



Little Bluff Activities

Trip Venue #2

- Guided Tour of Little Bluff
- Mounds Activity

Mounds Activity

Mississippian Cultural Overview Sheet
(attached)

Objectives

Students will learn how platform mounds were built, and what life was like for the Mississippian people who settled in Trempealeau 1,000 years ago. This activity pairs well with the “Guided Tour of Little Bluff” if you have a longer period of time to spend on site at Little Bluff.

Method

Passage reading or listening and personal reflection.

Grades: K-4

Subject Areas: Social Studies

Duration: one 45-minute class period
(plus transportation if applicable)

Group Size: N/A

Setting: Little Bluff walking trail, or indoors

Standards met: Social Studies: A.4.4, A.4.7, A.4.8, B.4.1, B.4.3, B.4.4

Literacy Standards: W.4.1:a-c, W.4.8, SL.4.2, SL.4.4, SL.4.1:b-d, L.4.1:a,c

Associated materials: Building a Mound Story, Scavenger Hunt Tour of Little Bluff Trail, Mississippian Cultural Overview Sheet

Materials

Clipboards, blank pieces of paper, pencils

Background

Answers to frequently asked questions about mounds:

<http://mvac.uwlax.edu/past-cultures/specific-sites/trempealeau/>

Key Terms

Cahokia: the largest pre-Columbian city north of Mexico located in what is now southern Illinois, across from St. Louis, Missouri. Cahokia was home to a group of people that archaeologists call “Mississippians.”

Mississippians: a group of ethnically diverse people that lived about 1,000 years ago in the city of Cahokia and in other places across the Midwest, like Trempealeau. Mississippians were accomplished builders, well known for their masterfully constructed platform mounds and community works. They were also large-scale corn farmers. At Cahokia, craft specialists made a distinctive type of red-slipped pottery, special arrowheads, and other artifacts. Mississippians marked the seasons by watching the sun and moon. They practiced religious activities related to seasonal changes and important events.

platform mounds: flat-topped rectangular mounds made by piling basketloads of dirt. Platform mounds were used as temples for special religious activities and as a place for the leader’s house.

borrow pit: large holes or depressions in the ground where soil was scooped or “borrowed” for mound construction.

Procedure

This activity can be completed either on site after students have had an opportunity to explore Little Bluff or in a classroom. Depending on the age and behavior of your group, you could have them explore Little Bluff in small chaperoned groups (one way to do this is using the “Scavenger Hunt Tour of Little Bluff Trail” included in this document) or as a class using the guided tour that is a separate activity called “Guided Tour of Little Bluff”.

After you have explored the site (either that same day or during your next class period) have your students sit in a circle.

- If it is immediately after you have visited, ask each of them to share what they noticed or liked most about the Little Bluff trail.
- If you are doing this activity at a later date, ask the students to use their imagination and imagine the Little Bluff site. Have them tell you something they remember from their visit.

When you have completed one of these two introductory steps, tell your students that you are going to read a story about building the mounds. Ask the students to listen and be ready to write a response afterwards.

After reading the story, ask the students to think about it for one minute. Ask them, “What part of this story do you remember best?” Hand out clipboards with copies of the worksheets attached to this activity, and pencils and have the students draw their ideas.

When they have finished have them share their drawings with the group.

Then ask the students to answer the first question on the back of the worksheet by writing about how building the mounds might have impacted the Mississippian community at Trempealeau. With younger groups use the version of this page with blank spaces and ask the students instead to draw a picture of how they think one Mississippian person felt about the mounds. Have them explain their drawings.

Now talk about a recent project or event that has impacted the community where you live. Ask students to share information that they know about the event and after a few minutes of discussion, have the students complete the rest of the questions on the back. For younger groups, ask the questions out loud that are on the second page of the “Drawing” version worksheet. Then have the students draw and explain their answers.

Building a Mound Story

Today I awoke to the chirping of birds as sun filtered in through the gaps in our grass roof. My muscles ached and my stomach rumbled but the scent of corn mash was already wafting across the large open room. My mother was there, stirring circles with her wooden spoon into a pot of cooking corn. I yawned, and breathed out the soreness in my muscles. It was time for another long day building the great mounds. I dressed quickly and ate a hearty breakfast to give myself energy for the work ahead. As I walked out of my house, I saw countless other people: young and grown, men and women, grabbing their baskets as they left their homes. I picked up my own basket that was leaning against the wall and joined the mass of people making their way up the hill to Little Bluff.

People chatted. Women and men greeted their friends, and no one complained about the aches and pains that they inevitably felt. We had been working for weeks, but we labored for the sun and the stars, the celestial powers that were so important to our people. We had traveled the river many moons from our home in Cahokia to make our village here near the Mountain in the Water. In our former city, there were many types of mounds. The largest ones were majestic platform mounds in the main square that reached so high it was as if they connected the earth with the skies. Perched atop these mounds were temples where a priest consulted with spirits and where villagers went for advice. Now we labored to build the same here at our new home, towers of earth to touch the sky and connect us with the higher powers. When we finished the mounds we would build a temple at the top for our own priest. To reach this goal we worked together as a community, carrying basket after basket of dirt and piling them, each on top of the last.

The work is simple but well planned. We use baskets we have made to borrow dirt from holes that grow bigger with our work and carry our loads atop Little Bluff. At the top, lead workers instruct us where to pile our dirt on the growing mound. The leaders' roles are very important because the sides of the mound must be aligned perfectly with the sun and moon as the seasons change. We carry baskets for hours, and occasionally we are told to take dirt from another area for its different color. There are many layers in the mound, with different soil colors that have deep meanings.

When the sun starts to lower, after hours of work carrying dirt from the borrow pits to the mound, a leader yells that the day's work is done. I look up at what we have accomplished. The pile of earth reaches many hands higher than it did this morning. We rub our lower backs and arms and head down the hill happily, arm-in-arm, to our village for dinner. As the sun disappears from sight that evening, and the sky darkens, sleep threatens to overcome me. Another difficult day is over but as I lay in bed under the stars I am reminded of the great beauty that inspires our work.

Building the Mounds Story Response

Draw the image or scene from the story that you imagined most clearly.

Write about it:

The Mississippians built mounds one basketful of dirt at a time. To build the platform mounds at Little Bluff this meant piling high about 1.8 million baskets of dirt. Work like this required many people and a lot of time to finish. How do you think a project like this might have affected the Mississippian community at Trempealeau?

Write a few sentences in response.

Have any big projects taken place recently in your community?

How did the community respond to the project? Was everyone happy about it?

Draw what you think below:

How do you think a Mississippian person felt about the mounds being built?

How would you feel if you were one of the workers building the mounds?

How would you feel if you were the leader who gave instructions to the workers?

Scavenger Hunt Tour of Little Bluff Trail

Count how many times you see the following images on the Little Bluff Trail signs. Record the number below. Be aware that some of the items may be found on more than one sign.

Shells_____

Pottery_____

Boats_____

Mounds_____

Grass-roofed Houses_____

Arrowheads_____

What tools did Mississippians use to build their mounds on Little Bluff?

What is a borrow pit?

Where did the Mississippians get the yellow soil they used to build the mounds?

Recent Research in Trempealeau: The Mississippian Settlement

Lifeways	Farmers and hunter/gatherers
Time	A.D. 1,000-1,100
Climate	Similar to the climate today.
Environment	Similar to today.
Settlement type and House structure	Rectangular mounds were built to elevate the elite above the commoners and used for practicing religious activities (church). A village consisted of rectangular wood houses with thatched roofs. The religious mound complex was located atop Little Bluff, and residential areas were below, in what is now the modern Village of Trempealeau.
Food	Beginning of farming corn and beans. Also relied on fish, waterfowl, deer, and the abundant plants and animals in the region.
Tools	Bow and arrows with small notched and un-notched triangular points, knives, scrapers, drills, stone hoes, hammerstones, expedient flake tools.
Ceramics	Pottery tempered with shell, limestone, and grog (crushed up pottery), with either distinctive red-slipped (painted), white or tan-slipped, black burnished (polished), or plain surfaces. Some evidence that some pottery originates from the Lower Mississippi River Valley (what is now the states of Louisiana and Mississippi). Large cooking pots and Mississippian “fineware” are present at Trempealeau, with the majority of the ceramics being finely-made small bowls and jars usually associated with elite populations and feasting or religious activities.
Religion/Rituals	Mississippians practiced religious ceremonies and built rectangular platform mounds to align to the cycles of the sun and moon on Little Bluff, a ritual site with three platform mounds. On Little Bluff, archaeologists have uncovered temple buildings and fire hearths that were once perpetually burning fires.
Social/Political	Stratified, hierarchical society made of commoners and elites. Society ruled by a chief.
Connections to other cultures	The Mississippians at Trempealeau brought all of their tools and pottery from Cahokia when they settled in Trempealeau. There is little evidence to suggest interaction between Mississippians and contemporary Woodland natives who lived nearby (in Perrot State Park and surrounding area).

Guided Tour of Little Bluff

Mississippian Cultural Overview Sheet
(attached)

Objectives

Students will explore the 1,000-year-old archaeological site of Little Bluff to learn the unique Mississippian settlement at Trempealeau and why Little Bluff was such an important spot for Mississippians. This activity is paired well with the “Building a Mound” activity on site or in the classroom.

Method

Guided walking tour with questions and prompts for discussion.

Grades: K-4

Subject Areas: Science

Duration: one 45 min class period not including transportation

Group Size: N/A

Setting: Little Bluff Trail

Standards met: Science: B.4.1, C.4.2, C.4.7 Social Studies: A.4.4, A.4.7 Literacy Standards: SL.4.1.c-d,

Associated materials: Quick Guide for Teachers: bus/walking activity, Guided Tour of Little Bluff, optional Mississippian Journey to Trempealeau worksheet

Materials

Printed guided tour sheet, and Mississippian Journey to Trempealeau story if applicable

Background

Short video about ancient Cahokia:

<http://cahokiamounds.org/educate/#tab-id-7>

Key Terms

Cahokia: the largest pre-Columbian city north of Mexico located in what is now southern Illinois, across from St. Louis, Missouri. Cahokia was home to a group of people that archaeologists call “Mississippians.”

Mississippians: a group of ethnically diverse people that lived about 1,000 years ago in the city of Cahokia and in other places across the Midwest, like Trempealeau. Mississippians were accomplished builders, well known for their masterfully constructed platform mounds and community works. They were also large-scale corn farmers. At Cahokia, craft specialists made a distinctive type of red-slipped pottery, special arrowheads, and other artifacts. Mississippians marked the seasons by watching the sun and moon. They practiced religious activities related to seasonal changes and important events.

platform mounds: flat-topped rectangular mounds made by piling basketloads of dirt. Platform mounds were used as temples for special religious activities and as a place for the leader’s house.

borrow pit: large holes or depressions in the ground where soil was scooped or “borrowed” for mound construction.

hypothesize: to make an educated guess about the outcome of a situation.

Procedure

This activity starts at Little Bluff. If you are looking for ideas for activities to do on the way to the site, check out the “Mississippian Journey to Trempealeau” activity.

If you are taking a bus you could read the story and discuss the first page of questions aloud.

If you are on foot, you could start the first paragraph of the guided tour by asking the students to imagine moving 500 miles like the Mississippians, followed by a discussion based on the questions below:

- Have you ever moved homes like the Mississippians?
- If so, how did you feel about leaving your old house? If not, how do you think you might feel if you had to move to a new city?

Ask the students to share their own experiences with the class. This will be a good warm up for the tour of Little Bluff. When you reach the trailhead sign, pick up again with the second paragraph. If you did not discuss the first paragraph on the way to the site, make sure to begin with the first paragraph.

Use the “Quick Guide for Teachers: bus/walking activity” and “Guided Tour of Little Bluff” sheets included in this document for quick reference on site. Longer explanations are included (see below) for review before the tour.

Guided tour of Little Bluff

Trailhead Kiosk:

When you arrive at Little Bluff, pause at the trailhead kiosk and ask the kids to imagine what it would be like to travel in a canoe 500 miles from southern Illinois to this spot. Tell them that Mississippian

people who lived in Trempealeau made that journey about 1,000 years ago, arriving with only the possessions they could carry in their canoes.

Explain that archaeologists who have excavated at Trempealeau have learned a lot about Mississippians who arrived in Trempealeau 1,000 years ago from Cahokia. Cahokia was a big city ruled by a religious chief whose temple was built on top of Monks Mound, the largest platform mound at Cahokia. When Mississippians came to Trempealeau they brought their ideas, ways of living, and personal items with them on their journey. Use the images on the trailhead sign to illustrate your points. Explain that the Mississippians built mounds and a temple here too, at Little Bluff, which was probably the religious center of their village.

Trailstop #1 (Borrow Pits):

Walk with your students up the trail to the next sign, near the borrow pits, on Little Bluff. Explain that Mississippians were known for building platform mounds, and that they built three platforms, atop of Little Bluff (just ahead, towards the tip of Little Bluff). Explain Mississippians built the mounds by hand, using only baskets to carry the dirt, and sticks to help with digging.

Ask the students to hypothesize about why there might be large pits near the mounds. After some guesses, explain that these pits were where the Mississippians borrowed dirt to build the mounds, and that archaeologists call them “borrow” pits for this reason.

Trailstop #2 (Mounds):

At the next sign, near the mounds at the top of Little Bluff, ask the students if they

can see the form of the mounds. What shape are they?

Explain that they are platform mounds and are shaped like large rectangular prisms with slanted sides. Ask the students to estimate how long they think the mounds took to build. After several answers, tell them that archaeologists are not sure of the answer, but that it could have taken 100 workers around half a year to build them.

Ask the students to imagine what this place might have looked like 1,000 years ago. Explain that archaeologists have found evidence that there was at least one temple built on top of the mound on which you are standing (by Trail Stop #2). Based on clues that they found when they dug here, archaeologists think a religious leader lived here and kept a fire burning for some spiritual purpose.

Make sure to point out the picture on the trailstop of the hearth (the red patch of dirt on the right side of the sign). Explain that differences in soil color like this are very useful clues for archaeologists and can tell them a lot about the past. Archaeologists have discovered that Little

Bluff was very important to the Mississippian way of life.

Trailstop #3 (Tip of Little Bluff):

At the final trail stop, let students take in the vista looking downstream, towards the Mississippian homeland of Cahokia. Ask the students to once again imagine canoeing up river against the current with all of their possessions, as Mississippian people did 1,000 years ago. Point out the map of habitation sites that archaeologists have excavated in the Village of Trempealeau below.

Explain that archaeologists don't know where Mississippians went after they left Trempealeau. Archaeologists also don't know why Mississippian people left. Ask the students to hypothesize some ideas about why Mississippians may have left Trempealeau.

After you have finished giving the tour, answer any questions your student have. Then ask them to think about their favorite part of the site. Have the students share what they found most interesting. This could be completed on the bus or walk home as well.

Quick Guide for Teachers: bus/walking activity

Bus:

Print off the “Mississippian Journey to Trempealeau story” for the bus ride and read it aloud.

Discuss the questions below:

- Have you ever moved homes like the Mississippians?
- If so, how did you feel about leaving your old house? If not, how do you think you might feel if you had to move to a new city?
- In the story, the child travels with family and friends. Was this a positive or negative aspect of the journey for the child?
- Imagine that you were leaving like the Mississippians and could only bring what you could carry with you. Which things would you take on the journey?

Walking:

Ask the kids to imagine what it would be like to travel in a canoe 500 miles from southern Illinois to Trempealeau. Tell the students that Mississippians who lived in Trempealeau made that journey about 1,000 years ago, and could only bring the possessions they could carry in their canoes.

Discuss the questions below:

- Have you ever moved homes like the Mississippians?
- If so, how did you feel about leaving your old house? If not, how do you think you might feel if you had to move to a new city?

Ask the students to share their own experiences with the class. This will be a good warm up for the tour of Little Bluff. When you reach the trailhead sign just start the tour in the second paragraph.

Guided Tour of Little Bluff (questions and prompts are bolded)

Trailhead Kiosk:

*If you did **NOT** do the bus/walk activity start here:*

- **Ask the students to imagine what it would be like to travel in a canoe 500 miles from southern Illinois to this spot.**
- Mississippians made that journey about 1,000 years ago, and could only take the possessions they could carry with them in their canoes.

If you did the bus/walk activity start here:

- Archaeologists have learned a lot about Mississippians in Trempealeau from their excavations.
- Mississippians who came here 1,000 years ago traveled from a large city called Cahokia where there were:
 - high status religious leaders
 - temples built on top of large flat earthen mounds and
 - craft specialists and artisans that made red-painted pots, special arrowheads, shell beads, and discoidals or chunky stones (a round stone used as a game piece).
- When they came to Trempealeau Mississippian people brought their ways of life, ideas, and items with them.
- Use **images** on the trailhead sign to show Cahokian artifacts, mounds, and city life.
- At Little Bluff, Mississippians built mounds and a temple. Little Bluff was probably the religious center of their village.

Trailstop #1 (Borrow Pits):

- The Mississippians were known for building platform mounds by piling basketloads of dirt.
- They built three of them on top of Little Bluff.
- **Ask the students to hypothesize about why there might be large pits nearby the mounds.**
- After some guesses, explain that these pits were where the Mississippians “borrowed” dirt to build the mounds, and that archaeologists call them “borrow” pits for this reason.

Trailstop #2 (Mounds):

- **Ask the students if they can see the form of the mounds. What shape are they?**
- Explain that platform mounds are shaped like large rectangular prisms with slanted sides.
- **Ask the students to estimate how long they think the mounds took to build.** After several answers, tell them that archaeologists are not sure of the exact amount of time, but that it could have taken 100 workers around half a year to build them.
- **Ask the students to imagine what this place might have looked like 1,000 years ago.**
- Archaeologists have found evidence that there was a temple built on top of these mounds. Based on clues that they find when they dug here, archaeologists think a high-ranking religious leader lived here and kept a fire burning for some spiritual purpose.
- Make sure to point out the **picture on the trailstop** of the hearth (the red patch of dirt on the right side of the sign). Explain that differences in soil color like this are very useful clues for archaeologists and can explain past activities.

- This place was very important to the Mississippians.

Trailstop #3 (Tip of Little Bluff):

- Turn the students' attention to the vista looking downriver toward the Cahokian homeland. **Ask them to imagine, once again, canoeing upriver to a new home.**
- Archaeologists have excavated several Mississippian habitation sites below Little Bluff, in the Village of Trempealeau. On this trailstop sign, point out the map of the known archaeological sites below.
- **Ask the students to imagine why Mississippians left Trempealeau and where they may have gone.**

A Mississippian Journey to Trempealeau:

Today is the day of our big journey my father says. My mother makes me a breakfast of corn mash and tells me to pack up my clothes. It is not only my family that is leaving. Some of my friends' families and others in the community are coming too. I am nervous about the trip, but I am glad that my friends and family will be with me. We pack everything we can fit into our dugout canoe and turn to look at the city for the last time. The giant flat-topped platform mounds of the city plaza rise up majestically in the background and our small wall-trench house, built of wood poles covered in grasses and clay, seems as tiny as a toy house in comparison. My family was chosen to make this trip by the chief. My mother says it is an honor, and that we are going to live near the mountain that stands in the river. I can't imagine anything bigger than the majestic mounds of my city, Cahokia.

When the canoes are completely packed, I climb in the middle between my parents. Friends and family line up along the riverbank to say goodbye. Tears run down my face as we paddle away from my home. I turn to face the river ahead and the water is dark but shining. A mysterious and exciting future lies ahead.

We travel for weeks and weeks, stopping along the shores to camp each night. After paddling all day my parents seem tired. The waters can be rough and at some points we have to get out and walk with the canoes. The men fish and hunt along the river while the kids help their mothers gather berries and nuts. Each night we have a supper of food we collect along with corn and seeds that we grew in Cahokia and brought for the journey. I fall asleep at night not knowing what the next day will bring.

One afternoon, when the sun is low in the sky and everyone is tired, we paddle around a bend in the river. There, rising in the distance, is the mountain standing in the water! I yell to my parents, and everyone around me chatters excitedly. We have made it! With renewed strength and energy we paddle quickly to the shore at the foot of the mountain and carry our canoes to land. Laughter and conversation fill the air as the adults set up camp. Everyone seems content despite their exhaustion. As I watch the people bustle around the sandy beach I think back to the regal mounds and plazas of Cahokia that we have left behind. A tear runs down my cheek, but I wipe it away and turn to gaze up at the giant peak above me. Our adventure has only just begun.

Discussion Questions:

Have you ever moved homes like the Mississippians? _____

If so, how did you feel about leaving your old house? If not, how do you think you might feel if you had to move to a new city?

In the story, the child travels with family and friends. Was this a positive or negative aspect of the journey for the child? Explain your answer.

Imagine that you were leaving like the Mississippians and could only bring what you could carry with you. Which things would you take on the journey? Draw or list 3-5 things in the space below.

Recent Research in Trempealeau: The Mississippian Settlement

Lifeways	Farmers and hunter/gatherers
Time	A.D. 1,000-1,100
Climate	Similar to the climate today.
Environment	Similar to today.
Settlement type and House structure	Rectangular mounds were built to elevate the elite above the commoners and used for practicing religious activities (church). A village consisted of rectangular wood houses with thatched roofs. The religious mound complex was located atop Little Bluff, and residential areas were below, in what is now the modern Village of Trempealeau.
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Religion/Rituals	Mississippians practiced religious ceremonies and built rectangular platform mounds to align to the cycles of the sun and moon on Little Bluff, a ritual site with three platform mounds. On Little Bluff, archaeologists have uncovered temple buildings and fire hearths that were once perpetually burning fires.
Social/Political	Stratified, hierarchical society made of commoners and elites. Society ruled by a chief.
Connections to other cultures	The Mississippians at Trempealeau brought all of their tools and pottery from Cahokia when they settled in Trempealeau. There is little evidence to suggest interaction between Mississippians and contemporary Woodland natives who lived nearby (in Perrot State Park and surrounding area).