

Lost Cities: Cahokia — why did North America's largest city vanish?

By Lee Bey, The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 09.23.16

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Panoramic view of steps on Monk's Mound, JTB Photo/UIG via Getty Images; Cahokia consists of more than 100 mounds grouped around plazas or squares, Brown Bear/Windmil Books/UIG via Getty Images; Archaeologists excavate a Native American garbage dump in Monk's Mound in Cahokia Mounds State Park, Bettmann via Getty Images

Editor's Note: Long before Columbus reached the Americas, Cahokia was the biggest city north of Mexico. Yet by 1350 it had been deserted by its native inhabitants, the Mississippians. No one is sure why.

A Large And Advanced City

Cahokia was a large and rich Native American city built hundreds of years before Columbus reached the Americas. Its population was about as large as London, England's.

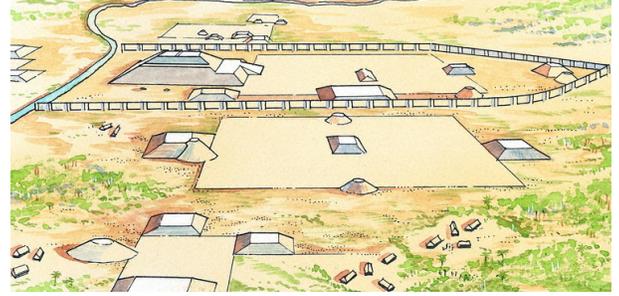
Cahokia was located in what is now southern Illinois. It was probably the largest North American city north of Mexico at that time.

The city was built by a group of Native Americans known as the Mississippians. At one point, the Mississippians occupied much of North America. Their cities and villages stretched from the

Mississippi River to the shores of the Atlantic.

Cahokia was an advanced city for its time. Yet its history is nearly unknown by most Americans. Life there was very different from what most people imagine when they think of early Native Americans.

Most people still picture teepees when they think of Native Americans, says scientist Thomas Emerson. Yet Cahokia was a large planned city, with buildings and roads. It was carefully designed. It contained the largest earthen mound in North America.



No One Knows Why It Was Abandoned

Cahokia was built according to careful plans and was big enough for 20,000 people. It featured a town center with broad public squares. The most important buildings were set on top of huge earthen hills, or mounds. The largest of these mounds was 100 feet tall and covered 14 acres. It still exists today.

However, Cahokia never developed into a modern city, the way London, England did. Instead, it simply disappeared.

Cahokia was already a large city by AD 1050, but by 1350 it was abandoned. No one is sure why. The city's inhabitants were not driven from their homes by war, disease or European settlers. Indeed, the first white man did not arrive in the area until 1540.

Cahokia was between six and nine square miles in area, and had 120 earthen mounds inside its borders. The Mississippians dug up, hauled and stacked millions of pounds of dirt. They used only woven baskets to transport all that earth.

Daily Life In Cahokia

Cahokia's largest mound, now known as Monk's Mound, still survives today. Originally, a large building sat on top of it. The building was an important meeting place for Cahokia's political and religious leaders.

The town center was where the people gathered to hold meetings and worship their gods. It was surrounded by a large wooden fence, which was almost two miles long.

Most of the Mississippians lived outside the fence. Their homes were rectangular, and consisted of a single room about 15 feet long and 12 feet wide, with wooden walls and a straw roof. The homes shared courtyards and were connected by streets.

At its height, Cahokia was a busy place. Men hunted, grew and stored corn, and cut down trees for buildings. Women worked in the fields, cooked, made pottery and wove mats and cloth.

People spent much of their day in the small courtyards and gardens outside each group of homes. Important meetings took place on the plazas and in buildings inside the fence.

The City Empties Out

Since the 1960s, scientists have been digging in the area where the ancient city stood. They have found small statues and a workshop where copper goods were made.

Scientists have also discovered a mound containing mass graves full of bodies. The Mississippians seem to have performed human sacrifices as offerings to their gods.

The reasons for Cahokia's end are a mystery. The city's population was at its largest around 1100, but by 1350 not a single person was left.

Perhaps it had become too difficult to produce enough food to feed the city's inhabitants. Perhaps there was a lengthy drought, or some kind of unrest. Whatever happened, the Mississippians simply kept leaving until the city was empty.

Truly one of the great lost cities, Cahokia deserves to be much better known.



Quiz

- 1 Which sentence BEST supports the idea that Cahokia was a highly advanced city?
- (A) It was probably the largest North American city north of Mexico at that time.
 - (B) Cahokia was built according to careful plans and was big enough for 20,000 people.
 - (C) The town center was where the people gathered to hold meetings and worship their gods.
 - (D) They have found small statues and a workshop where copper goods were made.

- 2 Based on information in the article, which of these statements is true?
- (A) The evidence shows that worship of the gods was an important part of Cahokian culture.
 - (B) The arrival of the white man in America ultimately led to the destruction of Cahokia.
 - (C) Most Americans don't know about Cahokia because it was discovered only recently.
 - (D) Cahokia came to an end because of a combination of drought and unrest.

- 3 Read the sentence below.

The city's inhabitants were not driven from their homes by war, disease or European settlers.

Which sentence uses "driven" in the SAME way as the sentence above?

- (A) The truck was driven to the city and back every day.
- (B) Margaret was driven to succeed in everything she did.
- (C) The settlers were driven to dig deep holes because of a lack of water.
- (D) The rear wheel of the motorcycle is driven by the engine.

- 4 Read the sentence from the section "The City Empties Out."

Perhaps there was a lengthy drought, or some kind of unrest.

Which word would BEST replace the word "unrest" in the sentence without changing the meaning of the sentence?

- (A) conflict
- (B) sleeplessness
- (C) suffering
- (D) confusion