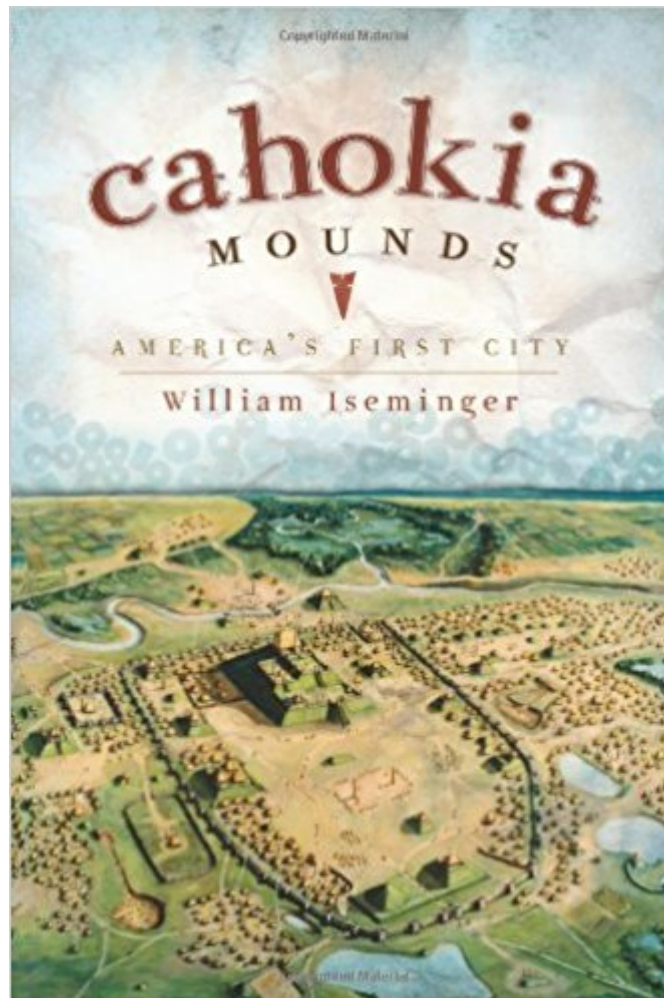


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Cahokia Mounds: America's First City (Landmarks)



Synopsis

About one thousand years ago, a phenomenon occurred in a fertile tract of Mississippi River flood plain known today as the "American Bottom." This phenomenon came to be called Cahokia Mounds, America's first city. Interpreting the rich heritage of a site like Cahokia Mounds is a balancing act; the interpreter must speak as a scholar to the general public on behalf of an entirely different civilization. Since even those three groups are splintered into myriad dialects of perspective, sometimes it is hard to know what language to use. But William Iseminger's work at the site has given him nearly four decades of practice in Cahokia Conversation 101, and he tells the story of the place and its ancient culture (as well as its place in contemporary culture) with the clarity and confidence of a native speaker.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

William R. Iseminger was born in Bloomington, Illinois, and grew up in Arlington, Virginia. He majored in anthropology in college, receiving his BA from the University of Oklahoma and his MA from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. He participated in excavations in South Dakota and several locations in Illinois, and he has worked at the Cahokia site full time since 1971. He directed public archaeological field schools for many years and serves as assistant site manager in charge of exhibits, interpretation and public relations at Cahokia for the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency.

Overall, Iseminger provides readers with a book that does provide a good introduction to Cahokia Mounds. However, the lack of citations and admittance to utilizing his "personal memory bank" does bring a question of credibility to some arguments levied in the book. Despite this and some updates that need to be made (interpretation of Mound 72 layout), *Cahokia Mounds: America's First City* provides readers with a tangible discussion of the layout and purpose of the impressive mound city interpreted from (mostly) current archaeological evidence. This book would be great for an introduction to Cahokia in general, the layout, and preservation concerns facing the site.

Growing up so close to Cahokia Mounds, I've been interested in the site my entire life and have even worked a few field schools out there. I've read a lot of books on the subject and this book is by far the best. It is a detailed account (and from what I can tell, comprehensive) of all the archaeological work that has happened at Cahokia Mounds since its discovery. Mr. Iseminger has a clear and authoritative writing style that makes this book easily accessible to the "armchair" archaeologists. This book is a "must read" for anyone interested in, or planning to visit, the site. I can't imagine a trip to Cahokia Mounds without it. I read a library edition, but plan to download a kindle edition to keep as future reference. However, I do wish the author would have done two things differently: 1) included a numbered map of the mounds earlier in the book - even a pull out copy and 2) included an index. When I was done reading there were a few topics I wanted to double-back on but the lack of an index made that nearly impossible. Good job!

Great book ! Better than any I have read previously on Cahokia.

Cahokia Mounds: America's First City by William Iseminger A great and inspiring resource, shows pictures, details and explanations of the finds and ideology of the site and people who lived historically on it. The detail in the pictures shows the relations of the finds and believed structures within the site. P.S. the author is a very kind and generous man.

Although written for the lay person, it is anthropology. As interesting and exciting as the discovery of cities in North America existing as early as BCE. This location in Southern Illinois has been documented to have over 20,000 inhabitants in 1300. It is the beginning of the real history of America.

Library at Cahokia Mounds, a wonderful site and a wonderful visitors center near Saint Louis. I visited Cahokia first in 1963 on a trip to visit friends in Saint Louis (and also to see Stan Musial in one of his last appearances -- a thrilling moment with the crowd roaring their approval as he pinch hit a single -- awe inspiring.) Cahokia wasn't very inspiring on that trip, frankly, mounds of course but not much explanation. No real visitors center, no books, just some rather rudimentary brochures. I wandered (and wondered) for several hours, but couldn't make heads or tails of the place. In 2012 a year after my wife died, I drove a truck full of furniture from Santa Fe to New Jersey, and arrived at Cahokia a little after dawn. It was a revelation and truly awe inspiring. I had planned to stay for two hours; a day and a half later I finally and reluctantly hit the road east again. The visitor's center is superb, the grounds immaculate, the signage educational and inspiring. This great book is a superb introduction to the wonders here. And this recent article describes some of the results of the research that continues here:

Cities and human lives have long been linked with water. Rivers provide water, a means of sustenance and access to other communities. Civilisations around the world have underpinned their existence on rivers, occasionally with disastrous consequences. At Cahokia, the largest prehistoric settlement in the Americas north of Mexico, new evidence suggests that the Mississippi River was inextricably linked to the rise and fall of the settlement. New research by University of Wisconsin-Madison academics has revealed Cahokia's complex history. By taking sediment cores from two lakes in the Mississippi floodplain, Samuel Munoz and Jack Williams have shown that major flood events in the central Mississippi River valley could explain the rise and fall of Cahokia as a cultural centre. Dating back nearly 2,000 years, these cores have revealed at least eight major floods in the area, near modern St. Louis. Cahokia rose to be a powerful centre during a relatively flood-free period of stability between 600 and 1200 CE. Munoz and Williams found that a major flood hit the area after the year 1200 and Cahokia, suffering from political instability and a declining population, was completely abandoned by the year 1400 CE. Drought has traditionally been viewed as one of the factors which led to the decline of many early agricultural societies. This new study, published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, presents new ideas to explore. "We are not arguing against the role of drought in Cahokia's decline but this presents another piece of information," says Samuel Munoz, currently writing his Ph.D. in geography and the study's lead author. The research also provides new information about the history of the Mississippi River, a waterway known to flood regularly, which may be useful now. "By understanding the river better, we can hopefully offer new information to those concerned about the exposure of current populations to floods," explains Williams, a professor of geography. By using radiocarbon dating techniques of plant

remains and charcoal within the core samples, Munoz and Williams have established "fingerprints" of major flood events from the last 2,000 years. Following a 300-year-period of numerous floods, the centuries after 600 CE witnessed an increasingly arid climate. Archaeological evidence from this period reveals that human activity increased in the floodplain as people moved into the area and farmed more intensively. Around 1200, however, population began to decline. "There are shifts in craft production, house size and shape, and other signals in material production that indicate political, social and economic changes that may be associated with social unrest," explained Sissel Schroeder, a UW-Madison professor of anthropology who aided Munoz and Williams. Cahokia fractured and the population began to migrate away from the floodplain. By 1400, the site was deserted. Many factors obviously contributed to Cahokia's rise and eventual decline. A period of gradual aridification followed by increased flood activity provides a means of understanding how past societies, as well as modern ones, are dependent on the climate. Sudden shifts in environmental conditions can prove disastrous for communities, as happened at Cahokia.

By: Adam Steedman Thake on
.newhistorian.com/cahokia-brought-down-by-floods/3700/

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Robert C. Ross
May 2015

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