

Illinois Presentation

The Ground Did Not Begin Again: Rethinking a Millennium of History in the American Bottom

The American Bottom has never lacked historians.

Archaeologists have excavated Cahokia and reconstructed one of the largest Indigenous urban centers in North America. Historians of French Illinois have examined villages, agriculture, slavery, Catholic institutions, and imperial competition. Scholars of race, labor, and urban history have studied East St. Louis, industrialization, segregation, and the violence of 1917. Engineers and environmental historians have documented bridges, levees, drainage systems, navigation projects, floods, and attempts to control the Mississippi River.

Taken together, this scholarship has produced an extraordinarily rich history of the region.

Yet the American Bottom itself has rarely been the historical subject.

Instead, scholarship has divided the floodplain according to period and discipline. Cahokia belongs largely to archaeology. French Illinois belongs to colonial history. Eads Bridge enters histories of engineering and nineteenth-century St. Louis. East St. Louis belongs to urban, labor, and African American history. Floods appear in environmental history. Landfills, wetlands, archaeological preservation, and abandoned industrial landscapes occupy still other literatures.

Each division makes sense. But together they create an artificial problem. They can make events occurring on the same relatively compact floodplain appear to belong to completely different histories.

My argument is simple: the ground did not begin again.

The American Bottom stretches roughly eighty miles along the eastern bank of the Mississippi River opposite St. Louis. It is a remarkably compact landscape containing evidence of more than a thousand years of intense human activity. If we make that landscape, rather than an individual city, political regime, or century, our unit of analysis, relationships become visible that conventional chronological divisions tend to hide.

Consider several very different monuments within this landscape.

The first is Monks Mound.

Generations of archaeological scholarship, including the work of Melvin Fowler, Timothy Pauketat, Thomas Emerson, Rinita Dalan, and others, fundamentally changed our understanding of Cahokia. We now recognize a large and complex society that constructed monumental earthworks, reorganized settlement, practiced intensive agriculture, maintained long-distance networks, and repeatedly altered the floodplain.

Monks Mound represents that achievement on an extraordinary scale. Its construction required enormous quantities of earth and, more importantly, enormous quantities of human labor.

But Cahokia frequently occupies a chronology largely separated from what follows. Archaeologists quite reasonably concentrate upon Mississippian society, while historians dependent upon written documents often begin the region's history centuries later with European exploration.

That disciplinary boundary can unintentionally create a rupture that did not exist on the ground.

People changed. Political systems disappeared. Populations moved.

But the landscape remained altered.

French settlers entered a world that was not empty. Americans later entered a landscape already changed by Indigenous and French inhabitants. Railroad builders, industrialists, farmers, and engineers worked upon the same floodplain.

The second monument is Eads Bridge.

Completed in the nineteenth century, Eads Bridge appears to represent a completely different world from Monks Mound. One was constructed from earth by a Mississippian society; the other from steel and stone by an industrial society.

Eads Bridge has rightly been celebrated as an engineering achievement. It connected St. Louis more directly with the rail networks and industrial districts developing across the Mississippi. Its foundations pushed workers beneath the river into pressurized caissons. Its steel superstructure represented some of the most ambitious engineering of its era.

Yet when viewed from the American Bottom rather than solely from the history of engineering, the bridge becomes part of a much longer pattern.

Like Cahokia, industrial America confronted a landscape offering extraordinary advantages but imposing significant constraints.

The Mississippi provided transportation, water, fertile soil, and access to continental markets. It also flooded, shifted, undermined structures, and resisted easy crossing. Railroads crossing the American Bottom required elevated grades. Levees required construction and repair. Drainage systems transformed wetlands but demanded continuing maintenance.

Industrial technology did not eliminate the environmental problem. It changed the scale of the response.

Eads Bridge therefore belongs not only to the history of nineteenth-century engineering. It belongs to a millennium-long history of people investing extraordinary amounts of labor to make the American Bottom serve human purposes.

The third monument is not normally considered a monument at all.

Milam Landfill occupies more than two hundred acres of the modern floodplain.

Its meaning could hardly be more different from Monks Mound or Eads Bridge. Monks Mound emerged from a society deliberately constructing monumental space. Eads Bridge proclaimed industrial engineering and connectivity. Milam accumulated from the enormous quantities of material modern society discarded.

Yet all three are artificial landforms created through concentrated human work.

Placed within separate disciplines, they seem unrelated.

Placed within the same landscape, they raise a different question: what do societies leave behind?

That question matters because the American Bottom is not simply a succession of civilizations replacing one another. It is an accumulated landscape.

Archaeologists uncover traces of Cahokia beneath modern development. French place names and settlement patterns survived changes in sovereignty. Railroad embankments continue to affect drainage after the trains disappear. Industrial pollution remains after factories close. Levees protecting modern communities represent decisions made by earlier generations and require new generations to maintain them.

Even abandonment creates inheritance.

But abandonment is only part of the modern story.

A new American Bottom is now being built across portions of the same floodplain.

Drive through parts of the region today and the dominant structures are increasingly not steel mills, stockyards, or rail yards but enormous distribution centers and warehouses. Near Route 111, close to Cahokia Creek and Horseshoe Lake, massive logistics facilities dominate sections of the landscape. The Amazon hub and neighboring warehouse complexes belong to a new generation of economic infrastructure: large, low buildings surrounded by pavement, truck routes, loading docks, retention systems, access roads, and vast areas organized around the rapid movement of goods.

At first glance, this seems to represent another historical break.

The steel mill and stockyard belonged to industrial America. The warehouse belongs to the digital and logistical economy. The kinds of work have changed. The relationship between labor, production, and transportation has changed. Goods may now arrive through global supply chains coordinated by computers rather than through the nineteenth-century world of riverboats, rail yards, and heavy manufacturing.

But again, the ground did not begin again.

The new warehouses occupy a landscape already shaped by earlier drainage systems, roads, railroads, highways, levees, altered streams, industrial development, and flood-control projects. Their location is not accidental. The same qualities that made the American Bottom attractive to earlier economic systems continue to matter: proximity to St. Louis, relatively flat land, access to interstate highways, rail networks, airports, and the larger Mississippi transportation corridor.

The technology has changed.

The logic of connectivity remains.

That does not mean continuity in the simple sense that nothing has changed. Quite the opposite. The American Bottom has repeatedly undergone profound transformations. Cahokia was not French Illinois. French Illinois was not industrial East St. Louis. The steel economy was not the warehouse economy.

What persists is not continuity of institutions but continuation of the process.

Each generation enters a landscape already altered by the one before it. Each receives inherited advantages, inherited problems, and inherited infrastructure. Each then reorganizes the landscape around its own needs.

This is where changing the chronological scale changes the historical argument.

Viewed over fifty years, an industrial plant can rise and fall.

Viewed over two hundred years, East St. Louis can move from agricultural settlement to industrial powerhouse to deindustrialized city.

Viewed across a millennium, another pattern becomes visible.

Successive societies repeatedly entered a landscape already altered by previous inhabitants. They inherited opportunities and constraints. They preserved some features, destroyed others, adapted others to new purposes, and created new structures that later generations inherited in turn.

The Mississippi remained present throughout this process.

It did not determine what people did, but neither was it simply scenery behind human events. Cahokians adapted agriculture and settlement to the floodplain. French colonists organized river villages and long-lot farms. Industrial Americans built bridges, railroads, levees, drainage districts, canals, highways, and factories. The current generation adds distribution

centers, logistics corridors, data-driven transportation networks, and enormous warehouse landscapes.

Technologies changed dramatically.

The obligation to negotiate with the landscape did not.

This longer view also changes how we think about historical achievement.

Modern Americans often described engineering projects as victories over nature: wetlands drained, rivers controlled, distances conquered.

Across a thousand years, those victories appear more provisional.

Monks Mound survived its builders. French political authority disappeared while French cultural traces remained. Railroads that once defined the industrial landscape became abandoned grades. Factories closed. Levees still require inspection. Pumps must continue operating. Floods periodically remind residents that engineering altered the relationship with the Mississippi but never abolished it.

And even today's warehouse complexes are not final.

They too belong to a particular economic moment. They depend upon highways, cheap transportation, global trade, consumer demand, flood protection, drainage, electrical infrastructure, and continual maintenance. Future generations may use them differently, replace them, abandon them, or build over them.

That is precisely the point.

None of this means that earlier scholarship has been wrong.

My argument depends upon it.

Archaeologists made Cahokia visible. Historians reconstructed French Illinois. Scholars of race and labor recovered East St. Louis. Environmental historians taught us to treat rivers as

historical actors rather than passive backgrounds. Engineering historians documented structures that transformed the Mississippi Valley.

The question is what happens when we put those histories beside one another.

The answer is that the American Bottom becomes something more than the location where a series of unrelated historical episodes occurred.

It becomes the historical subject itself.

Within a remarkably small geography stand Monks Mound, French villages, railroad embankments, industrial ruins, levees, highways, wetlands, cemeteries, landfills, and now enormous warehouse complexes. They represent radically different societies and economic systems, but they occupy inherited ground.

That is the value of a millennium-long history of the American Bottom.

It allows us to see history not simply as one society replacing another, but as accumulation and reconfiguration.

Every generation entered a landscape already underway.

Every generation changed it.

Every generation believed, in one way or another, that it was building for the future.

And every generation left something for the next.

The ground did not begin again.