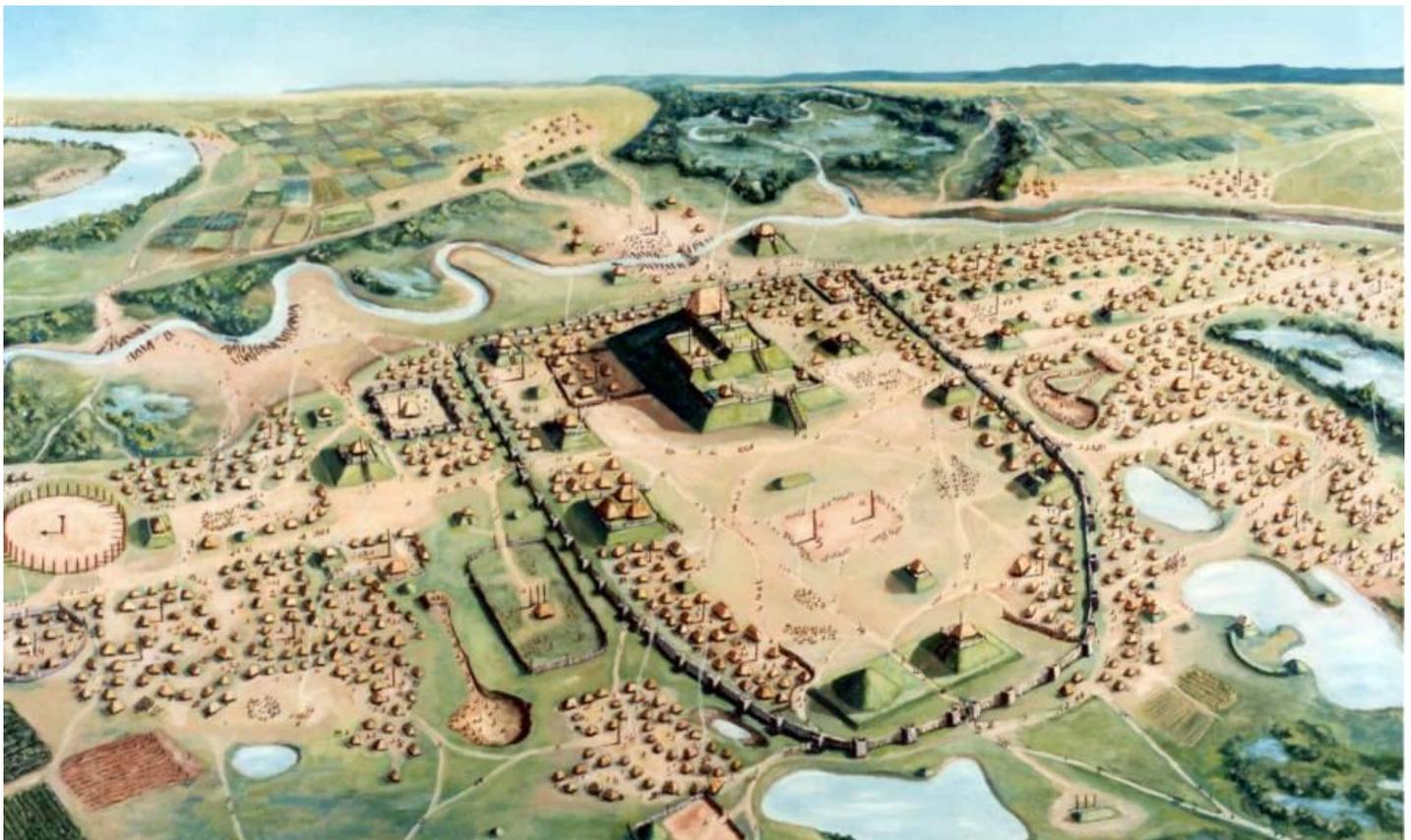
Some researchers believe these structures were used as calendars that marked the solstices and equinoxes of the time, to properly satisfy the cultural and religious urges and plan festivals accordingly. It's posited that a priest figure may have stood on a raised platform in the middle of a henge, for instance.

According to an account recorded on the [Cahokia Mounds website](#), sunrise during the equinox is quite the sight to behold from this location. A post from a woodhenge aligns with the front of Monks Mound to the east, making it appear as though the giant mound "gives birth" to the Sun.

While no written records facilitate these theories from garnering definite support, the tangible archaeological finds are more than enough for some researchers to stand firm in their beliefs that Cahokia had deep cosmological appreciation.

"New evidence suggests that the central Cahokia precinct was designed to align with calendrical and cosmological referents — the sun, moon, earth, water and the netherworld," a team of archaeologists stated in a paper published in [Antiquity](#) in 2017.

The "Emerald Acropolis," as archaeologists have dubbed it, marks "the beginning of a processional



*Mounds State Historic Site An illustrated aerial view of Cahokia.*

route" that leads to the center of Cahokia. A dozen mounds and the remains of wooden buildings (likely "shrines," according to archaeologists) were denoted at this acropolis as having "lunar alignments."

Water, too, seemed to have played a central role in the religious life of Cahokians. Some of the buildings were found to have been ritually "closed" with "water-redeposited silts" atop. One of these contained a buried infant, which researchers posited was intended as an "offering."



## Commerce and Trade

To keep the growing populace orderly and, perhaps more important, to manage corn surpluses, Cahokia developed a ranked society with a chief and elite class controlling workers in lower classes. By the 1000s and 1100s, when mound-building began in earnest, Cahokia was a beehive of activity.

"It became this political vortex, sucking people in," says Timothy Pauketat, an anthropologist and Cahokia specialist at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

The rulers lived atop the mounds in wooden houses and literally looked down on others. They almost surely consolidated power the way leaders of many early societies did, not by hoarding but by giving away goods. Since there was no money, commerce was by barter.

Generosity also boosted status. Within Cahokia, such trading and gift-giving probably bought fealty. Ornamental items were passed from generation to

generation. In the long run, people in and around the urban center grew up having a stake in perpetuating the hierarchy. Once the first few generations were in place, children grew up knowing nothing else.

"Social systems became entrenched," says William Iseminger, archaeologist and curator at Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site, which includes the main plaza and 65 of the remaining 80 mounds.

Power and position were passed by birthright. The local caste system was similar to social arrangements seen later in other Native American groups along the Mississippi and to the southeast, generally called Mississippian cultures. It was even in evidence hundreds of years later when Spaniard Hernando de Soto led an army along the Gulf Coast in the 1540s. Indians in Mexico had such social systems, too, although no direct connections have been found between them and any Mississippians.

Meanwhile, Cahokia sat conveniently at the center of the trade network. It harbored a minor hardware industry, manufacturing hoes with flint blades and axes with shaped stone heads. Trade was extensive, but it's not as though armadas of canoes were streaming into and out of Cahokia.

## The Mysterious Decline Of Cahokia Mounds

Cahokia didn't last long, but while it did — it thrived. Men hunted, gathered resources, and tended to necessary construction while women worked in the fields and homes, building pottery, mats, and fabrics. There were communal activities and social gatherings, and all were in tune with the natural world they inhabited.

"There was a belief that what went on Earth also went on in the spirit world, and vice versa," explained [James Brown](#), professor emeritus of archaeology at Northwestern University. "So once you went inside these sacred protocols, everything had to be very precise."

Ultimately, what was left of the city were several dozen mounds, human remains, and a roster of assorted artifacts. It's largely unknown why people were killed or no further information regarding the civilization's disappearance was left behind. There's no evidence of invasion or warfare that eradicated the entire city.

"At Cahokia the danger is from the people on top; not other people (from other tribes or locations) attacking you," according to [Thomas Emerson](#).

What then, caused this civilization to cease? [Williams Iseminger](#), an archaeologist and assistant manager at Cahokia Mounds, remains adamant a longstanding threat to the city must have existed for this to occur.

"Perhaps they never were attacked, but the threat was there and the leaders felt they need to expend a tremendous amount of time, labour and material to protect the central ceremonial precinct," he said.

Despite the theories, the known facts are still insufficient. After a population peak in around 1100, it began to shrink — and then vanish entirely by 1350. Some suggest that natural resources ran out — or maybe political unrest or climate change caused Cahokia's downfall.

In the end, Cahokia doesn't even appear in Native American folklore.

"Apparently what happened in Cahokia left a bad taste in people's minds," said Emerson.

All that remains now is a historical site in modern-day St. Louis, which garnered Unesco World Heritage Site status in 1982, and comprises 72 remaining mounds and a museum. It's visited by around 250,000 people each year. A thousand years after it was built, this site still fascinates those who experience it with their own eyes.



*St. Louis, Missouri as seen from atop Monks Mound.*

"Cahokia is definitely an underplayed story," said Brown.

"You'd have to go to the valley of Mexico to see anything comparable to this place. It's a total orphan — a lost city in every sense."

Margaritoff, Marco. "Cahokia Was The First And Largest City In North America - Before It Vanished Mysteriously." *All That's Interesting*, All That's Interesting, 19 Apr. 2019, [allthatsinteresting.com/cahokia-mounds](http://allthatsinteresting.com/cahokia-mounds).

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