

Exploring Aztalan State Park

By Robert Birmingham
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Located on the Crawfish River in Jefferson County, the ancient Native American site of Aztalan is the first formal, complexly-organized town in what is now the state of Wisconsin.

Earlier Native peoples lived in small villages or camps often occupied only during certain parts of the year. Established between A.D. 1050 and 1100, it was the northern outpost of a great and

complex civilization called Mississippian by archaeologists.

At the time, the center of the Mississippian world was a large city of Cahokia (see artist's rendering) on the banks of the Mississippi River in southern Illinois, also the first city in what is the United States.

The ancient town of Aztalan, preserved at Aztalan State Park, has been designated a National Landmark because of its importance to American history. The name Aztalan comes from a

greatly mistaken idea prevalent in the early nineteenth century that the site had been the place of origin of the Aztecs of Mexico.

Because of the speculator nature of the town, it has been the focus of archaeological investigations beginning in the nineteenth century. The Milwaukee Public Museum conducted the first professional excavations beginning in 1919 and this has been followed by a number of excavations by archaeologists from various institutions that

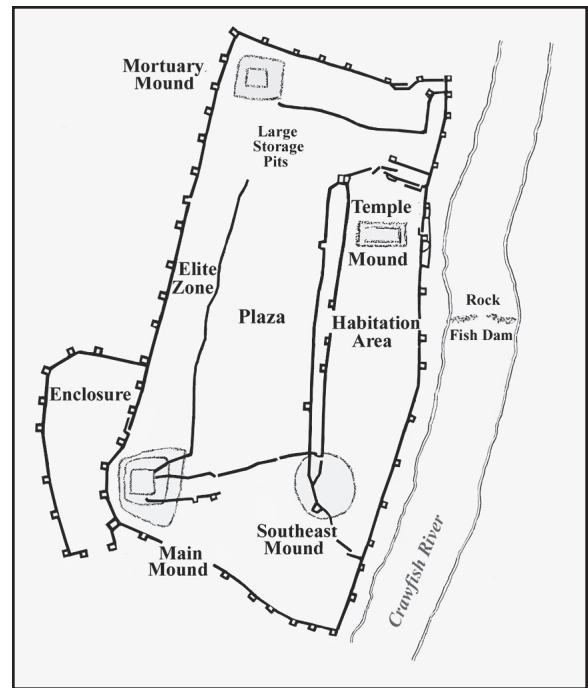
continue today. Through these investigations, we have learned much about the ancient town.

At its heyday around a.d. 1150, Aztalan covered 22 acres and was enclosed by a formidable wall made of huge posts interwoven with willow branches and thickly plastered with clay. Large buttresses located at intervals along the wall not only helped support the massive structure, but also probably served as watch towers for defense of the town.

The massive walls tell us that some local peoples, called Woodland by archaeologists, were not happy about the presence of the newcomers, although the Mississippians did have allies. Pottery and other artifacts show that some local Woodland people lived side by side with the Mississippians at Aztalan.

Walls inside the town divided it into different social spaces: a habitation area where most of the people lived, a plaza for public ceremonies, and, along the highest elevation, a zone reserved for the most important people (see map).

At roughly the four corners of the town are earthen mounds, three of which are flat-topped platform mounds characteristic of Mississippian culture (see photo). These supported important buildings: the probable residence of the ruling family, a small house or mausoleum where the Aztalan elite were placed after death, and temple in which a sacred fire was kept. A fourth large mound, located in the southeastern end of town, is circular or oval shaped but its function has not yet been determined. It had been considered a natural knoll but recent limited archaeological excavations revealed that it is a cultural feature. Another



Layout of the town of Aztalan as determined by archaeological excavations. (Submitted by Robert Birmingham)

structure that remains a mystery is large walled enclosure adjacent to the main platform mound.

The people who lived at Aztalan were farmers who grew corn and other crops, but they also fished and collected clams from the river and hunted deer and other animals. In the 1980s, archaeologists found that a communal food depot in the northwestern part of town consisting of numerous pits dug into grounds used for storage of food like corn. These might have been food reserves for times of need or for distribution during major ceremonies when feasts were held.

What drew the Mississippians north to Wisconsin remains one central research question, as is an explanation for the demise of the Mississippian civilization in the Midwest about AD 1200 along with abandonment of Cahokia and of Aztalan itself. Many theories have been proposed and ongoing research will undoubtedly solve these and other mysteries concerning Aztalan in the future.

Aztalan State Park is located on County Highway Q one mile east of

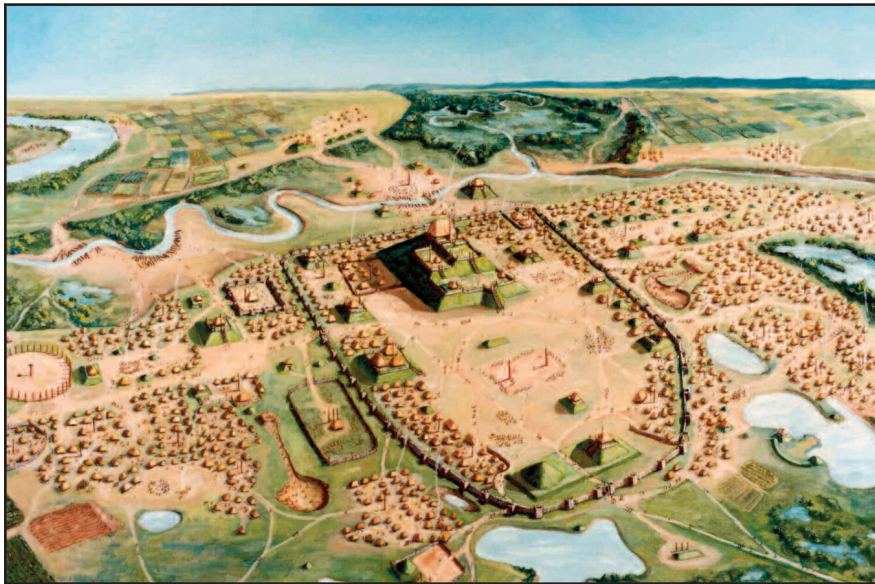
the community of Lake Mills. It is open year-round from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m.

In summer, the Friends of Aztalan State Park maintain a temporary visitor center trailer where visitors can learn more about the site. The Friends also provide walking tours every Sunday at 2 p.m. from June through August and host a number of special events. For more information on events visit the Friends of Aztalan State Park website at www.aztalanfriends.org. For more information on Aztalan, watch an on-line video at dnr.wi.gov/topic/parks/name/aztalan and read the book *Aztalan: Mysteries of an Ancient Native American Town*. Copies are generally available at libraries, but the book can be ordered through the Wisconsin Historical Society Press at www.wisconsinhistory.org/whspress.

Visitors to Aztalan State Park require a Wisconsin State Park annual, daily, or hourly vehicle admission sticker and these can be purchased at a self registration station at the entrance to the park.



Main Platform mound at Aztalan. Photo by Dan Seurer. (Submitted by Robert Birmingham)



Artists conception of Cahokia courtesy of William Iseminger. (Submitted by Robert Birmingham)

Jefferson Hot Spots & Happenings

Compiled by Jason Francis

Hot Spots

Step into yesteryear as you step through the ten rooms of the **Jefferson Historical Museum** (317 S. Main St.), located behind Jefferson City Hall with parking on Gardner Street. The museum fills the city's old city police station and jail. It contains 175 years of Jefferson's history. Hours are Wednesdays, 10 a.m. to 12 p.m., and Sundays, 1 p.m. to 4 p.m., or by appointment. 920-674-7731, jeffersonhistoricalsociety.org

A series of **live music concerts** are presented Thursday nights June through August in **Rotary Waterfront Park** (301 S. Gardner Ave. in downtown Jefferson). A wide variety of genres are featured from some of the state's best bands. Free admission. Food and beverages available. In case of inclement weather, shows will be moved to the Jefferson Area Business Center. Also playing live in the park, on selected summer Fridays, is Jefferson's American Legion Band. For more than eighty years, Jefferson's residents and visitors have enjoyed these concerts. For many years, the band performed in the high school parking lot, and listeners stayed in their cars, honking their horns instead of applauding. Now the band performs in the Rotary Waterfront Park Pavilion. For a full schedule of dates and performers, visit www.jeffersonlivemusic.com. Rotary Waterfront Park is a 1.3 acre downtown park that lies on the east bank of the Rock River adjacent to the original Jefferson Depot.

The **Jefferson Performing Arts Center** (700 W.

Milwaukee St.) provides culturally valuable, affordable and accessible entertainment, together with performing arts opportunities for Jefferson County and the surrounding areas. Office hours are Monday, Wednesday and Friday, 10:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. 920-674-2179, www.councilfortheperformingarts.org

Happenings

Thursdays June 7-Oct. 4-Farmers' Market: Held every Thursday 12 a.m. to 5 p.m. behind Jefferson City Hall (intersection of West Dodge Street and South Gardner Avenue). www.jeffersonwis.com/community/market/

June 27-July 1-Jefferson Plein Air: Artists will be found in downtown Jefferson and surrounding areas painting historic buildings, churches, the Rock and Crawfish rivers, and other points of interest. The paintings will be judged and then will be for sale at the Woolen Mill, 222 S. Wisconsin Dr., on June 30 (10:30 a.m.-5 p.m.) and July 1 (11 a.m.-4 p.m.). 414-322-1440, www.artinjefferson.com

July 11-15-166th annual Jefferson County Fair: Midway rides, grandstand entertainment, Badger State Tractor Pull (July 11), truck pull (July 12), demolition derby (July 15), exhibits, demonstrations and country music, including Travis Tritt on July 13 and Randy Houser July 14. Jefferson County Fair Park, 503 North Jackson Ave., 8 a.m.-11 p.m. 920-674-7148, www.jcfairpark.com

Sept. 7-9-Wisconsin Sheep and Wool Festival: Family event featuring stock dog trials; sheep, Shetland, Border Collie, fleece and hooked rug shows;

auction; art classes and giant country store. Food and beverages served all day. Jefferson County Fair Park, 503 North Jackson Ave. 608-868-2505, www.wisconsinssheepandwoolfestival.com

Sept. 14-16-48th annual Gemuetlichkeit Days: Gemuetlichkeit is German for "good times, good fun, good fellowship." Celebrate with German food, crafts, great music, dancing, and a big parade on Sunday at noon. The 2018 theme is "Jeder Liebt Eine Parade" (Everyone Loves a Parade). Jefferson County Fair Park, 503 N. Jackson Ave. Friday 5 p.m.-midnight, Saturday 9 a.m.-midnight, Sunday 10:30 a.m.-7 p.m. 920-674-4511, www.gdays.org

Sept. 28-30-Fall Jefferson Car Show and Auto Swap Meet: Swap meet, car corral and car show for classics, collectibles, street rods and trucks. Covers 99 acres. More than 3,100 vendor stalls and over 1,000 cars for sale. Swap and car corral all three days; car show Saturday and Sunday. Friday 10 a.m.-6 p.m., Saturday 6 a.m.-4 p.m. and Sunday 6 a.m.-3 p.m. Jefferson County Fair Park, 503 N. Jackson Ave. 608-244-8416, www.madisonclassics.com/car-shows/fall-jefferson.php

Oct. 19-21-Warriors and Wizards Festival: Formerly the Harry Potter Festival. This festival was formerly located in Edgerton and was held in Jefferson for the first time in 2017. See story on this event in this section of the Lakes Edition for much more information.

Information compiled from internet sources, including local chamber of commerce websites, municipal websites, the Wisconsin Department of Tourism's www.travelwisconsin.com, and other websites, unless noted.