

## ANNUAL REPORT: US (IL) - CAHOKIA 2017 FIELD SCHOOL

**Director:** Dr. Sarah E. Baires, Eastern Connecticut State University

**Co-Director:** Dr. Melissa R. Baltus, University of Toledo



Our goal for the 2017 IFR Field School at Cahokia was returning to the Spring Lake Tract (formerly CABB Tract) to complete excavations of one large public building and further test two additional structures. Additionally, we intended to further explore the reclaimed borrow pit identified in 2016 and test our hypothesis regarding a plaza near a previously identified borrow pit. From our initial research question regarding Cahokian's relationship to water and watery places, we have refined our research to considerations of people's lived relationships to earth-moving activities. Specifically, we wanted to explore how people engaged with the borrow pits themselves by continuing excavations in the anthropogenically in-filled borrow and test whether an open plaza was maintained adjacent to another borrow location. We also wanted to continue our excavations and documentation of both public and domestic structures in this neighborhood.

Students were involved in relocating our previous excavation locations and expanding units to capture more data. They learned to use mapping technology like a Total Station to tie our new excavation areas into the previous map. Students worked in smaller teams on excavation units to expose, map in plan and profile, and excavate the targeted features. They were actively involved in identifying feature fill and observing 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. They learned how to use varying excavation techniques (shoveling, troweling, or picking) based on artifact types and preservation. During excavation, students were part of the ongoing hypothesizing regarding feature construction and termination, ultimately resolving the following:

- 1) We verified the presence and orientation of a targeted structure that was part of a potential courtyard group. Through our expanded excavations to the floor of this building we learned that, rather than an aboriginal re-excavation to place and burn a woven mat, the entire

structure had burned and burned matting was deposited across the majority of the floor. We were able to document three corners of the superimposing building that was oriented to cardinal directions. This later building was smaller than expected for its temporal affiliation and had a hearth or pit that extended down to the level of the burning in the structure below.

2) The large public building in the northern part of the tract proved to be larger than originally defined. Upon completion of excavation of the large rectangular building, it became apparent that it superimposed an earlier T-shaped structure. T-shaped buildings were hallmarks of Cahokian religious-politics and likely house religiously significant materials in its T- alcove. The basin of the superimposing rectangular building continued to yield evidence for a public feasting event, along with other extra-domestic material like pigments, pipe fragments, and a possible needle or tattooing implement.

3) While excavations into the reclaimed borrow pit were less extensive due to time and weather constraints, we verified continued deposition of organic and artifact-rich soils along the original slope of the borrow. This slope became steep and potentially had aboriginal steps along its edge based on the undulating fill along that slope.

4) A small test unit placed in the possible plaza area identified in the magnetometry survey revealed no feature fill and miniscule material culture from the plow zone. This lack of features seems to support our hypothesis that this was a plaza intentionally kept clear of structures, pits, and debris, located adjacent to a borrow pit.

These excavations, together with the magnetometry survey, support our earlier hypothesis that the Spring Lake Tract (formerly 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. Additionally, the incorporation of extra-domestic materials and objects with earth to terminate both public and domestic structures suggests ritual and daily practices were heavily entangled in this area of Cahokia.

Unfortunately we did not have any students who expressed interest or pursued their own research topics in this field school. While one student was already involved in a regional archaeological research project that began prior to this season, we struggled with a lack of engagement with many of the other students.

The co-directors of the excavation will be disseminating this research at the Midwest Archaeological Conference and numerous public and avocationalist talks. 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 (including a publication in *American Antiquity* currently *in press*).