

# Archeological Society of Virginia Massanutten Chapter

Volume 32, Issue 8

August, 2011



# POINTS



## Aztalan

*Submitted by Tom Hester*

I was born, raised and lived in Wisconsin until 1978 when I joined the U.S. Army and left for Georgia. While living in Wisconsin, I had often heard intriguing stories about Aztalan, the remains of an ancient Indian mound-builders settlement whose very name evoked mystery and wonder. In spite of my curiosity, I did not visit Aztalan until 1998, when my father and I veered off the most direct route back home from a Canadian fishing vacation, to take a side trip to the storied site near Lake Mills. During this visit, I learned how Aztalan received its exotic-sounding name, why it is considered Wisconsin's premier archeological site and why its mysteries endure.

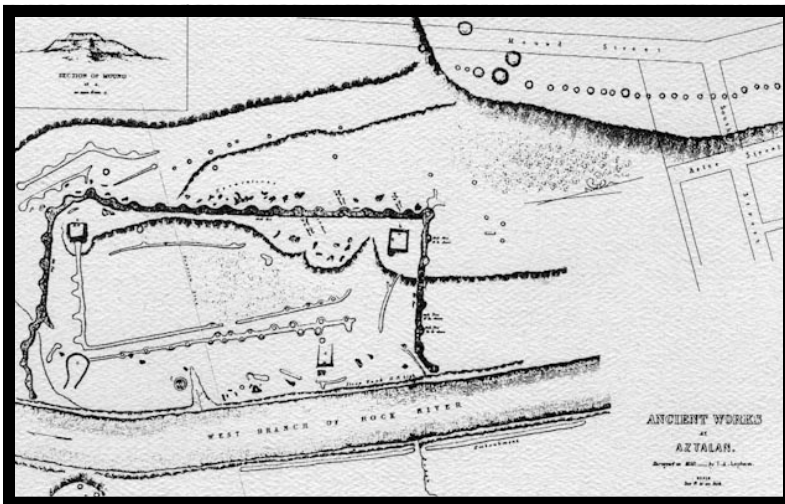


Figure 1. Aztalan Site Drawing, Increase Lapham,

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## Aztlan Continued

Aztalan is a 72 acre site about 50 miles west of Milwaukee on the Crawfish River. It was discovered in 1836 by a settler, Timothy Johnson, and shortly thereafter, mapped by Milwaukee Judge, Nathaniel Hyer. Judge Hyer believed the mounds were built by descendants of Aztecs from the ancient Mexican settlement of Aztlan and thus chose to call the site Aztalan. The name, Aztalan has persisted even though it is a misspelling and no links to the Aztecs have ever been found. The "father of Wisconsin Archeology", Increase A. Lapham, surveyed the site and found 72 mounds. In 1855, the Smithsonian Institution published Lapham's book on Aztalan, "The Antiquities of Wisconsin, as Surveyed and Described." This book is the first book published on Wisconsin archeology.

Unfortunately, only a small number of the 72 original mounds remained when major archeological excavations of Aztalan began in 1919 by Samuel Barrett, the Director and Curator of the Milwaukee Public Museum. The site was ransacked by farmers who leveled pyramid mounds to create planting fields, road workers who used burned clay wall remnants, "Aztalan Brick," to fill ruts in area thoroughfares and souvenir hunters who avidly dug for artifacts. Despite these obstacles, ongoing archeological investigations since Barrett have established the importance of Aztalan.

Aztalan is significant because it represents the northernmost outpost of the Mississippian culture which was centered in Cahokia, near East St. Louis, Illinois. Middle Mississippian peoples migrated to this site by 1100 A.D. and lived there for nearly 300 years. They built large earthen mounds and a stockade with 30 "watchtowers" that surrounded a 20 acre village site inhabited by about 500 people.

The key finding that forges the link between Aztalan and Cahokia is the predominance of shell-tempered pottery at the Aztalan site. Grit-tempered pottery is dominant form of pottery found throughout Wisconsin during this period. Another connection to Cahokia is the cultivation of corn, the first known in Wisconsin. One more association with the Cahokia is the archeological evidence of that Aztalan was a site where the game of chunky was played. The chunky players tested their spear throwing prowess by aiming at a disc-shaped stone.

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## Aztalan Continued

After arriving at Aztalan State Park, I was pleased to find a pamphlet that provided a map (figure 1) of the park and guide to a walking tour of the most populated portion of the ancient village.

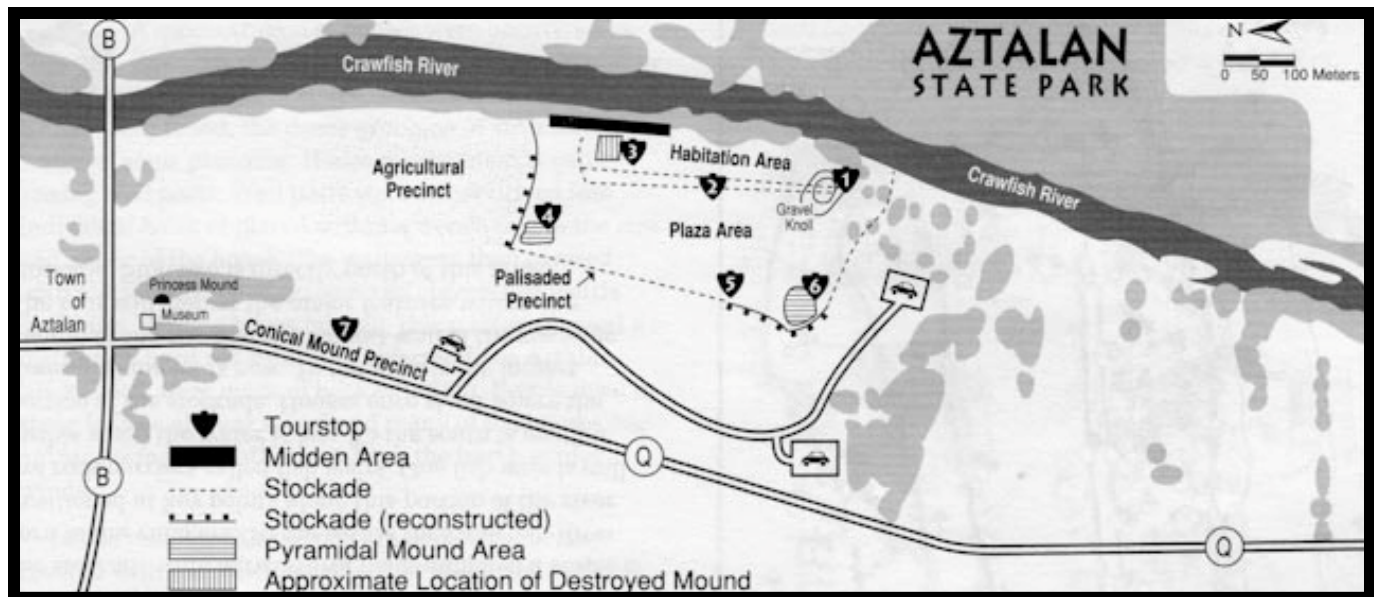


Figure 2. Aztalan State Park Walking Tour Map

My father and I quickly headed to areas 5 & 6 on the map. Here we saw a portion of the stockade that was rebuilt in 1968 and the largest mound on the site which was reconstructed in 1951. As you can see from figure 3, the rebuilt wall is a series of wooden posts stuck in the ground. This was not the appearance of the original wall. Willow branches were woven through the posts and a mixture of clay and grass (wattle & daub) was plastered to create a solid wall.

The reconstructed platform mound also is not an accurate replica. The original did have steps that led to the top as shown in figure 3, but it was not covered in grass. Instead, the mound was covered by a clay cap and had a structure over the entire top. This structure sheltered storage pits containing corn. The precise purpose of this mound is not clear. Was it the village-wide food storage & distribution site?, a structure to house food reserved for the elite?, a ceremonial site?, or the living quarters of the rulers?

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## Aztalan Continued



Figure 3. Platform Mound & Portion of Reconstructed Stockade



Figure 4. Crawfish River Next to Aztalan

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## Aztalan Continued

Our final stop was area 7. As seen in figure 4 just over another portion of reconstructed stockade, there is a series of conical mounds. These are all that remain from the over 40 mounds that Lapham had in this area in 1850. All but the largest have been plowed down. No burials were found in these mounds. What they did find was intriguing. A large post was set in a pit that was in the center of each mound. Each 10 foot post was encircled by gravel and soil and the pit capped by a mixture of clay and gravel to situate each post in a firm foundation. In its original state, the posts could have been seen for miles in all directions. These mounds have been called marker mounds because they would have served as markers for travelers. It is also speculated that these post topped mounds may have deciphered astronomical events or announced special occasions.



Figure 5. Conical Mounds Visible Over Reconstructed Stockade

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## Aztalan Continued

The most enduring mystery surrounding Aztalan is why, after about 300 years, did the inhabitants abruptly abandon its site? We may never definitively know the answer to this question, but we do have solid evidence that may help shape thinking about their sudden departure. That is, Aztalan was a culturally isolated community. Archeological investigation strongly indicates that the people of Aztalan although clearly originally connected to Cahokia did not appear to have maintained trade with the Middle Mississippian people after they settled in Aztalan. Specifically, the changes in pottery styles that evolved in Cahokia were not reflected in Aztalan. In addition, Aztalan appears to have been isolated from the neighboring Late Woodland Indians. Systematic surveys of Indian sites surrounding Aztalan have not demonstrated any relationship to Aztalan.

So, why did the people of Aztalan leave? It is of note that the abandonment of Aztalan occurred at about the same time that the people of their parent culture, Cahokia, also vanished. It could be that the Aztalans left because of lack of resources. There is some evidence that the time of departure may have been a time of serious drought. Also, the Oneota Indians moved into the vicinity of Aztalan and may have been strong competitors for resources. There is evidence that the Aztalans were a warlike and possibly cannibalistic people which did not likely endear them to their neighbors and rivals for resources.

We may still yet learn the answer to why the Aztalans left. In spite of being named a National Historic Landmark and being placed on the National Register of Historic Places, more than 80% of the Aztalan site has yet to be excavated.

## August Birthdays

August 5	Leon Bailey
August 12	Jan Bailey
August 13	Alexandrya Click
August 25	Richard Hebron
August 26	Bobi Deyerle



## Whatizit?

Submitted by Kay Veith,

Kay took this picture of MCASV member, Leon Bailey, driving his antique car in Harrisonburg's 4th of July Parade. The question is, what is the make and model of the car? Answer in September's Points.



The Answer to July's Whatizit? submitted by Joe Sharrer:

These objects are not made by humans. They are ecofacts made by nature. Specifically, they are wormholes in mudstones found on the Topsail Beach, North Carolina



## 2011 MCAVS Picnic



Linda Waggy has again volunteered to host the annual MCASV Picnic.

The soirée will be on Saturday, August 6th at 4 pm at the Waggy homestead:

6368 Beaver Creek Rd.  
Bridgewater, VA 22812

Linda has provided these directions:

From Dayton:

Rt.42 south, turn West onto Rt. 257...travel past Montezuma Church of the Brethren, take next left onto Silver Creek Rd. go 1/2 mile turn Rt. onto Beaver Creek Rd. pass the Beaver Creek Church until you arrive at a concrete bridge (Beaver Creek). Turn Rt at the end of bridge, down the dirt lane to the white house with columns.

From Bridgewater:

Rt. 42 south, cross the bridge turn west (Rt.) onto Spring Creek Rd. until it ends (4.5 mi.) at the T turn Rt. toward Spring Creek. Pass the white church in the village. Turn Rt. at the Grey Mill (Beaver Creek Rd.), travel 1/2 mi to a concrete bridge (Beaver Creek). DO NOT cross bridge! take the last left lane before bridge (white house with columns).

Linda will again provide her delicious barbecue chicken. Please bring a dish or desert to share with others.

## Certification Program Opportunities

*Submitted by Carole Nash*

The following is information on upcoming certification opportunities:

**Historic and Prehistoric Lab Work:** Artifact processing and analysis from several 19th century historic home sites and prehistoric base camps. M, W, F schedule -- set your time! Contact Carole (432-6864 or nashcl@jmu.edu) for parking information and directions to her new JMU lab space.

### **2011 Field School and Volunteer Opportunities**

There are a number of opportunities available throughout the state for Certification members and Chapter volunteers. Check out the MCASV website at [www.mcasv.org](http://www.mcasv.org) for a full listing of the programs, their websites, and contact information.

**\*\*New opportunity\*\*** Pamplin Pipe Factory Site excavation in Appomattox County. Dates are August 15-19 and possibly August 22-26. Sponsored by the Archaeological Conservancy and VDHR. Contact Carole Nash for more information.

### **Department of Historic Resources (DHR) Volunteer Program**

Volunteer days can be arranged during the week for anyone interested. Prehistoric and historic artifact processing, cataloguing, data entry, documentary research, and outreach activities are some examples of what work is available. Please contact Chief Curator Dee DeRoche at [dee.deroche@dhr.virginia.gov](mailto:dee.deroche@dhr.virginia.gov) or (804) 367-2323 x134 for an application and to set up day(s) to volunteer if you are interested.

### **The Certification Program is on Facebook!**

Kay McCarron has created a Facebook page for the Certification Program, and it's available for your comments/photos. We have plans to post materials for the program and are open to your suggestions. Please look for it the next time you're social networking: "Virginia Certification and Training Program for Archaeological Technicians."

## Upcoming Events

- Aug. 3, 2011 7:00 p.m. MCASV Monthly Meeting, Arey Hall in the Bridgewater Municipal Building. No Program MCAVS Members will be "Working on Chapter Archives".
- Aug. 6, 2011 4:00 p.m. MCASV Annual Picnic, Waggy Residence
- Sept. 7, 2011 7:00 p.m. MCASV Monthly Meeting, Arey Hall in the Bridgewater Municipal Building. Program: TBA
- Oct. 5, 2011 7:00 p.m. MCASV Monthly Meeting, Arey Hall in the Bridgewater Municipal Building. Program: TBA
- Oct. 13-16 ASV Annual Meeting, Frontier Culture Museum, Staunton, VA
- Nov. 2, 2011 7:00 p.m. MCASV Monthly Meeting, Arey Hall in the Bridgewater Municipal Building.

## MCASV August 3, 2011 Meeting Agenda

*The MCASV monthly meeting will commence at 7:00 p.m. at the Bridgewater Town Hall.*

- I. Call to Order
- II. Welcome to Guests
- III. No Program MCASV Members will be "Working on Chapter Archives".
- IV. Secretary's Report
- V. Treasurer's Report
- VI. Newsletter Editor's Report
- VII. ASV Annual Meeting Report
- VIII. New Business
- IX. Certification Program Report
- X. Morris Pottery Kiln
- XI. Announcements
- XII. Adjournment

## We Need Your Help in Contributing Articles!

Your article could be here!

Please help by contributing articles each month.

The deadline for any information to be included in the newsletter will be the TWENTIETH of each month. Please have articles sent to Tom by this time.

Please email the Newsletter Staff with any comments or articles or concerns.

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