

ANNUAL REPORT: Cahokia 2016 FIELD SCHOOL

Director(s): Sarah E. Baires, Eastern Connecticut State University

Co-Director(s): Melissa R. Baltus, University of Toledo



IFR Field School Students at Cahokia to watch the Summer Solstice Sunrise

The overarching goal of the 2016 Cahokia IFR Field School was to explore the relationships between people at the Native North American city of Cahokia and water or watery places. Specifically, we wanted to explore a neighborhood located near two borrow pits that were presumed to have held water, at least periodically, and how that neighborhood may have changed over the course of Cahokia's history. Additionally, we wanted to explore any potential earth moving or landscape modification in associated with the borrow pit areas. We identified the area of exploration, the Courtyard Area Between Borrow pits (CABB Tract), and three potential features to excavate, using geophysical survey. These potential features were initially hypothesized to be 1) a building located within a courtyard group that may date to the early years of Cahokia; 2) a possible compound wall that may date to the later years of Cahokia; and 3) a later building located within the aforementioned compound wall.

Students were involved in creating a topographic map of the site area and tying our excavations into the broader Cahokia landscape while learning to use mapping technology like a GPS and Total Station. Students worked in smaller teams on excavation units to expose, map, and excavate the targeted features. They were actively involved in identifying feature fill and differences in soil colors, textures, and artifact densities. They learned how to define features in relation to surrounding subsoils, how to interpret different depositional layers and episodes, and how to identify different artifact types. During excavation, students were part of the ongoing hypothesizing regarding feature construction and termination, ultimately resolving the following:

- 1) We identified a portion of the targeted structure in the courtyard group. This building had been partially re-excavated by Cahokians, who laid a reed mat along one wall, burned that mat,

and capped over that re-excavation. They then constructed another building, oriented to cardinal directions, over the location of the earlier building. The later building was not recognizable in the magnetometry data given the strong signature of the burned mat.

2) What we initially hypothesized as a compound wall in the magnetometry was actually a different, and unexpected, kind of linear feature. We revealed a previously undocumented borrow pit that had been aboriginally reclaimed through layers of specially selected soil and artifact offerings. Students excavating the units in this new borrow became adept at recognizing changes in depositional layers and interpreting the sequence of deposition.

3) The building we previously believed to be inside the possible compound (now borrow pit) was confirmed. This building was semi-subterranean, with an atypically deep basin. The building was large and contained deposits beyond the usual domestic refuse, including large portions of deer bone and large pieces of specially decorated pottery. This suggests an extra-domestic building that was terminated in conjunction with a public eating event.

These excavations, together with the magnetometry survey, demonstrate that the CABB Tract was heavily utilized for both domestic and special-use activities. Some of these special activities are focused on excavating and moving earth, for mound construction as well as for reclamation of former borrow pit areas. This shifts our understanding of the importance of this neighborhood from a focus on water to include a focus on earth and earth-moving activities.

Students engaged with the fieldwork through their own research interests as well. Five students authored or co-authored posters presenting either data from the CABB Tract excavations or data from their own research conducted while in the field. These posters were presented first at the annual Mississippian Conference, held at Cahokia this year. Two of the posters will then be presented at the Midwest Archaeological Conference and/or the Southeastern Archaeological Conference this fall.

The co-directors of the excavation presented their findings at the Mississippian Conference as well as at the local meeting of avocationalists (Cahokia Archaeology Society) and will be disseminating this research at the Midwest Archaeological Conference, the Southeastern Archaeological conference, and the Society for American Archaeology annual meeting. They will also be submitting a formal report to the Illinois State Historical Agency (the permitting agency for this fieldwork) and a series of articles to peer-reviewed journals.