

SAFE AT LAST: THE CAHOKIA MOUNDS¹

BY WALLACE N. STEARNS

THE recent action of the Illinois Legislature, creating a Cahokia State Park, gives every citizen occasion for gratitude. We now have an opportunity to learn of the real value of these monuments and posterity will have a reminder that America, too, has a history.

The value of the land for industrial uses already had caught the eye of business. The fine mounds that gave to St. Louis its sobriquet, are now only a memory. To have allowed these also, the



CAHOKIA MOUND LOOKING NORTHEAST

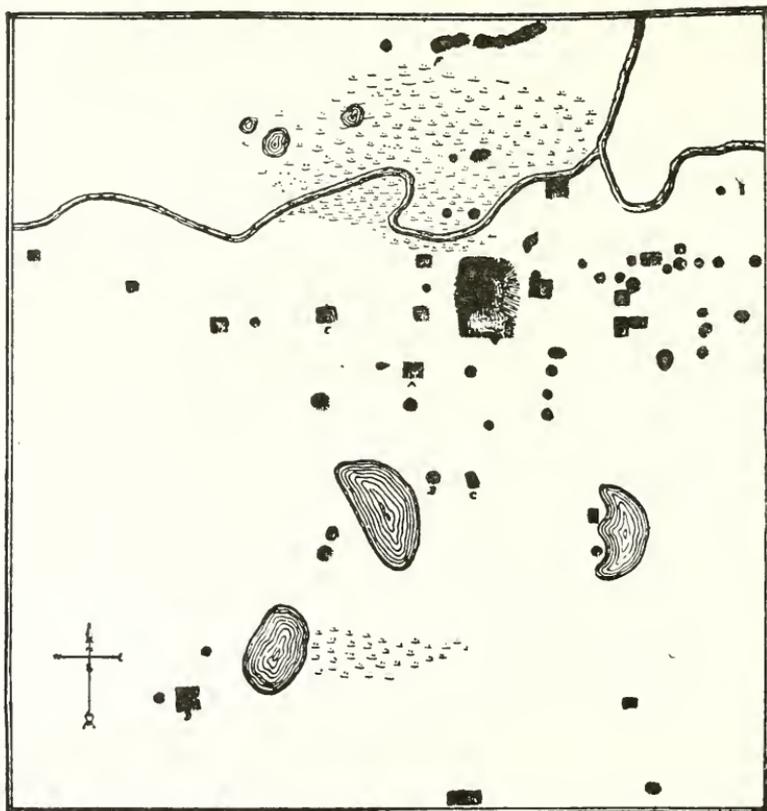
Two-story house in foreground may serve for comparison. From Bushnell (Peabody Museum)

finest of their kind, to pass out before encroaching industries or perchance be used for ballast, would occasion lasting regret.

Within the brief compass of the American Bottoms occurs a confluence of mighty streams. Through this basin the waters from over a million square miles find their way to the sea. Here within a range one hundred and twenty miles from north to south and

¹ By courtesy of authorities of Peabody Museum, the cuts in this article are taken from Bushnell, *The Cahokia and Surrounding Mound Groups*, 1904.

thirty miles wide, is one of the greatest amphitheatres in the world, where for thousands of years man has been working out his destiny. Here, today, railroads have built a web of steel; here, fifty years ago, argosies of packet-boats darkened the heavens with their clouds of pitch-black smoke; here for centuries back the Indians swarmed in their canoes; and here are to be found monuments of a people whose names are lost but whose labors must be reckoned among the wonders of the world.



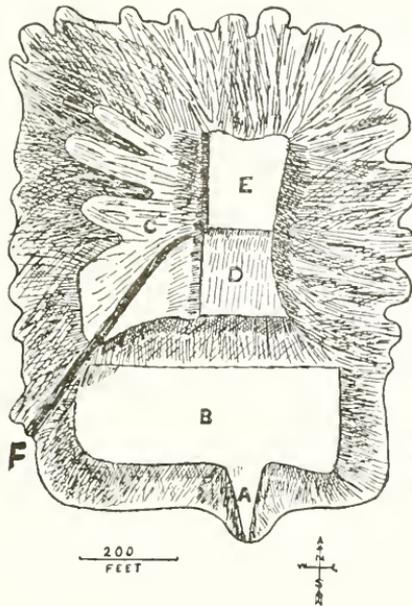
THE CAHOKIA GROUP

The cut shows an area one and three-fourths miles square. From Bushnell (Peabody Museum). The stream is Cahokia Creek

Eight miles northeast from St. Louis stand the Cahokia mounds, one of the most remarkable of these groups of possibly prehistoric monuments. Within an area ten miles square are more than a hundred mounds of earth ranging from five to, in one instance, a hundred feet in height, and attaining, some of them, a circumference of

several hundred feet. About seventy of these mounds stands within a square mile along Cahokia creek. They are of various shapes—oblong, round, square, truncated, and with sides more or less worn down and disfigured by storms and by the ravages of white men. Most of these mounds occur in groups, though a few stand isolated and apart.

That the mounds are artificial appears from cross sections. Much of the black soil of the valley was used, but scattered through this material occur bunches of yellow clay, sand, and marl—masses of



PLAN OF CAHOKIA GROUP

From Patrick (Peabody Museum)

- A. Graded approach, 80 feet north to south. B. First terrace, 500 feet, east to west, 200 feet north to south. C. Second terrace, much eroded and broken. D. Third terrace, 97 feet above level of plain. A small conical mound that stood near center of this terrace has been destroyed. E. Fourth terrace, 3 feet above level of D and once 100 feet above level of plain. F. Track, work of white men, to summit of mound. Such vandalism is inexcusable even for prisoners

earth of such size and shape as a man could fashion and carry by himself alone. Not far distant are shallow ponds, considerable lakes in flood-time. One could easily imagine the earth scooped out here to be added to the growing mass of the mounds, though much of this material must have been brought from considerable distances.

The so-called "American Bottom" with its flanking ridge of hills, provides fit places for folk assemblies. Here before the largest of the mounds is a natural arena. Natural approach is by river. Within a hundred miles the Mississippi receives its mightiest tributaries, the Missouri and the Ohio, with a half-dozen scarcely less streams, as the Illinois. When we consider the great tributaries of these auxiliary streams, as the Cumberland and the Tennessee, we can see how in those early days when the river was all, no better place for great tribal or national gatherings could be found in all the heart of the continent. This is the true center of the Mississippi valley, and here an ancient people selected a site for their great folk-gatherings primarily, probably, in the name of religion. Further, the site does not stand open to view. Up the Cahokia creek, at all times easily navigable for their craft, these people found a natural highway to a spot affording ample arena and the seclusion desirable for their purpose.

The country about is a cemetery. The bluffs are favorable places for burial. Even the mounds, some of them, show intrusive burials. The mounds when they are really burial mounds mark the graves of chiefs of high rank, but most of them were not burial mounds at all.

Many finds and fragments, especially of pottery, are continually being plowed up. This indicates that the Mound-people had settled themselves to ways of peace. There are spades and hoes of flint, and others that are thought to have been used in the manner of plowshares. Iron and lead ore are found as ores but not in worked forms. There is copper, but no traces of a bronze age. Towering over all the rest, the so-called Cahokia, or Monk's mound bulks a stupendous mass. The dimensions taken by Van de Voort, a professional surveyor, and published by MacAdams, are as follows:

	Cahokia	Cf. Cheops
Length (No. to So.) . . .	980 ft.	755 ft.
Breadth	721 ft.	755 ft.
Area	16 A., 2 roods, 3 perches	13 A.
Height	99 ft. (now)	482 ft. (now)
Volume	21,690,000 cu. ft.	91,000,000 cu. ft.

The contour has often been explained. There are four levels: the southern curtain at one-fifth the height and with a depth of one-fourth that of the entire mound; a terrace on the western side one-half the entire width of the top of the mound; two levels dividing the remaining top surface about equally, one level about three feet above the other. On the southern end, leading to the large open

space or arena there is the ruin of a ramp whereby approach is had to the mound. The contour of Monk's mound is fairly well preserved except on the western side which is in a sorry state of dilapidation. A road built up from the southwest corner has wrought destruction, and the storms of ages have left the structure deeply furrowed. One feature attracts notice. On the west side two deep gorges, stopped below by detritus and too deep to have been formed by natural agencies, flank a narrow ridge that stands out boldly from the rest of the mound. As one climbs down this ridge one cannot escape the thought that this is the remnant of an ancient approach, an "employees' entrance" as it were, leaving the south ramp as the state approach from the assembly arena. Public processions would be by the way of this southern ramp and in view of the assembled people. Further, this western approach opens out toward the Cahokia creek, the natural approach from the river.

Size and arrangement are evidence of engineering skill even with crude tools; of ability to conceive and power to accomplish large things; and of a form of government that could hold men together and compel them to labor through long periods and to a desired goal. Man had reached a settled form of life; the period of wandering was over. Equally apparent is it that such vast works, life in so desirable a country and with all that made life ideal for them, must have ceased only because of destruction, assimilation or compulsory withdrawal before a fresh, more warlike, and, to judge from remains, more barbarous people.

Terms are as non-committal as are "megalithic," "menhir," and the like in Europe. The expression "Mound-builders" is descriptive only, there is no clue as to their race or kind, their origin or date. Two questions thus come up: Who were they? and When did they live?

Elaborate statements have been made, supported by abundant citations (Cf. Lucien Carr in *Smithsonian Report*, 1891, pp. 503ff.) from travelers and historians, to show that ancestors of the American Indians of white man's knowledge could well have been and doubtless were the Mound-builders. These arguments almost convince us. To suppose that within a thousand or two thousand years a civilization such as that of the Mound-builders must have been, could have thus disintegrated and degenerated is possible. Or are we to believe that a people far advanced in the ways of settled life but grown unaccustomed to war, was overwhelmed by a new, less cultured but more warlike people and finally expelled from their

ancient seats? This, too, seems in keeping with what we know of history elsewhere.

Estimates as to dates are at best only conjectures. One cannot escape the impression of great antiquity. Accepting central Asia as the homeland of the race, we know at what dates, approximately, migrations reached Western Europe, though even here the problems have not all been solved. It would probably take longer from Asia to our Mississippi valley than across Eurasia. We are willing to accept high dates for the monuments of Mexico, Central America, and Peru, then why not for those in the United States?

Many and diverse are the uses conjecturally made of these mounds. Perhaps they served many purposes. Their relative locations with outlying sites render plausible their employment as beacons or signal-towers, and their size would make some of them excellent observatories and outposts. That they might have served an astronomical use can possibly be neither proved nor denied, and some of the smaller ones served as burial mounds. But there was one purpose served by the larger mounds: they were preëminently for religious rites.

The following clipping from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (April 21, 1922), conveys an idea of work now done. Those directing the work are suspending judgment until in the light of these finds opinions may be reviewed and, doubtless, thoroughly recast:

"Professor Moorehead has been at work under the direction of the University of Illinois for five weeks and in that time has cut through the center of six mounds, has unearthed three cemeteries, taken up fifty-two skeletons, discovered twenty-three funeral urns and jars, found countless small art objects, each with some contribution to understanding of their makers, and yesterday uncovered in the base of a mound an altar, the use of which is not yet clear.

"The altar is in the center and at the base of a conical mound having a diameter of approximately 160 feet and a height of twenty-three feet six inches. It is a basin-like structure of baked clay, its sides having a thickness of three or more inches. It was filled with ashes, though of what nature only a chemical analysis will disclose. The character of the ash will throw light on the use to which the altar was put.

Such altars commonly were used by the Mound-builders in other sections of the Mississippi valley in connection with ceremonial rites. They were inserted, as this one is, in a flat surface baked hard with hot fires into a sort of platform or ceremonial dance floor. At such

time as the altar had fulfilled its ceremonial usefulness, it was the custom of the people to cover it over laboriously and to great height—hence, the mounds.

“As the hard floor surrounding the altar was uncovered, the diggers came upon two sticks protruding about two inches above the platform, as if they had formed two sides of a tripod. The sticks were rotted and easily pulled out. They were found to have been fitted into holes nearly 12 inches deep, and as the digging progressed a complete circle of about 35 holes, six to eight inches apart, was uncovered. This caused the conclusion that a tepee had been erected above the altar—too small a tepee for residential purposes and hence leading to the surmise that it was used in some sort of ceremony.”