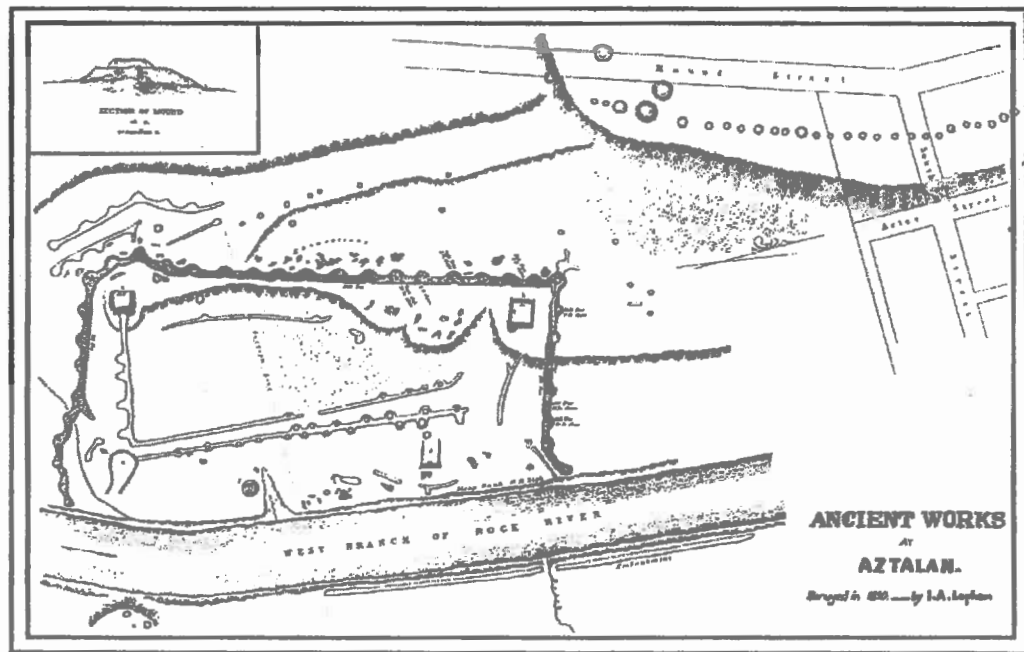


AZTALAN



Walking Tour

This walking tour brochure is a revised version of the original brochure produced by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources in 1995. It is the work of the Friends of Aztalan State Park with updated material from several decades of new archaeological research. Funded by a Friends of Wisconsin State Parks Incentive Grant.

Cover: 1850 map of Aztalan by Increase Lapham from *Antiquities of Wisconsin*, Smithsonian, 1855.

Ancient Aztalan: A Northern Town of the Mississippian Culture

The ancient town now called Aztalan was a northern outpost of a great and complex Native American civilization archaeologists refer to as *Mississippian* that first arose in the Middle part of America a thousand years ago. Supported by agriculture, mainly corn, the Mississippians built the first city in what is now the United States along the Mississippi River in southern Illinois just east of St. Louis, Missouri. The city was occupied by many thousands of people and covered six miles. Today, the city is called Cahokia but the original name is unknown.

The Mississippian culture had a social hierarchy where important families occupied the top tier,

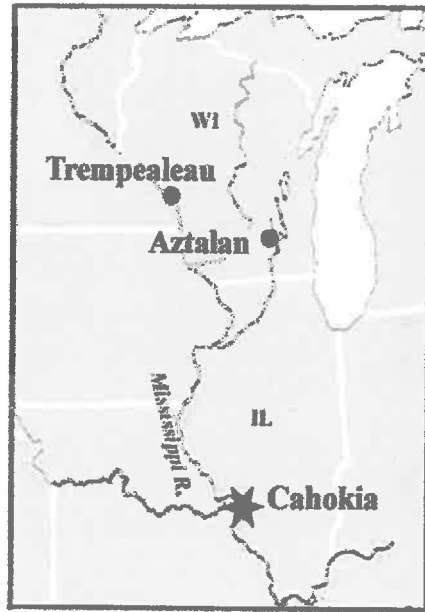
and it was formed around religious beliefs with the sun as a principal deity. The Mississippians engaged in earthen monument building and developed beautiful art forms in many different materials, almost always with religious themes.

In the center of the Cahokia still stands Monks Mound, a huge flat topped and terraced earthen mound that is 100 feet feet high and covers 14 acres. Undoubtedly the city rulers had their residence on top of the giant mound.

The Mississippian culture eventually expanded throughout much of eastern North America. One area of early expansion was north into southern Wisconsin, a region particularly rich in natural

resources where, between A.D. 1000-1050, people from Cahokia established a short-lived colony along the Mississippi River at what is now Trempealeau, Wisconsin. Several decades later, sometime just before A.D. 1100, Cahokians built the fortified town of the Aztalan on the banks of the Crawfish River.

Both Cahokia and Aztalan were abandoned after A.D. 1250 as the Mississippian civilization disappeared from the northern part of America. In the south, Native nations like the Cherokee, Creek and Choctaw maintained Mississippian traditions, including the use of flat topped platform mounds, when the first Europeans arrived.



Mississippian clay pot from Aztalan

Before Aztalan

The area along the Crawfish River that is now Aztalan State Park had been used by Native people for thousands of years before the Mississippian town was built. Stone tools and spear points found here date as far back as 8,000 years ago. Across the river, people of the Middle Woodland period built round or conical burial mounds and perhaps other earthworks about 2,000 years ago. Archaeologists discovered a house, pottery and artifacts south of Aztalan showing that people lived there about A.D. 600.

A part of a stockaded village of the Late Woodland period once existed at what is now the lower park parking lot next to the river,

and an effigy mound directly across the river may be related to it.

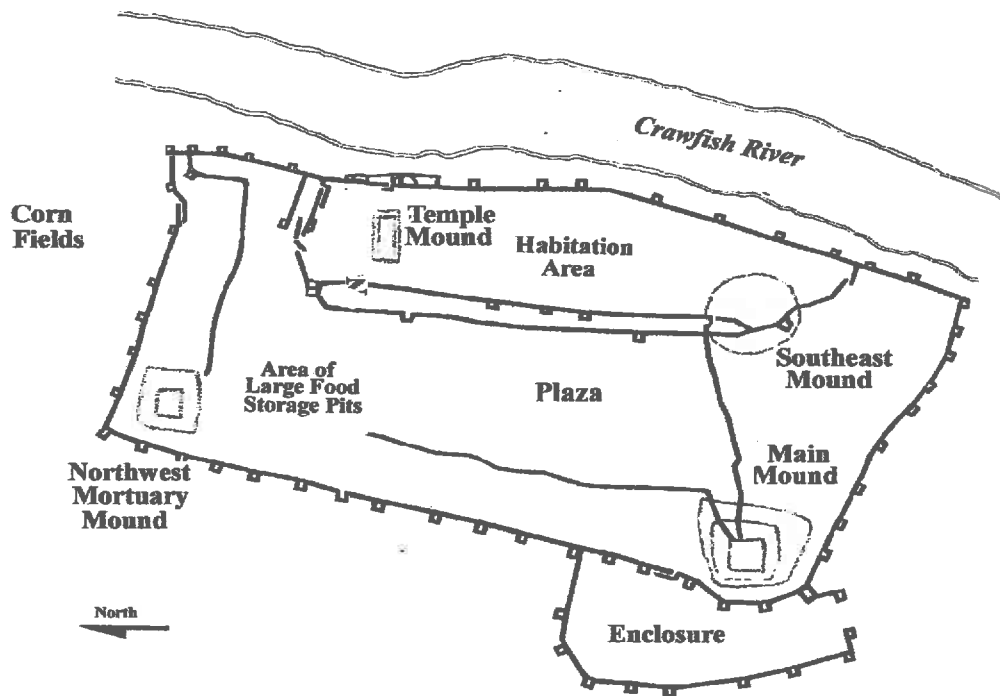
This village was probably occupied at the time that the Mississippians arrived. Pottery and other evidence shows that Late Woodland people, both local and from other places, lived with the Mississippians at Aztalan. The local environment had obviously attracted people for settlement and use for a long time.

One of the aspects of the local geography that made it particularly attractive is that this stretch of the Crawfish River is narrow and shallow, forming a natural ford. Early maps show that a major Indian trail crossed the ford of the river in the 1830s at what is now

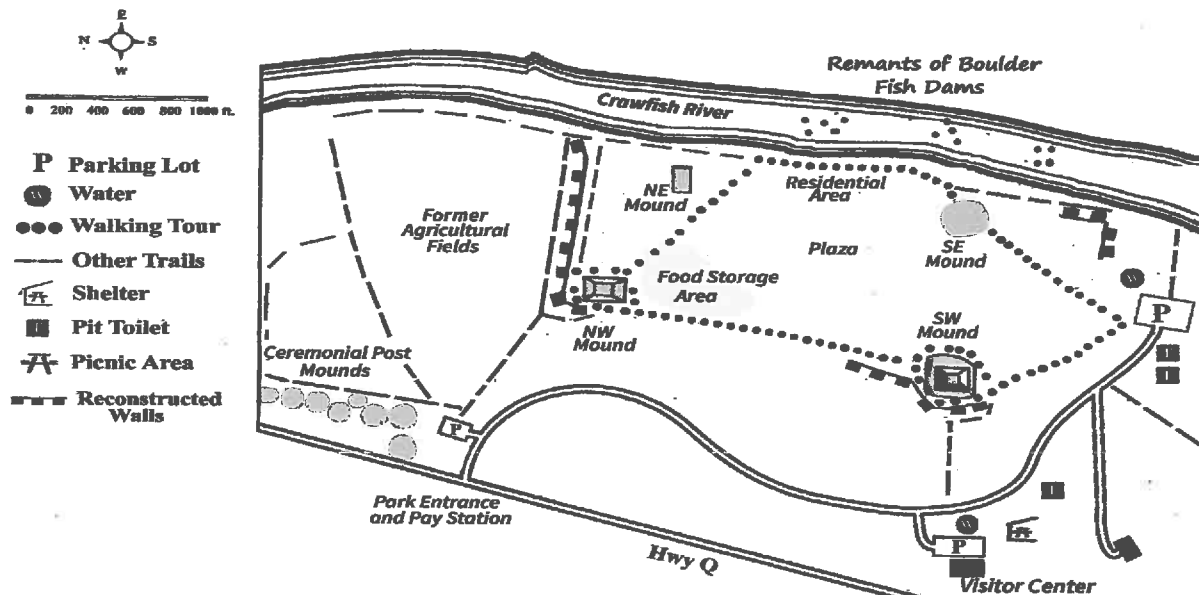
the bridge over the river on County Highway B, north of Aztalan. Springs are also found along the banks of the river that not only provided fresh water but were considered the sources of life by Native people and considered sacred. Several springs were enclosed within the town walls of Aztalan.

Finally Aztalan was surrounded by highly productive food resources. The vegetation of the land was a mosaic of prairies, savannas, forest, and marshes that provided a wide variety of game and wild plants. Judging from food remains found at Aztalan, deer, was especially plentiful. The river produced abundant clams and fish.

Aztalan Town Layout



Walking Tour of Aztalan



The walking tour begins at the lower parking lot next the river and follows a trail clockwise around the interior of the town. You may also access the trail from the park entrance parking lot and opposite the middle parking lot where the temporary visitor trailer is located. Along the route you will find a number signs providing more information and colorful images describing different aspects of the town and life of the people.

The Walls of Aztalan

As you approach the large Southwest Mound you will notice reconstructed portions of a wall that once surrounded the whole town. Aztalan was heavily fortified and that indicates the presence of enemies and warfare. The great, high wall was originally three feet thick.

Large logs cut from trees were placed vertically next to each other deep in the ground to form the core of the wall. Long, thin tree branches were woven in between the logs to

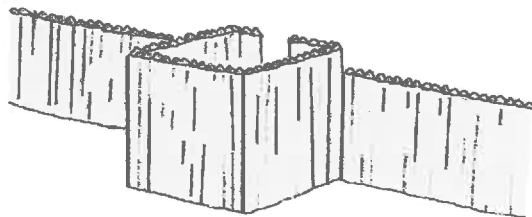
make a lattice work, and then thick layers of clay, mixed with prairie grass as a binder, were applied to both sides, forming a thick covering. Among other things, the clay covering would have functioned as a fire retardant.

Along the walls, Aztalan people constructed large vertical log and clay covered rooms called watch towers or bastions because, at the time of European contact, Native people in the south still made such structures as defensive positions.

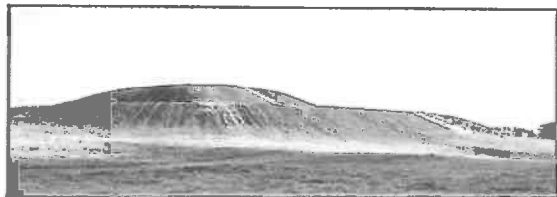
The rooms also served as buttresses to hold up the heavy town walls.

A need for tight security is also reflected by the fact that the town itself had only a few narrow entrance ways to the outside - all located along the river side of the town.

The log portions of the walls have been reconstructed at their original locations at the southeast and southwest corners of the town and all along its north side.



Main Southwest Platform Mound



At the southwest corner of the town is the main platform mound that almost certainly supported the large house of the ruling family. Like the two other platforms at the site, it is oriented to the cardinal that are considered sacred by Native people today. The front of the mound faces east -the direction of the rising sun.

It consists of two tiers – a large rectangular base with a smaller square flat topped mound on the

top. The form of the mound is identical to Monks Mound at Cahokia although much smaller. It is 16 feet high on the west end and measures 185 by 130 feet at its base. However, the mound was built into the side of a high ridge that made the mound look huge when viewed from the town.

The mound was built in several stages, growing larger with each stage. Excavations by Samuel Barrett of the Milwaukee Public

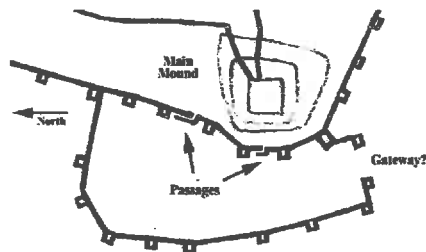
Museum early in the early 20th century found evidence of a structure on top of the mound outlined by small circular stains in the ground where former upright posts of the walls had been.

Two walls from the large central plaza ran up the mound to the structure as though directing the leader to this public gathering space that would have used for major ceremonies, and there is evidence that these had been rebuilt as the mound grew in size. The top tier of mound had been coated with light colored clay, a common feature of platform mounds used by Chiefs among the later Mississippian peoples of the south.

The Mysterious Southwest Enclosure

Beyond the town walls directly west of the Southwest Mound, a large walled enclosure had been constructed. Access to enclosure from the main mound was provided by narrow passage ways formed by overlapping walls and guarded by adjacent watch towers. Two such passages have been documented. These have been reconstructed and can found along the wall west of the Southwest Mound.

The walls of the enclosure were built like the exterior walls of the town with a number of watch towers. These have not been



reconstructed. Early maps and excavations suggested that there had been a wide gap at the south end evidently representing a large gateway, and an opening here was verified in 2013. This large opening

stands in contrast to the narrow passageways in the town walls. Perhaps the enclosure was secure and carefully guarded space where outside peoples could meet with town leaders for trade or other negotiations without entering the town.

However, only limited excavations have been conducted in the interior so the purpose of the enclosure remains a mystery. Adding to the mystery, 1950s excavations along the enclosure walls found two burials: a headless man and a women accompanied by an infant.

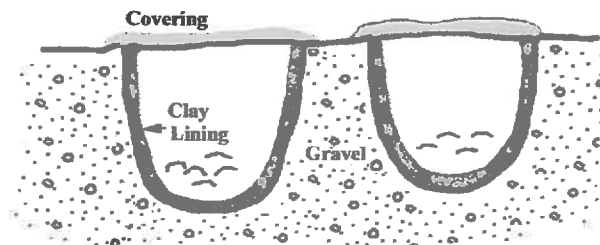
Plaza and Food Storage Pits

As you walk from the main Southwest Mound to the Northwest Mound, you will notice that the ridge widens out east into the town and the northern part of the plaza. This area is underlain by gravel and into it the Aztalan people dug huge food storage pits, probably for corn. At least some pits are six feet wide and six feet deep and lined with clay to keep out moisture. The natural gravel layer would also have facilitated rapid drainage of water. Archaeologists

estimate that over 70 pits are present.

Food from the storage pits would have been used during emergencies such as attacks on the town, and for feasts held during public ceremonies. As the pits fell into disuse, they were used for refuse disposal, and, in one case, for a human burial.

This area, unique to Aztalan, was discovered by a Michigan State University and University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee archaeological project.



The Northwest Mortuary Mound

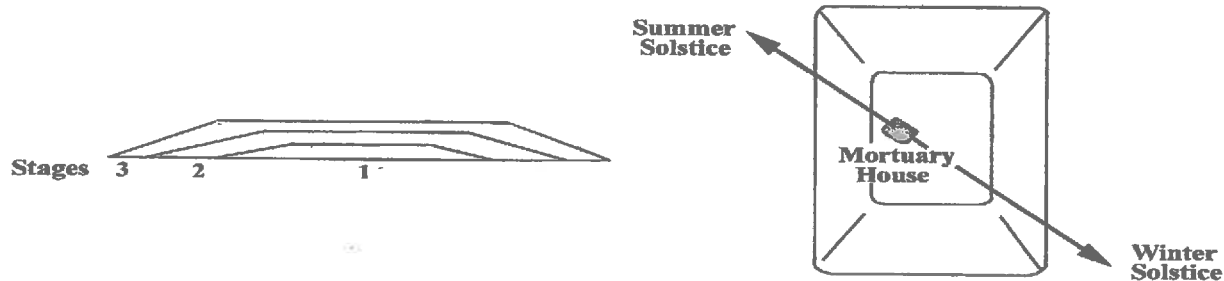
A second platform mound is located just inside of the northwest corner of the town wall. It is nine feet high, measures 105 x 82 feet at the base, and is oriented north-south. Archaeologists dug a trench through the mound in the 1950s and discovered that it had been built in three stages. They also found a major clue to its function. On the second stage was the burned remnants of a small wood pole walled house that contained the

skeletal remains of eleven men and women. The house had been a mausoleum for the elite, and similar structures probably had existed on the earlier and later stages.

The orientation of the mortuary structure is different from that of the mound. One end is in the direction of the sunset at the summer solstice -the longest day of the year after which the days grow shorter. The opposite end is in the direction of the sunrise at the

winter solstice- the shortest day of the year after which the days grow longer, giving rebirth to the world. The people in the mortuary structure had been incorporated into this natural cycle to be symbolically reborn again with the world.

No major cemeteries have been found for the other people of Aztalan. So far, they appear to have been buried singly at various places throughout the town.



The Northeast Temple Mound

At the north end of the residential area along the river, a low platform that mound once existed that supported a structure interpreted as a town temple typically found in Mississippian communities. It was oriented east-west and originally stood five high on the east end, sloping down to the west.

Plowing by modern farmers reduced the height of the mound so that by the 20th century it was difficult to see. Today, the location is marked by a very low rise. The mound area has been excavated

several times by archaeologists beginning in the early 1900s by Samuel Barrett of the Milwaukee Public Museum and as recently as 2015 by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. This work determined that building itself started as large vertical post structure, about 45 x 90 feet in size, built on the surface of the ground. Sometime later, it was dissembled and a mound built over the location that supported a similar structure. Excavations in the 1960s by the Wisconsin Historical Society discovered large

fire pits within the building. The structure and the sloping mound is very similar to a European description of a temple used by the Mississippian-related Natchez Indians of the American south where a sacred fire was kept burning — symbolizing the life of community. Pottery of different styles found in the mound suggests that the temple was used both by the Mississippians and the Late Woodland people who lived with them.

Residential Zone

Following the trail from the Northeast Mound you enter what was the residential or habitation zone where most of the people lived. It was completely surrounded by clay and timber defensive walls. Two lines of walls have been identified for the western side but the second wall was probably the result of rebuilding and expansion.

People lived in small circular and rectangular “pit houses” dug several feet into the ground and covered by structures framed by

upright poles coated with clay in order to insulate and water proof the dwellings. Roofs were of thatch or bark. The semi-subterranean construction kept the house warm in the winter and cool in summer. Narrow, protected entrance ways kept rain, wind, and snow from interiors. Examples of houses are illustrated on park signage.

Throughout the living area, archaeologists found roasting and fire pits, storage and refuse pits, heaps of refuse, and large

concentrations of fire-cracked rock that are probably from ceremonial sweat lodges. Aztalan people planted crops, especially corn; hunted; gathered wild plants; harvested clams and fished in the river. One fishing technique was to trap spawning fish by boulder dams placed across the bed of the river from which quantities of fish could be speared in spring. Remains of the fish dams can be seen when the the river is low.

Southeast Mound



At the south end of the living area, and directly east of the main Southwest Mound is a different kind of mound. It is the large circular or oval Southeast Mound that until recently had been believed to be a natural gravel knoll. Early excavations found a burial and that interior walls ran up

along the edges. East of the knoll archaeologists discovered dismembered human remains that were cut, broken, charred and mixed with other refuse. These remains may be from enemies.

Archaeological testing in 2013 found that, although the core of the mound is a indeed a gravel deposit, the Mississippians added dirt to

heighten the natural rise and turned it into a cultural feature. What overall role the mound played in the ceremonial life of Aztalan is still unknown. The location directly east of the Southwest main mound suggests it might have something to do with solar ceremonies since, from the view of the main mound, the sun would rise above the Southeast Mound during the spring and fall equinoxes.

However, this would not easily explain clear evidence of violence in the vicinity.

The Ceremonial "Post" Mounds

Just north of the entrance to the park are six large round or conical mounds that were once part of a long line of similar mounds that extended north along a ridge to what is now County Highway B.

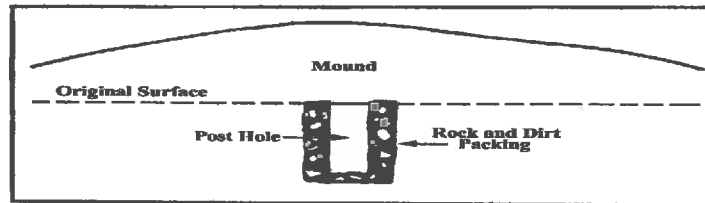
Increase Lapham mapped 27 mounds here in 1855 (see cover), but most of these were destroyed by modern farming. Lapham also mapped a line of ten smaller mounds below the ridge that have also disappeared. Excavations of several of the mounds by Samuel Barrett in the early 20th century

revealed a surprise. The high mounds covered deep holes in the original ground surface in which huge wooden posts had been put with dirt and rock securing them in place. At a later date the posts had been removed and the holes buried under a mound.

Barrett related the posts to the annual Green Corn Ceremony held by Native peoples in the south during which a large ceremonial post was put up to start the event. The ceremonies initiated the beginning of the agricultural year

when the corn began to ripen.

Perhaps a new ceremonial post was also erected at the birth of the new year at Aztalan when the corn starting appearing and then taken down when that year "died," and a new one begun. The dead year was symbolically buried under a mound just like deceased humans. Support for this hypothesis comes from the fact that the post mound line directly overlooks what had been Aztalan's agricultural fields. Other theories suggest that the posts functioned as astronomical markers.



The “Princess” Burial Mound

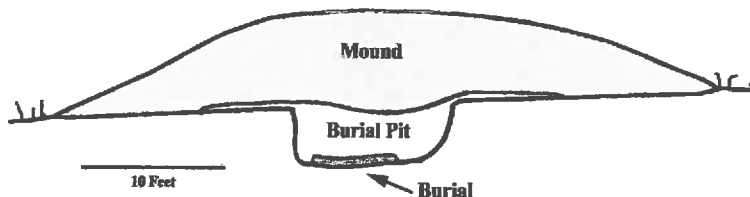
Two other mounds along the ceremonial post line covered pits with very different contents. One mound was built over a pit lined with birch bark and containing a large stone that had obvious significance in the beliefs of the Aztalan people.

An extraordinary human burial lay below the mound at the north end of the long mound line that is preserved on the grounds of the

Lake Mills-Aztalan Historical Society, north of Aztalan State Park.

Excavated by Samuel Barrett, the burial was that of young woman adorned with strands of over 2,000 shell beads identical to those made from seashell associated with the most important people at Cahokia. Some of beads were also made from seashell but most came from local clam shell obtained from the Crawfish River.

Barrett dubbed the young woman a “Princess” and the Princess Mound burial remains among the most enduring mysteries of Aztalan. The young woman was of obvious importance but who she was and why she was buried here is unknown. Perhaps if crops were failing, a sacrifice to the spirits of an important woman of a child bearing age was deemed necessary for continued fertility of the agricultural fields.



Abandonment

About A.D. 1250, the great city of Cahokia went into demise. The Mississippian Culture disappeared from the northern region of America but Mississippian lifeways continued in the south through the time of European contact in the 1500s.

What brought down Cahokia is a matter continuing research. Among the causes being explored are drought, flooding, warfare, environmental degradation, internal conflict, and disease. Perhaps Cahokia simply became too big to sustain.

Whatever the case, people left Aztalan about the same time. Where they went is unknown, but some archaeologists believe they

were among the people forming large farming villages on Lake Koshkonong 15 miles to the southwest, although the villages and culture were not as complex as Aztalan. Archaeologists call this new cultural tradition *Oneota*.

The Oneota are almost certainly the Native people who the Europeans met when they first came to Wisconsin and vicinity in the 1600s. Tribal names included Ho-Chunk and Ioway.

Small groups of Ho-Chunk were the last Native people to occupy lands along the Crawfish River- and probably Aztalan itself- in the early 1800s before they were removed by the federal government to western lands to make way for

American settlers.

In 1850, Increase Lapham mapped what had been a recently used corn field on top of the ancient town, probably that of a Ho-Chunk family. East of the Southeast Mound near the river, Samuel Barrett found storage pits containing historic period artifacts. One contained a piece of a flintlock musket and in another, a set of deer antlers, a turtle shell, pieces of a British iron knife, and an iron fishhook. Traditionally, medicine men wore antler headdresses and used turtle shell rattles during ceremonies.

How the Ho-Chunk perceived the ancient ruins and mounds of Aztalan is not recorded, but they must have regarded it as a very special place.

Help Support Aztalan State Park

The Friends of Aztalan State Park is a non-profit organization that assists the state park with funding, promotion, site tours, volunteers for park projects, and by offering a number of special events throughout the summer months. Volunteers staff a temporary visitor center trailer at the second park parking lot from June through August.

One major Friends project is the construction of permanent visitor center at the middle park parking lot that will provide information and displays to visitors. It will also provide space where schoolchildren can learn about Native American history. Architectural plans for the Visitor Center have been completed and the Friends of Aztalan State Park is now fundraising for actual construction.

Help support Aztalan State Park by giving a donation to the Friends Aztalan State Park for construction of the proposed visitor center . A donation envelope is included in this brochure and others may be found at the entrance pay station and at the temporary visitor center. Contributions can also be made via PayPal on the Friends secure website **[www Aztalanfriends.org](http://www.Aztalanfriends.org)** or by sending a check to:

**Visitor Center Fund
The Friends of Aztalan State Park
P.O Box 855
Lake Mills, WI 53551**

Friends of Aztalan State Park



PO Box 855
Lake Mills, Wisconsin 53551
[www: AztalanFriends.org](http://www.AztalanFriends.org)