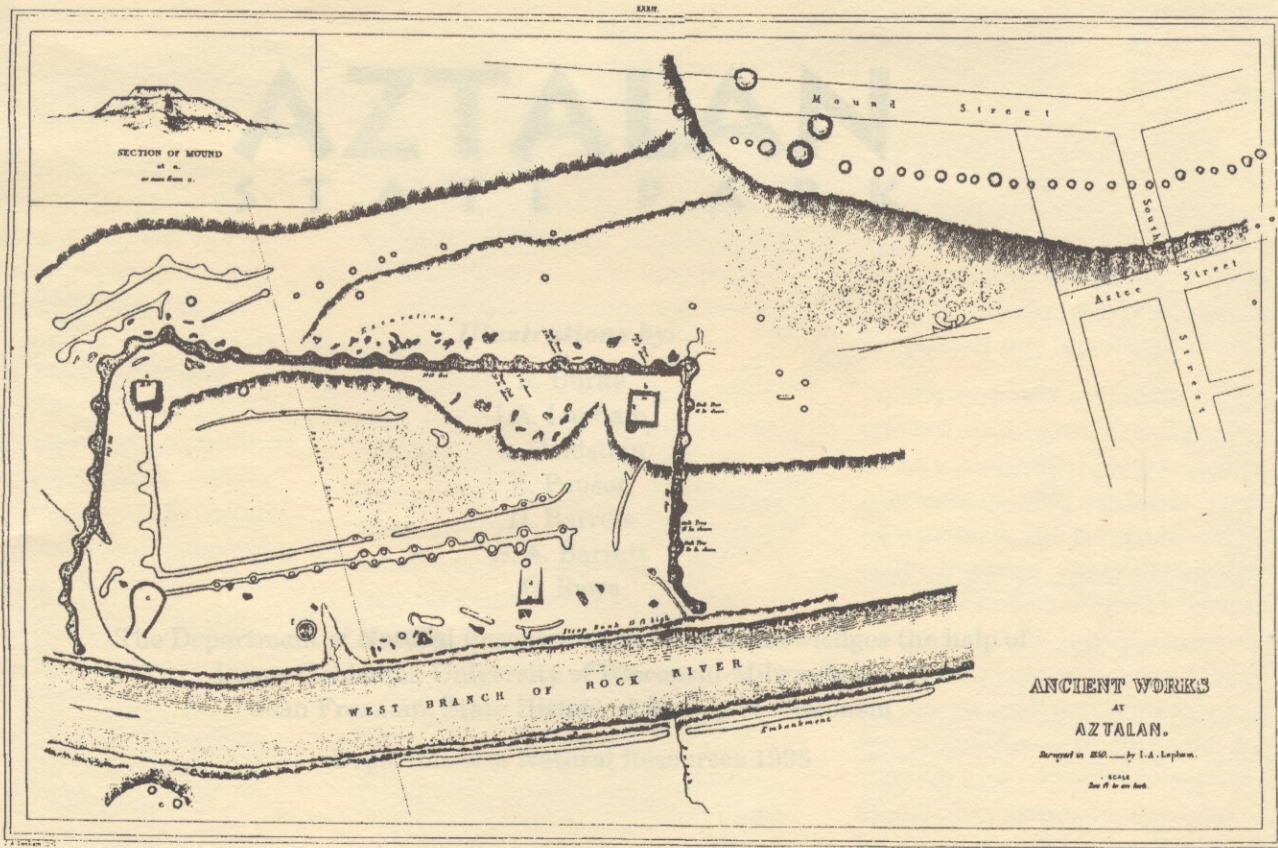


AZTALAN



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STATE PARK

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Aztalan State Park opened to the public in 1952. The park preserves one of the most important archaeological sites in Wisconsin. Aztalan was designated a National Landmark in 1964 and listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1966.

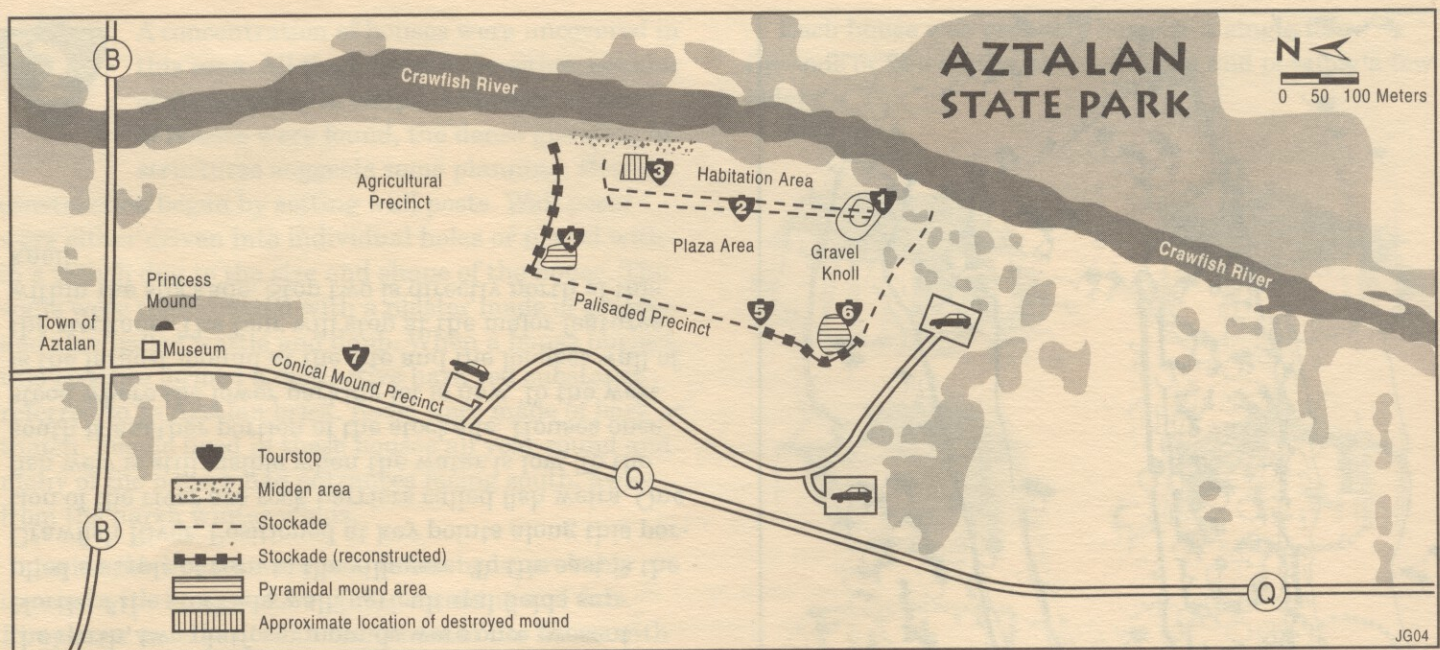
In 1836, Wisconsin was a vast unexplored territory to the settler from the eastern states. Imagine the surprise and wonder of a young man named Timothy Johnson when he first saw the ruins of ancient Aztalan. For the next 150 years, these ruins were investigated by amateurs and professionals alike in a quest to uncover the lives of the people who lived here so many hundreds of years ago.

The people who lived in Aztalan village had a highly organized and fairly complex way of life. Before historic plowing claimed its toll, evidence of several stockade walls, large platform mounds, ancient farm fields and numerous mound and pit features dotted the 172 acres which now comprise the park. Archaeological excavations, beginning in 1919, have helped to reconstruct some of these features and also piece together the social, political and economic life of Aztalan.

Aztalan is one of the northernmost outposts of what archaeologists call the Middle Mississippian Tradition. This tradition is most notable in west-central Illinois at a site called Cahokia, located near St. Louis. Mound and stockade construction, house construction, pottery decoration and agricultural

practices are just a few of the similarities that exist between Aztalan and Cahokia. But there are differences also. Although classic Middle Mississippian features exist, many artifacts belonging to the local people called Woodland by archaeologists are also present in large numbers. There appears to be a blend of the two cultures for everyday life and activities, with a more traditional Middle Mississippian view taken in respect to village planning and religious life.

Aztalan was a flourishing community from AD 900 to AD 1200, at which time all the inhabitants left. The reason for this abandonment is as much a mystery today as it was when Timothy Johnson first stood in awe in 1836.



This walking tour will take you through the most populated portion of the ancient village. The tour begins by the kiosk just north of the lower parking lot.

Please remember that the site is protected by state and federal law. Digging and artifact collecting are prohibited. Since many ancient vil-

lagers are buried here, the site is also considered sacred by modern Indian tribes. Please treat the area with respect.

1

This is a natural gravel knoll. Because of its location relative to the mounds, it is possible that the knoll served a function within the village plan; it may have been used as the fourth platform.

From this point, almost all the site can be seen. To the north, two platform mounds were once present. North of the stockade wall, agricultural fields supplied a staple of corn to the villagers. To the east is the Crawfish River. Positioned at key points along this portion of the river are rock barriers called fish weirs. One fish weir is still visible when the water is low. To the south is another portion of the stockade. Houses once stood where the lower parking lot is now. To the west is the largest mound at the site and the longest wall of the stockade. The tour will stop at the major features within the stockade. Stop two is directly north of this knoll.

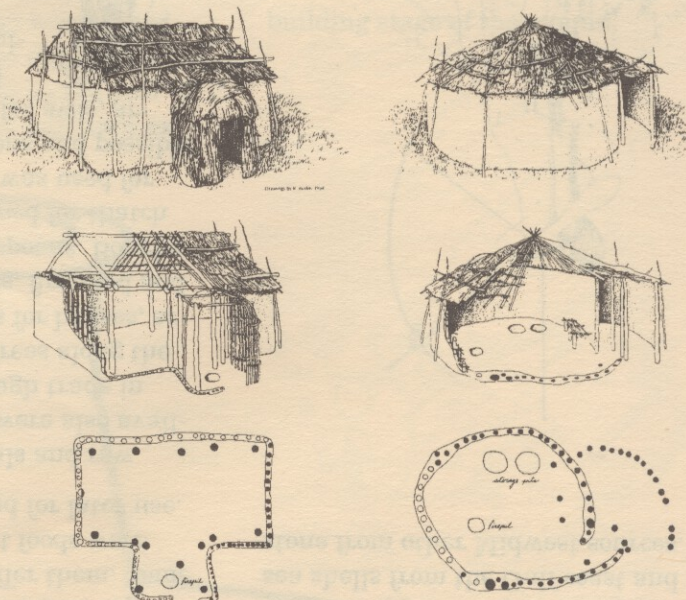


2

A concentration of houses were uncovered in this area. All the houses were either circular or rectangular in shape. Although no rows of houses were found, the dense grouping of structures suggests some planning. House construction began by setting wall posts. Wall posts were either driven into individual holes or placed within a trench dug to the size and shape of the house. The walls were then covered with a plaster made of grasses and clay, called wattle and daub. When a house burned, this mixture formed a distinctive hard red substance referred to as Aztalan brick. Roofs were made of bark or thatch. People lived in these houses all year round and many of the houses had entrances facing south, away from the harsh winter winds.

Inside the houses were pole frame beds, probably covered with tamarack boughs, deer skins and furs. Fireplaces were located in the center of the house with a hole in the roof to release the smoke. Food such as corn, nuts and seeds were stored in woven bags and placed in large pits inside the house. Meat and other perishables were probably stored outside the house where much of the cooking was done.

Each house was probably home to a single family—one or two adults, their children and possibly a few elders.



The location of Aztalan village was chosen for its rich natural environment, containing a wide variety of food and other resources within a short walk in any direction. The people grew corn but also gathered wild foods such as hickory nuts, acorns and berries. The primary meat source was deer, however, elk, raccoon, beaver, muskrat, and fox were also eaten. These villagers ate a large quantity of fish. Catfish, bass, suckers, buffalo fish, pike, drum and gar are all represented in the archaeological deposits. Passenger pigeons, ducks, turkey, goose,



and swan as well as turtle and mussel remains show the ability of these people to use all that the environment had to offer them. Some meat, fish and plant foods were processed and stored for later use.

Building materials and raw materials for tools were also available locally or through trade in the Aztalan area. Trees along the river supplied posts for houses, arrows hafts and bows, firewood and wooden bowls and spoons. Boughs and grasses were used for thatch and bedding. Shell was used for jewelry, beads, spoons and possible digging tools; bone for awls, arrowheads, pins and tools. Clay was available locally for pot-



tery making. Some raw materials were traded for more exotic goods such as copper from Lake Superior, sea shells from the Gulf coast and stone from other Midwest sources.



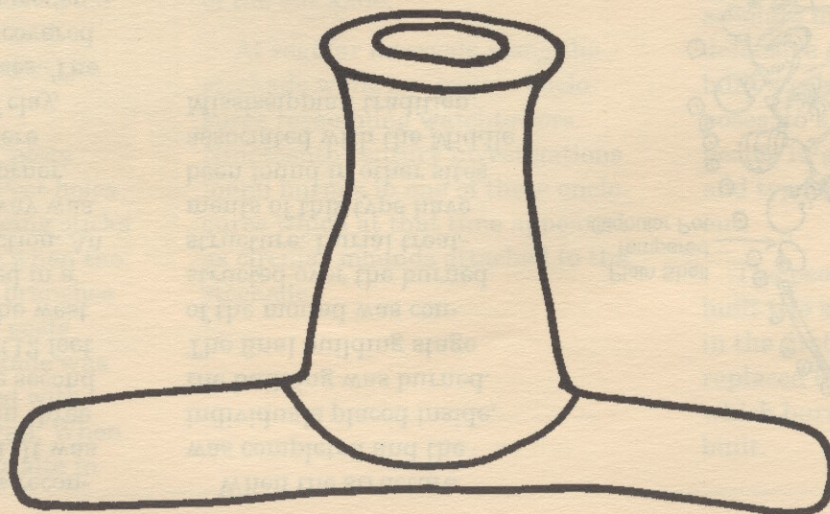
3

You are standing on the spot where a large flat-topped mound once stood.

This mound was similar to the two reconstructed platform mounds near the stockade. These three mounds and the gravel knoll formed a rectangle within which most of the activity of the site was concentrated.

A large open-walled structure (40 feet by 90 feet) had been placed on the top of this mound. Inside the structure were firepits lined with white sand. When a fire was extinguished, the pit was relined with white sand and used again. No debris was found on the floor of the structure so it is unknown ex-

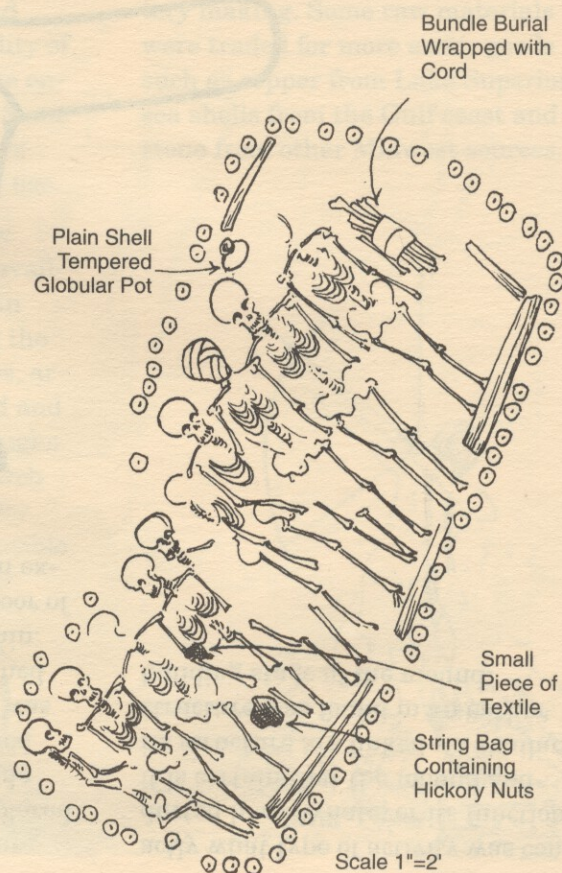
actly what type of activity was conducted here. Whatever its function, it is certain that the mound and its structure are linked—a similar structure was found in an earlier building stage of the mound.



4

This mound was reconstructed in 1954. It was originally built in three stages. During the second stage, a special structure (12 feet by 5 feet) was placed on the west side of the mound, oriented in a northeast-southwest direction. An opening, probably a doorway was placed in the southwest corner. The wall posts and roof were covered with a mixture of clay, willow branches and grasses. The floor of the structure was covered with a large mat, possibly woven of cattails. Ten individuals were placed side by side on the mat with their heads facing the opening. The bones of an additional individual were bundled together with a length of twisted cord.

When the structure was completed and the individuals placed inside, the building was burned. The final building stage of the mound was constructed over the burned structure. Burial treatments of this type have been found in other sites associated with the Middle Mississippian tradition.



5

The stockade wall is certainly one of the most prominent features of the site. It enclosed the north, west and south sides of the site. The stockade portions you see here were reconstructed in 1968. A set of smaller stockades or fences apparently enclosed the house area of the site at one time. These stockades have not been reconstructed and we are not certain if both kinds of stockades existed at the same time.

To build the stockade, posts were set in the ground. Post holes were excavated with digging sticks most likely in the spring when the ground was soft. Willow branches were woven through the posts and then the whole stockade was plastered with clay mixed with grasses to form a solid wall. When I. A. Lapham mapped the site in

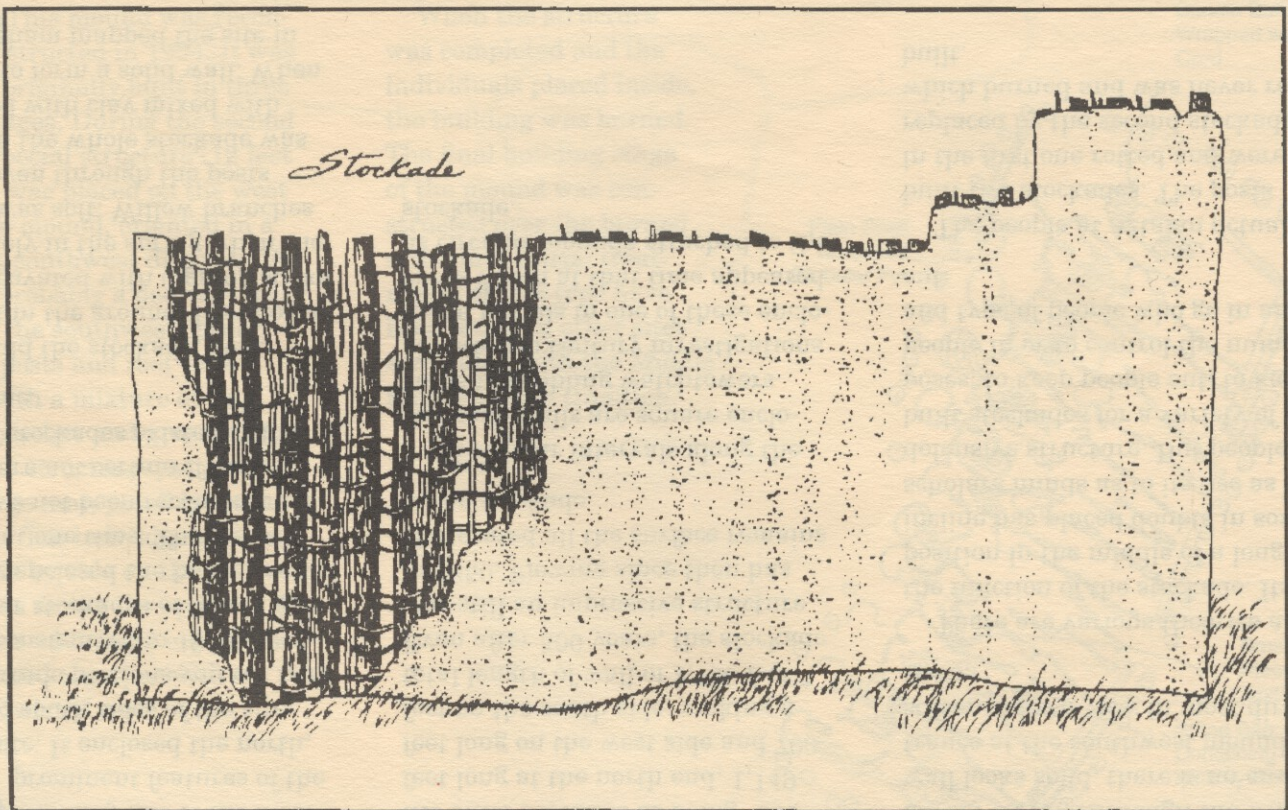
1850, he described the remains of the outer stockade as being "631 feet long at the north end, 1,149 feet long on the west side and 700 feet on the south side; making a total length of wall of 2,750 feet." Even after 500 years, the stockade was still an impressive structure in 1850. Plowing since then has obliterated all the surface remains of the stockade.

At regular intervals along the stockade walls are square enclosures resembling watchtowers. Nineteenth century investigations found burials in one of these enclosures which at that time appeared as circular mounds attached to the stockade.

The entrance to the stockade is very clever. Although the whole wall looks solid, there is an entrance at the southwest mound, screened from view in most directions.

There are various theories about the function of the stockade. Its position in the middle of a long incline has placed doubts in some scholars minds as to its use as a defensive structure. But people built stockades for a variety of purposes: to keep people out, to keep people in or to control the number and type of people who go in and out.

The people at Aztalan actually built two stockades. The posts in the first one rotted and were replaced by the second stockade which burned and was never rebuilt.



Stockade construction of wattle and daub

Drawing by R. Burke, 1964



6 This mound is the largest on the site, actually built on top of a natural terrace. It was reconstructed in 1951. Like the northwest mound, this one was originally built in three stages. A series of steps led to the top. There a structure was built encompassing the whole top of the mound. Instead of grass, like you see now, the mound was covered by a clay cap, certainly adding to the dramatic appearance of the mound.

Inside the structure were storage pits containing corn. While it is true that all the platform mounds had structures built on top of them, there have been several theories for the function of this particular structure. It may have served as 1) the storage facility for food to be distributed to the village; 2) the storage facility for food for top village officials; 3) a structure for ceremonies and rituals; or 4) a house for top officials. Excavations revealed that a similar structure stood on top of each of the three building stages of this mound.

The last stop on the tour is the mound area located by the upper parking lot. You may leave the path and walk up to the mounds or visit this stop on your way out of the park.



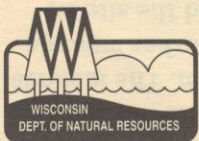
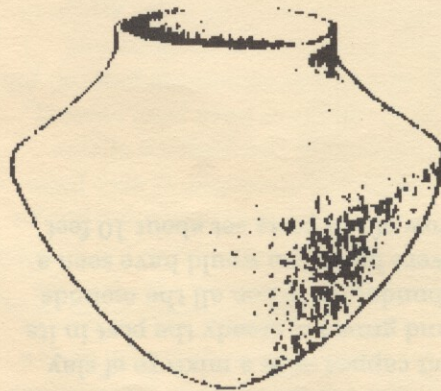
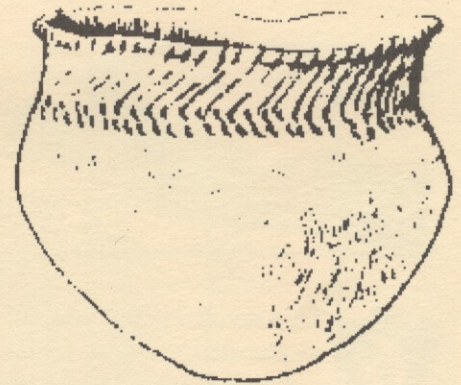
When I. A. Lapham mapped the site in 1850, there were over 40 mounds in this area. All but the largest mounds have been plowed down. Only a fraction of the original number can be located today.

When the large mounds were excavated by archaeologists in the 1920's, they found no burials,

which was quite an unexpected discovery. Instead, they found a large post set into a pit in the center of each mound. The post was surrounded by gravel and soil and the pit capped with a mixture of clay and gravel to steady the post in its foundation. When all the mounds were built, you would have seen a row of tall posts set about 10 feet

above the ground surface. These posts would have been visible for miles in any direction. The mounds have been named marker mounds because they marked the site for travelers in the vicinity.

These posts may have been used to announce village events, relay messages, or calculate astronomical phenomena.



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