

Cahokia's Coles Creek Predecessors

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Some of the founding ideas undergirding Cahokia came from a mound-building culture that flourished between 700 and 1200 CE in the southern Mississippi Valley, in the present-day states of Mississippi and Louisiana. Archaeologists recognize the people who lived there as members of the Coles Creek culture, who were themselves heirs to a tradition of mound building stretching back as far as 3500 BCE. Unlike the far more populous Cahokians, who relied on large stores of maize to fuel workers and feed gathered throngs of worshippers, the Coles Creek people, up until the twelfth century, accomplished what they did without growing corn. The natural bounty of the river and its floodplains made the Coles Creek homeland a hunter, fisher, and forager's paradise where people could live well and build mounds too, all by hunting, collecting wild foods, and gardening native plants.

Coles Creek people built civic-ceremonial centers dominated by flat-topped, rectangular mounds surrounding open plazas—a site plan that became the prototype for Cahokia and later Mississippian centers. Archaeologists call these sorts of earthworks *platform mounds* or *truncated pyramids*, because their tops were leveled flat, unlike the rounded tops of other mounds.

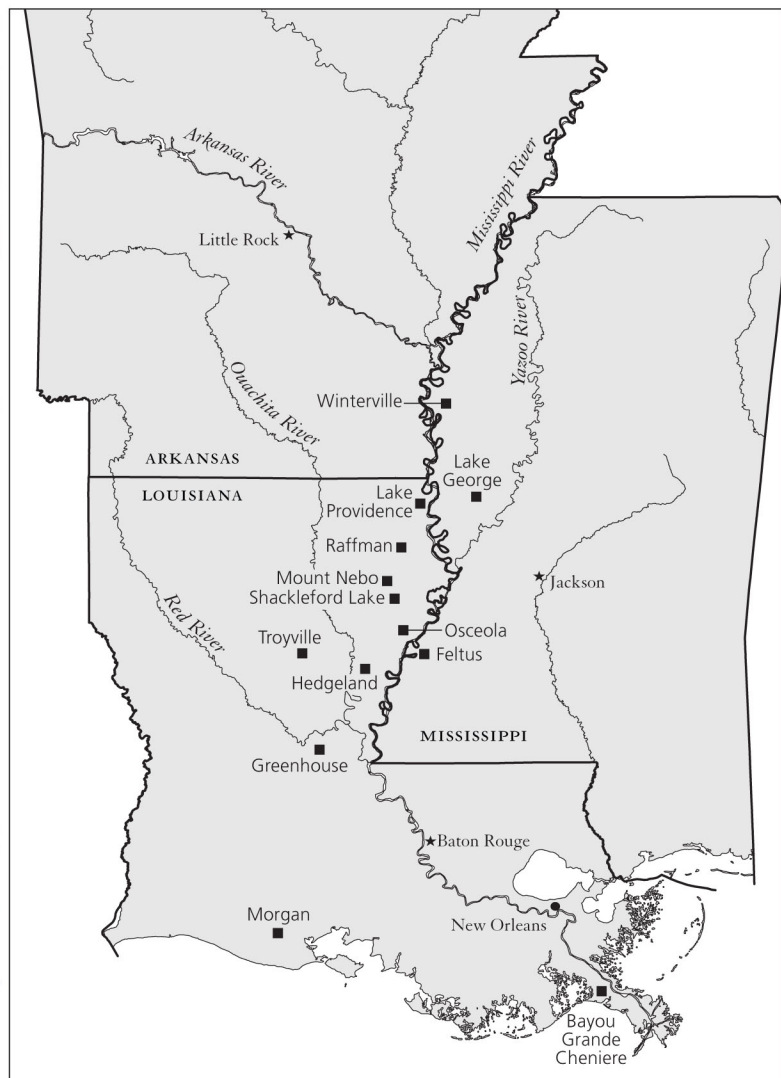


Figure 2.2. The lower Mississippi River valley, showing locations of excavated Coles Creek mound centers.

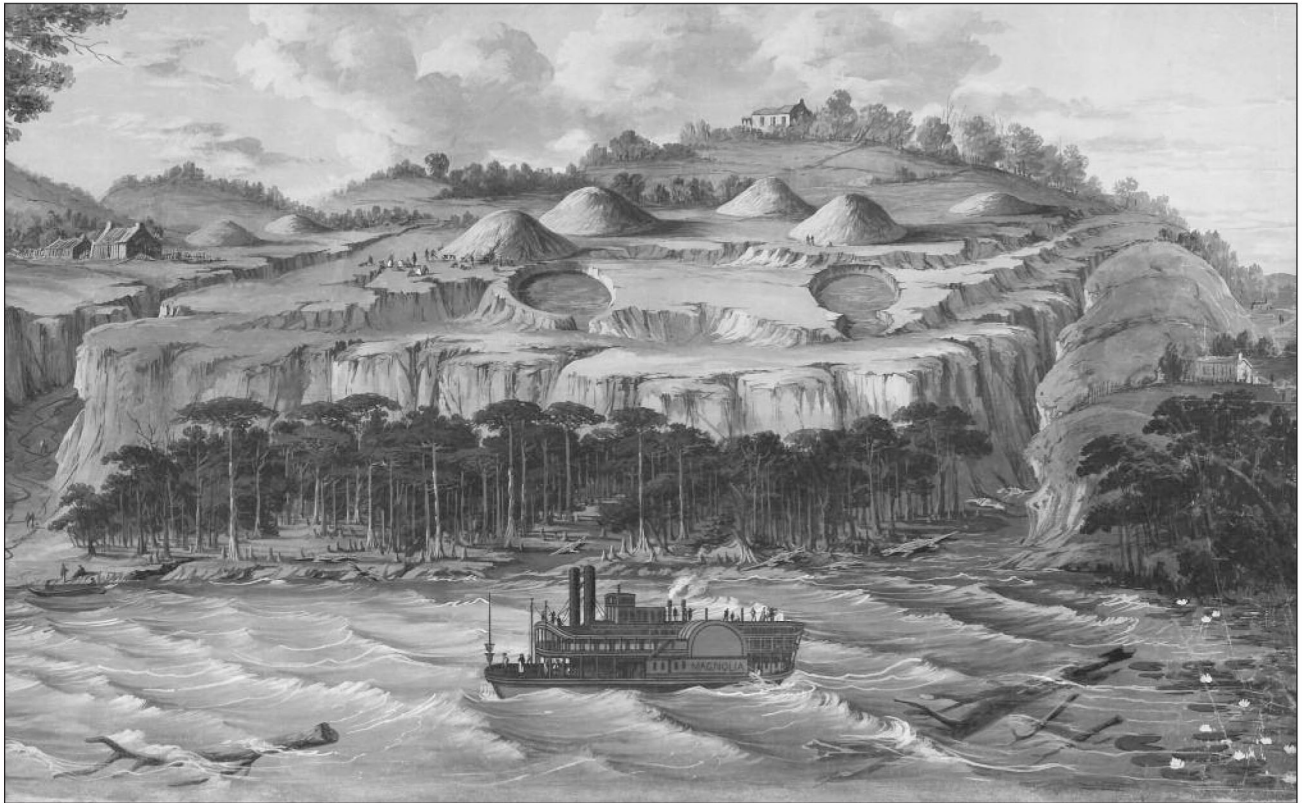


Figure 2.1. The Feltus site as painted in 1850 by John Egan from an 1846 field drawing by William T. W. Dickeson, the younger brother of Montroville W. Dickeson. The four main mounds are in their correct positions, but the artist added extra mounds on the left and right and made the summits rounded rather than flat. The two circular basins in front of the mounds were probably created by erosion.

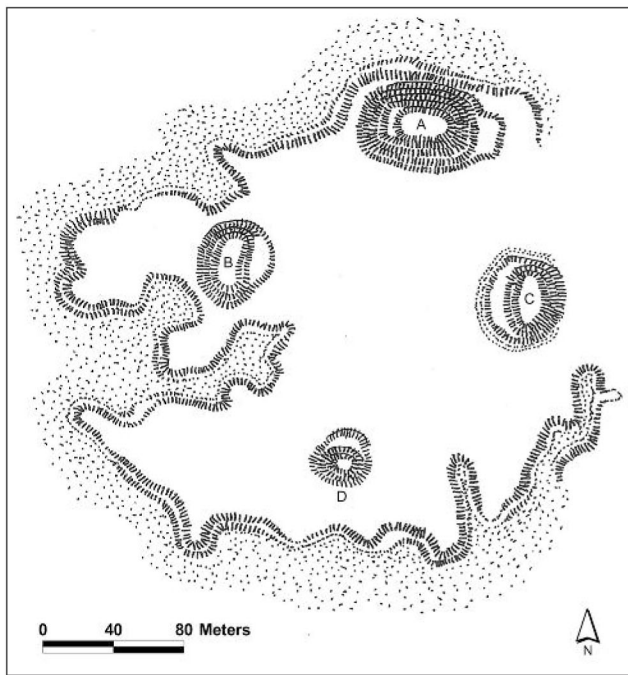


Figure 2.4. The Feltus site. Mound D was destroyed around 1940; its size and location have been reconstructed from an 1852 survey and old aerial photographs. The mounds sit on an isolated landform flanked by steep slopes on three sides.

Native peoples of the Deep South had been building platform mounds since the first century BCE, but initially these were rare in comparison with rounded ones. Early platform mounds seldom had buildings on top; rather, their summits show evidence of free-standing posts, burned areas, and refuse deposits containing broken pottery and food remains. Archaeologist Vernon Knight has argued convincingly that such mounds served as public stages for periodic world-renewal ceremonies, which involved feasting and the setting in and later pulling up of wooden posts. Usually small, the early platform mounds saw only one or two stages of construction apiece before being decommissioned with a covering of earth.

From these antecedents, a new architectural pattern crystallized in the lower Mississippi Valley by 800 CE—the Coles Creek pattern, in which ceremonial centers typically consisted of two to four platform mounds arranged around an open plaza. The mounds often (but not always) supported wooden buildings, though we do not know

yet what these earliest buildings were used for. The newer platform mounds tended to be larger than their predecessors and show more stages of construction, suggesting greater continuity of use. People of the early Caddo culture and their Plum Bayou culture neighbors, who lived along the Arkansas and Red Rivers to the west, adopted this pattern, too. Flat-topped monuments became ubiquitous in the lower Mississippi Valley even as post-related rituals and feasting continued. Together, these monuments and rituals became a major piece of the historical substrate from which the mound and post rituals of the medieval Mississippians emerged.

The layouts of Coles Creek–type mound centers look similar enough that researchers believe they conformed to a broadly shared, relatively formal plan. Maybe the sites served as the central places of large political territories. Few people, if any, actually lived in the mound centers—perhaps only community and religious leaders and their families. Most ordinary people lived in scattered outlying settlements and gathered at the mounds periodically for ceremonies and feasts.

Archaeologists have excavated relatively few Coles Creek centers, and only a handful thoroughly enough to gain a good understanding of the construction and uses of the mounds. One site, however—the Feltus Mounds in southwestern Mississippi—has a history of archaeological investigations going back to the 1840s, when a Philadelphia physician named Montroville W. Dickeson collected artifacts and dug into one of the mounds. In 1852, Mississippi's first state geologist, Benjamin L. C. Wailes, made a map of the site. Archaeologist Warren King Moorehead excavated into two of the mounds in 1924, and years later, in 1971, a crew with Harvard University's Lower Mississippi Survey carried out a small dig. Since 2006, we have collaborated in four seasons of excavation at Feltus. Most of our data are still being analyzed, but our preliminary findings, together with the results of earlier investigations, paint an interesting picture of the site's history and the kinds of public rituals that took place there—rituals that no doubt foreshadowed even grander ones to come at Cahokia.

Feltus mounds sit on a hundred-foot-high bluff

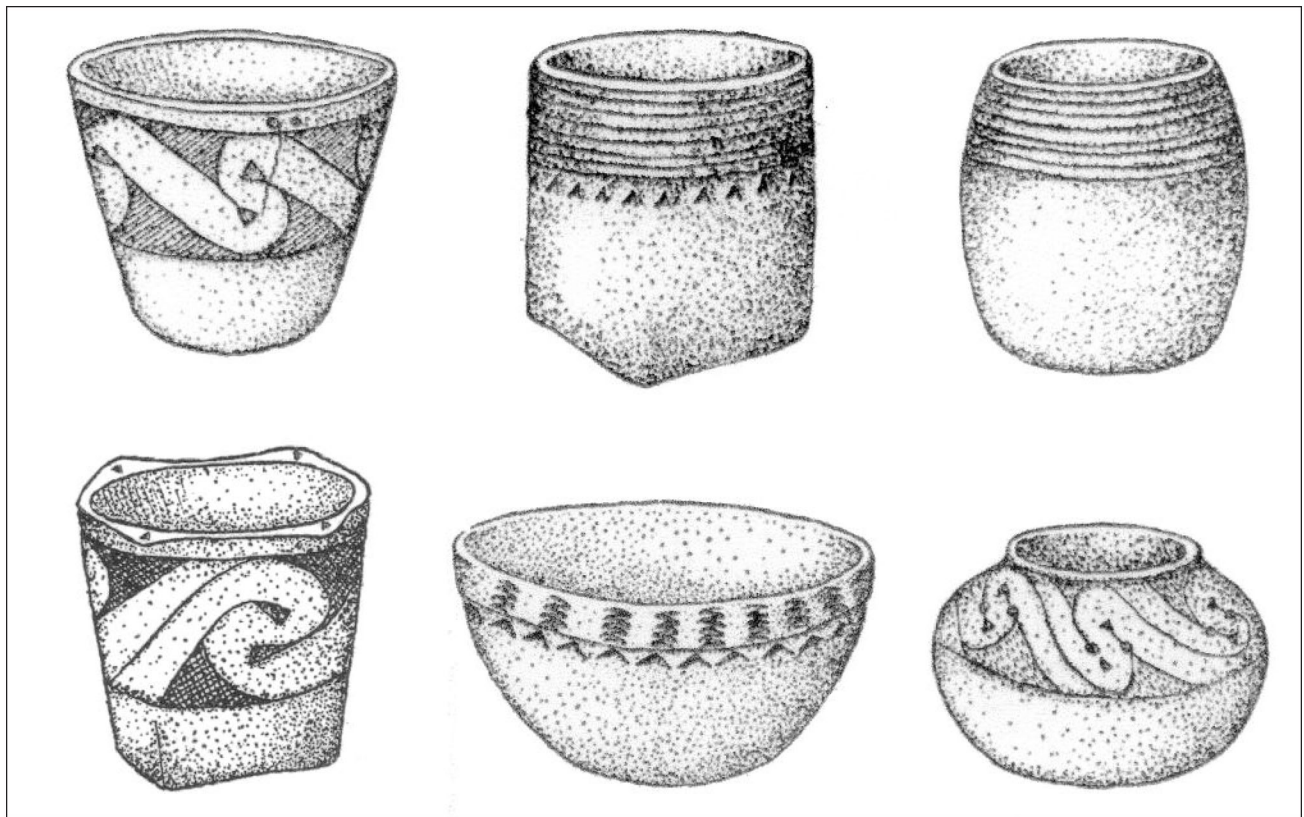


Figure 2.5. Coles Creek pottery vessels. The designs were typically incised or stamped into the vessel's surface while the clay was still wet.

overlooking the Mississippi River floodplain. Of its four original mounds, three survive today. The site's builders placed the mounds at the cardinal points around a plaza: Mound A to the north, Mound B to the west, Mound C to the east, and Mound D, now destroyed, to the south. The three surviving mounds have flat summits, but judging from a sketch made by Benjamin Wailes in the 1850s, Mound D was dome shaped. A moat encircled at least Mound C. Radiocarbon dates reveal that people used the site for three and a half centuries, from approximately 750 to 1100 CE—that is, from well before the Mississippian period into its early decades.

The earliest residents of Feltus erected no mounds but did leave a large oval pile of refuse—pottery, animal bones, and plant remains—around the edges of the plaza. We think this trash pile, or midden, held the remains of ceremonial feasts associated with symbolic wooden posts placed upright on the southern side of the oval. The free-standing

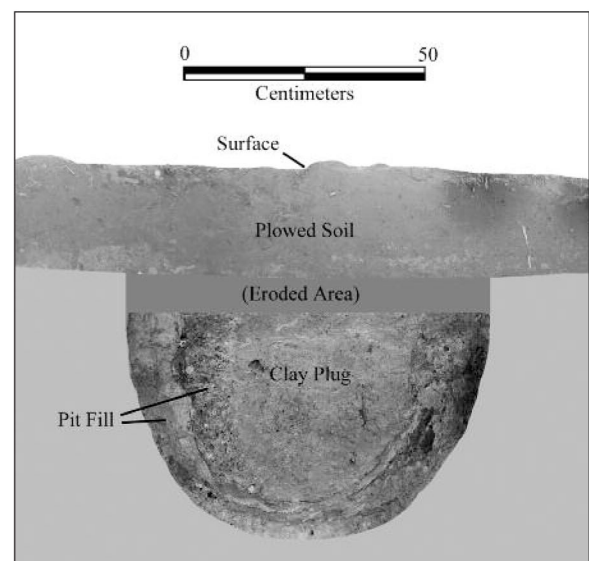


Figure 2.6. Photomosaic profile of a large post pit near Mound D, Feltus. Below about nine inches of plowed soil lay a central clay plug where the post once stood and, around that, dirt rich in charcoal and ash. The eroded area was washed away by heavy rain before a photograph could be taken.



Figure 2.7. Mound A at the Feltus site, as photographed by Warren King Moorehead in 1924.

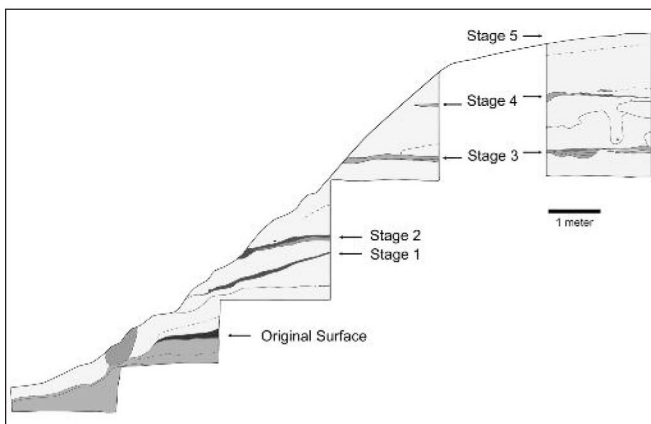


Figure 2.8. Profile of a trench dug into the west flank of Mound B, showing five stages of construction. The summits of the first two stages were marked by clay veneers. The summits of the third and fourth stages were burned and contained post holes, presumably from wooden buildings. Any prepared floors or features that once existed on the final summit (Stage 5) have been obliterated by erosion.

posts ranged from six inches to more than a foot in diameter and were set in pits up to three feet deep. Around the posts, someone packed the holes with earth containing ash and charcoal, probably from hearths or cooking pits, as well as objects such as tobacco pipes, bear bones, and, in one case, jumbled bones of human infants. After residents later

pulled the posts out, they refilled the holes, usually with clean brown clay. In one area about fifteen feet across, we found a cluster of more than twenty pits where posts had been planted and removed repeatedly, sometimes on the same spot. One pit yielded a radiocarbon date of 780 CE, give or take fifty years.

About thirty feet east of these posts lay a cluster of large pits filled with broken pottery, animal bones, and other trash. Many of the pottery vessels were unusually large,

and radiocarbon dates showed that the pits and the nearby posts were contemporary with each other. That is why we think the trash came from public feasting connected with ceremonies involving the wooden posts. Indeed, we suspect that most of the refuse around the early Feltus plaza was discarded during such feasts.

In the 900s, construction began on Mounds A and B and, we presume, on C and D. Each mound went up in stages. First, workers piled up earth to a certain height, packing it hard and leveling the top. People then used the summit for a while but eventually dismantled any wooden structures they had raised there. Workers now added a new layer of construction fill, making the mound taller and beginning the cycle again. As a result, each mound is something like a layer cake, with as many as five construction episodes.

Since 2006 we have excavated trenches into a flank of each standing mound. Our excavations, together with Moorehead's work in 1924, show that the Feltus people used each mound in a different way.

They built Mound A in three stages, until it reached a height of twenty-three feet. Before starting construction, people evidently held a public ceremony in which they planted and then pulled

ceremonial posts and feasted, leaving the post pits and trash from the meal on the spot where the mound was about to be built. Yet surprisingly, the mound's successive summits showed a very different pattern of use. All these surfaces were clean; we have yet to find any substantial midden or evidence of buildings. The only signs of use on the summits were scattered charcoal from burning and large, bathtub-shaped fire pits, which people probably used for cooking large animals, like modern barbeque pits.

Mound B, some twenty feet high, went up in five stages. Unlike at Mound A, we found no signs of feasting at its base, and each of its summits was faced with a thin veneer of yellow or black soil. On the third and fourth summits we uncovered post holes and large, fire-reddened areas—good indications that these surfaces once supported wooden buildings or other structures that were burned as part of “decommissioning” before a new stage went up. In one of Mound B's stages, users threw refuse off the edge of the summit, leaving a thick midden down the mound's flank. We have not yet finished studying the trash in this midden, so we do not know yet just what people were doing on Mound B.

Mounds C and D, the two smallest mounds at ten to thirteen feet high, served as burial places. When Moorehead excavated them in 1924, each contained many bundles of disarticulated human bones—the typical pattern at Coles Creek sites, where funerals were communal events. Bones and bodies in various stages of decay, which had been temporarily kept in mortuary temples, were reburied together in mass graves, simply and without grave goods. Interestingly, in Mound C all the bones lay within two feet of the mound's last summit, meaning that they were placed there late in the mound's history. Perhaps the mass burial was part of a decommissioning ceremony for an associated mortuary temple or for the mound itself. The moat surrounding Mound C might have been what archaeologist Robert Hall, referring to similar moats throughout the ancient South and Midwest, called a “spirit barrier,” meant to keep the spirits of the dead out of the world of the living.

Each of the four mounds on the site, then, had a distinctive history and purpose. Mound A had a clean summit with cooking pits and no buildings; Mound B had burned floors with wooden structures and flank middens; and Mounds C and D served as mortuaries, at least late in their histories. We believe these differences reflect the role each mound played in public ceremonies at Feltus—ceremonies in which people repeatedly set and removed large wooden posts, feasted, and built earthen mounds.

Differences in mound use like this were not unique to Feltus. Archaeologists have observed them at other contemporary sites in southern Mississippi, Arkansas, and northern Louisiana. For example, the largest mound at the Raffman site had no obvious middens or buildings on its successive summits, just like our Mound A. At the Greenhouse site, excavated in the 1930s, one mound had burned summits and another did not; this site also had dozens of bathtub-shaped fire pits. And on the original ground surface beneath the “Great Mound” at Troyville—a mound destroyed for bridge construction in 1931—people had laid down rows of large wooden posts and then buried them under the mound. It is not hard to imagine Troyville residents using the posts in rituals like the ones at Feltus.

Setting large posts and staging public feasts were not activities unique to the lower Mississippi Valley in pre-Mississippian times. People across eastern North America had been holding such ceremonies for at least two thousand years. But the Mississippians were about to take both public rituals and the mound-and-plaza layout to new scales of size and spectacle, starting at Cahokia around 1050 CE and eventually spreading over much of the South and Midwest. Just as people from the Coles Creek area must have helped shape Cahokia at its founding, so Cahokians returned the favor, contacting and sharing ideas with their Coles Creek cousins some four hundred miles to the south. By the 1100s, people from the two regions regularly exchanged pottery and participated in each other's ceremonies. We could ask for no better example of how interconnected the people of the medieval Mississippian world came to be.

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Megan C. Kassabaum completed her dissertation at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2014. She used ceramic, floral, and faunal data to study the activities that took place at Feltus, especially communal

ritual activities. She is now assistant professor in the Department of Anthropology and Weingarten Assistant Curator for North America at the Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology at the University of Pennsylvania, where she continues her work on Coles Creek sites in the lower Mississippi Valley.

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