New Mississippi River Bridge Project

Main Street Mound
A Ridgetop Monument at the East St. Louis Mound Complex

edited by
Tamira K. Brennan

with contributions by
Steven L. Boles, Tamira K. Brennan, Kristin M. Hedman, Michael P. Kolb, and Lenna M. Nash
## Contents

List of Figures............................................................................................................................... ix
List of Tables .............................................................................................................................. xiii
Preface ....................................................................................................................................... xv
Abstract ..................................................................................................................................... xvii
Acknowledgments ....................................................................................................................... xix

1 Introduction, Tamira K. Brennan .................................................................................... 1
   Natural Setting ..................................................................................................................... 1
   Modern Historical Setting .............................................................................................. 3
   The East St. Louis Mound Complex ................................................................................. 5

2 Main Street Mound Complex, Tamira K. Brennan ........................................................ 11
   Excavation Methods ....................................................................................................... 11
   Excavation Results ......................................................................................................... 14
      Main Street Mound ..................................................................................................... 17
      Submound Borrow Feature 4420 ...................................................................... 25
      Borrow Feature 3924 ............................................................................................ 43
      Pre-Mississippian and Transitional Activity .......................................................... 44
      Associated Features ................................................................................................. 51
      Pits ............................................................................................................................ 51
      Nearby Features ....................................................................................................... 53
      Structures .................................................................................................................. 53
      Nonmound Burials .................................................................................................... 53
      Post Pits .................................................................................................................... 55
      Borrows ..................................................................................................................... 55
   Summary and Discussion ................................................................................................. 55

3 Burials and Human Remains, Lenna M. Nash, Tamira K. Brennan, and Kristin M. Hedman ................................................................................................................. 57
   Excavation Methodology .............................................................................................. 57
   Results .............................................................................................................................. 58
      General Mortuary Assemblage Characteristics .......................................................... 63
         Within-Mound Contexts ......................................................................................... 63
         Off-Mound Contexts ............................................................................................. 64
            Possible Cemetery ............................................................................................. 64
            Off Mound .......................................................................................................... 64
      Submound Contexts .................................................................................................... 66
   Skeletal Analysis ............................................................................................................. 66
      Demography ................................................................................................................ 66
      Pathology ..................................................................................................................... 68
         Infection .................................................................................................................. 68
         Metabolic Disorders .............................................................................................. 68
         Degenerative Changes ............................................................................................ 69
         Trauma ..................................................................................................................... 69
      Dental and Oral Health .............................................................................................. 69
         Carious Lesions ...................................................................................................... 69
         Dental Calculus ...................................................................................................... 71
         Developmental and Enamel Defects .................................................................... 71
Periodontal Disease and Abscesses ......................................................... .71
Hypercementosis .................................................................................... .71
Cultural Modification ............................................................................ .72
Population Affinity ................................................................................. .72
AMS Dating and Isotopic Analysis ........................................................ .72
Summary and Discussion of Health ........................................................ .75
Mortuary Patterning ................................................................................. .79
Mound, South Edge .................................................................................. .80
Mound, Interior West Edge ...................................................................... .83
Possible Cemetery ................................................................................... .84
Other Contexts ......................................................................................... .85
Summary and Discussion ......................................................................... .85

4 Materials Analyses, Tamira K. Brennan ................................................ .89
Ceramics .................................................................................................... .90
Methods ..................................................................................................... .91
Results ....................................................................................................... .93
Main Street Mound ................................................................................... .94
Borrow Feature 4420 ................................................................................. .97
Borrow Feature 3924 ................................................................................ .99
Lithics .......................................................................................................... .99
Methods ..................................................................................................... 100
Results ....................................................................................................... 101
Chipped Stone ............................................................................................ 101
Nonchipped-Stone Artifacts ...................................................................... 102
Flora ............................................................................................................. 102
Methods ..................................................................................................... 102
Results ....................................................................................................... 103
Main Street Mound ................................................................................... 104
Borrow Feature 3924 ................................................................................. 104
Borrow Feature 4420 ................................................................................ 105
Fauna ............................................................................................................. 105
Methods ..................................................................................................... 105
Results ....................................................................................................... 107
Main Street Mound ................................................................................... 107
Borrow Feature 4420 ................................................................................. 108
Borrow Feature 3924 ................................................................................ 109
Absolute Dating ........................................................................................ 110
Summary .................................................................................................... 111

5 Landscape Modification, Tamira K. Brennan, Michael F. Kolb, and Steven L. Boles ....... 113
Geoarchaeological Methods ....................................................................... 113
Alluvial Landforms ................................................................................... 115
Sand Ridge ................................................................................................. 115
Ridge Slope ............................................................................................... 115
Shallow Swale ............................................................................................ 115
Abandoned Channels ................................................................................ 117
Anthropogenic Landforms ....................................................................... 117
Mound and Prepared Surfaces ................................................................. 117
Core Data .................................................................................................. 121
Plaza ............................................................................................................. 126
Historic Fill ................................................................................................. 133
# Contents

Borrow and Possible Early Plaza Area ................................................................. 134
  Borrow Features 1720, 1801, 2133, 2181, and 2514 ......................................... 134
  Capping Event: Feature 4517 ..................................................................... 137
  Nearby Structures ...................................................................................... 137
  Comparative Data ...................................................................................... 139
  Summary and Discussion ........................................................................... 141

6 Ridgetops, Religion, and Main Street Mound, Tamira K. Brennan .................. 143
  Ridgetop Mounds .................................................................................... 143
  East St. Louis Ridgetops ........................................................................... 146
  Conclusion .................................................................................................. 148

**Online Appendices**

To facilitate the production process, long appendices are available online and are not included in the paper copy of this report. Type the URL below into a web browser to download the data. Adobe and Excel or similar programs that can open .pdf and .xlsx files are required.

The following files are available for download at: https://uofi.box.com/Research-Report-36

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. Photograph of EB73 south profile</th>
<th>Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_A.pdf</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B. Illustration of adjacent Feature 1897 and Main Street Mound profiles by soil type</td>
<td>Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_B.pdf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Central Balk Profiles</td>
<td>Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_C.pdf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C.1. Illustration of central balk east profile by soil type</td>
<td>Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_C.1.pdf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C.2. Photograph of full central balk east profile</td>
<td>Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_C.2.pdf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Photograph of east profile of Main Street Mound and submound borrow Feature 4420 in Hand Units 12, 35, and 53 and central balk west profile</td>
<td>Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_D.pdf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Main Street Mound Skeletal and Dental Isolates</td>
<td>Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_E.pdf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.1. Skeletal Inventory for Isolates from Main Street Mound</td>
<td>Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_E.1.xlsx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.2. Dental Inventory for Isolates from Main Street Mound</td>
<td>Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_E.2.xlsx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.3. Age Assessment for Isolates</td>
<td>Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_E.3.xlsx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.4. Enamel Defects for Isolates from Main Street Mound</td>
<td>Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_E.4.xlsx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.5. Dental Pathology for Isolates from Main Street Mound</td>
<td>Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_E.5.xlsx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.6. Dental Metrics for Isolates from Main Street Mound</td>
<td>Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_E.6.xlsx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.7. Dental Nonmetrics for Isolates from Main Street Mound</td>
<td>Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_E.7.xlsx</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
E.8. Dental Pathology Summary by Feature for Isolates from Main Street Mound
Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_E.8.xlsx
E.9. Dental Pathology Summary by Tooth for Isolates from Main Street Mound
Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_E.9.xlsx

F. Skeletal and Dental Inventories
F.1. Skeletal Inventory for Individuals from Main Street Mound
Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_F.1.xlsx
F.2. Skeletal Inventory for Feature 1345 Disturbed Remains
Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_F.2.xlsx
F.3. Dental Inventory for Individuals from Main Street Mound
Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_F.3.xlsx

G. Age and Sex Data for Individuals
G.1. Age and Sex Data for Individuals
Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_G.1.xlsx
G.2. Sex Determination for Individuals
Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_G.2.xlsx

H. Dental Data for Individuals
H.1. Enamel Defects for Individuals from Main Street Mound
Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_H.1.xlsx
H.2. Dental Pathology for Individuals from Main Street Mound
Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_H.2.xlsx

I. Skeletal and Dental Metrics for Individuals
I.1. Skeletal Metrics for Individuals from Main Street Mound
Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_I.1.xlsx
I.2. Dental Metrics for Individuals from Main Street Mound
Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_I.2.xlsx

J. Skeletal and Dental Nonmetrics for Individuals
J.1. Skeletal Nonmetrics for Individuals from Main Street Mound
Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_J.1.xlsx
J.2. Dental Nonmetrics for Individuals from Main Street Mound
Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_J.2.xlsx

K. Dental Pathology Summaries for Individuals
K.1. Dental Pathology Summary by Feature for Individuals from Main Street Mound
Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_K.1.xlsx
K.2. Dental Pathology Summary by Tooth for Individuals from Main Street Mound
Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_K.2.xlsx

L. Feature 1346 CC-X-V-U Profile
L.1. Illustration by soil type of Feature 1346 in west profile CC-X-V-U
Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_L.1.pdf
L.2. Photograph of Feature 1346 in west profile CC-X-V-U
Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_L.2.pdf

M. Nonvessel Ceramics Table
Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_M.xlsx
Contents

N. Chipped Stone Table .............................................................................................................. 151
   Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_N.xlsx
O. Nonchipped Stone Table .................................................................................................. 151
   Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_O.xlsx
P. Floral Flotation Samples Table ................................................................................... 151
   Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_P.xlsx
Q. Faunal Table .................................................................................................................... 152
   Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_Q.xlsx
R. Soil Descriptions for Main Street Mound Profiles ...................................................... 152
   Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_R.xlsx
S. EB73 and EB75 Profiles ................................................................................................ 152
   S.1. Illustration of complete east EB73 and EB75 profile nails RR–H
       Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_S.1.pdf
   S.2. Photograph of complete east EB73 and EB75 profile
       Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_S.2.pdf
T. EB73 Profiles .................................................................................................................... 152
   T.1. Illustration of north EB73 profile nails T–I
       Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_T.1.pdf
   T.2. Photograph of north EB73 profile nails T–I
       Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_T.2.pdf
U. Extended Drainpipe Profile Nails A3–D3 ...................................................................... 152
   Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_U.pdf
V. Location of Profile Cuts Within Feature 4517 Cap and Borrow Area ................................ 152
   Main_Street_Mound_Appendix_V.pdf
References ............................................................................................................................... 153
| Figures |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1.1. Portion of the East St. Louis Mound Complex affected by the Mississippi River Bridge project | 2 |
| 1.2. Location of the mound centers in and adjacent to the St. Louis-East St. Louis-Cahokia Mounds corridor | 3 |
| 1.3. Features of the alluvial landscape in East St. Louis | 4 |
| 1.4. The approximate location of Main Street Mound and relocated I-70 and Exchange Ave. project limits superimposed on Malhom Yeakle's 1889 lithograph of the St. Louis National Stockyards | 5 |
| 1.5. Remnant of Main Street Mound fill below Main Street at the eastern right-of-way boundary, view to northeast | 6 |
| 1.7. Chronology of the American Bottom from Late Woodland to the end of the Mississippian era | 8 |
| 2.1. Original I-70 right-of-way design at the Main Street Mound area, showing the impact of proposed Illinois America Water Company pipeline and open roadside ditch | 12 |
| 2.2. Excavation Block 73 hand unit locator. Asterisk denotes unnumbered hand unit due to presence of burial features | 13 |
| 2.3. Main Street Mound extents and mound profile locations | 15 |
| 2.4. Main Street Mound Preserve and project redesign: Illinois American Water Pipeline corridor relocated and I-70 open ditch modified to a closed culvert in the mound area | 16 |
| 2.5. Aerial view of the Main Street Mound preserve during active project construction. Mound and burial portion of preserve protected within concrete barriers | 17 |
| 2.6. Main Street Mound and submound borrow Features 4420 and 3924 in plan view | 18 |
| 2.7. Natural and anthropogenic landforms surrounding Main Street Mound | 19 |
| 2.8. Profile of the Stockyards Tract landscape as evidenced by Geoprobe® | 20 |
| 2.9. Illustration and photograph of the depositional episodes of Main Street Mound and submound borrow Feature 4420. Homogeneous silty base identified in yellow in illustration | 21 |
| 2.10. Section of Main Street Mound north profile showing light and dark bands of silty and clayey fills | 22 |
| 2.11. Plan view of interior edges of Main Street Mound observed in EB73 | 23 |
| 2.12. Westernmost edge of Main Street Mound in profile of Hand Unit 21, view to southeast | 24 |
| 2.13. Southern edge of Main Street Mound in plan at Level 2 (~127.17 m amsl), Hand Units 90, 60, 85, 89, and 88 | 25 |
| 2.14. Main Street Mound south profile, showing mound edge at possible post and plaza fills to the right | 26 |
| 2.15. Plan view of Hand Unit 8 showing western edge of Main Street Mound as it corresponds to the south profile | 27 |
| 2.16. Profile illustration and photograph of Main Street Mound southern terrace or apron fill, view to northeast | 28 |
| 2.17. Central balk east profile illustration by depositional zones and photograph of Feature 1350 | 31 |
| 2.18. Illustration of east profile of Main Street Mound and submound borrow Feature 4420 in Hand Units 12, 35, and 53 and central balk west profile | 33 |
| 2.19. Series of depositional events at submound borrow Feature 4420 and Main | 35 |
2.20. Close-up of laminations and dedicatory layer in submound borrow Feature 4420 in Hand Unit 53 west profile .................................................................116
2.21. Dedicated layer in profile and Hand Unit 35 north wall ........................................118
2.22. Dedicated layer in plan view in Hand Unit 12 and Hand Unit 35 .........................120
2.23. Hand Unit 35 south profile ..................................................................................121
2.24. Hand Unit 53 west profile ....................................................................................122
2.25. Basket-loaded fills of submound borrow Feature 4420 in Hand Unit 35 ..............123
2.26. Gateway Archaeology’s extension of Feature 3924 plan map and adjacent features ..................................................124
2.27. East profile of Main Street Mound borrow Feature 3924, with intrusive pit Features 1901 and 1364 and possible burial Feature 1368 ........................................125
2.28. Remnant of Feature 3924 beneath Main Street Mound in EB73 north profile nails I–J ....................................................................................127
2.29. Basal Zones 24B and 57 of Feature 3924 in Hand Unit 67 ..................................129
2.30. Close-up of Zones 24B and 57 in Feature 3924 east profile .................................130
2.31. Transitional early Lohmann structure and pit Feature 1897 on the Main Street Mound ridgeslope ..............................................................................131
2.32. Prehistoric pits in superposition with Main Street Mound, seen in profile ..........133
2.33. Mississippian period borrow pits, structures, exterior posts pits, and possible burials in the Main Street Mound area ................................................................134
3.1. All possible burial features associated with Main Street Mound .......59
3.2. Feature 1740 plan map ..........................................................................................61
3.3. Modified incisors of SK43 .....................................................................................62
3.4. Stable isotope results of bone collagen, \( ^{13}C \) collagen × \( ^{15}N \) collagen .....72
3.5. Stable isotope results of bone and enamel apatite, \( ^{13}C \) apatite by individual ................74
3.6. Strontium (\( ^{87}Sr/^{86}Sr \)) isotope ratios of tooth enamel by individual ...76
3.7. Close-up of Main Street Mound south-edge burials ..............................................80
3.8. Feature 1346 in south segment of west profile .....................................................81
3.9. Profile of burial Feature 1689 with superimposing post mold ..............................82
3.10. Suspected graves identified during Gateway Archaeology’s testing of an area immediately east of the IDOT right-of-way in the Main Street Mound area ........86
4.1. Lip shape diagram .................................................................................................92
4.2. Rim stance diagram .............................................................................................92
4.3. Upper vessel form diagram ..................................................................................93
4.4. Ceramic metric attributes diagram .....................................................................94
4.5. Main Street Mound rims .....................................................................................98
4.6. Decorated sherds ..................................................................................................99
4.7. Feature 4420 rims ...............................................................................................100
4.8. Feature 3924 rims ...............................................................................................101
4.9. Burlington flake tools from Feature 4420 .............................................................102
4.10. Burlington cores ..................................................................................................102
4.11. Sandstone abraders from Feature 4420 and Main Street Mound ......................103
4.12. Crushed hematite (red ochre) visible in plan in the dedicatory level of Hand Unit 12 ........................................................................................................104
5.1. Location of cores discussed in text and profiled in figures ....................................114
5.2. Profile nail locations referred to in text ................................................................116
5.3. Schematic of the Main Street Mound landscape profile ......................................118
5.4. Geocores along Main Street in the Main Street Mound area ................................120
5.5. Buckshot fills of Main Street Mound in plan view beneath historic Main Street ........................................................................................................122
5.6. Mixed-fills buttress at the drainpipe profile ........................................................122
5.7. Buttress formed by borrow Feature 3924 at the east profile ................................123
5.8. Geocores in the near mound vicinity ..................................................................125
5.9. Illustration of plaza fill lapping up onto mound fill, profile nails OO–O2 ..........127
5.10. EB73 north profile, R1 .......................................................................................129
5.11. Main Street Mound profile, R1 to J1 nails ................................................................. 130
5.12. EB73 south wall sump ............................................................................................. 131
5.13. West, north, and east profile walls of Excavation Block 75 showing position of plaza fill.. 132
5.14. Laminated fills in borrow Feature 1801 ....................................................................... 135
5.15. Capping event Feature 4517 as superimposed on borrows 2133, 2514, and 2181 and burials ................................................................................................................................ 136
5.16. Capping event Feature 4517 superimposed on the remnants of borrow Feature 2133 .... 138
5.17. Plan view photo of capping event Feature 4517: upper silty fill underlaid by basket loads of clayey fill .................................................................................................................. 139
5.18. Possible mid to late Lohmann plaza south of Main Street Mound ................................. 140
Main Street Mound A Ridgetop Monument at the East St. Louis Mound Complex

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Reviewed by David G. Anderson, Department of Anthropology, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

The Main Street Mound, the basal portions of an apparent ridgetop mound, was discovered during mechanical stripping operations removing historic overburden within the ca. 11.5 footprint of the I-70 relocation corridor that ran through portions of the East St. Louis Mound Complex, a ca. 290 ha multi-mound center associated with what Pauketat and Emerson have called the “Central Political-Administrative Complex,” encompassing the Cahokia, East St. Louis, and St. Louis mound groups. The area of the Main Street Mound—also designated Tract 5, Feature 2000, Mound 26—was archaeologically examined over a two month period in the late spring and early summer of 2011, with the fieldwork and analysis results, including appreciable interpretive detail, documented in this report. Given its significance, which became clear during the excavation program, the remaining portions of the Main Street Mound were preserved in place in August 2011, following consultation with state and federal agencies, and representatives of the Osage Nation. The mitigation effort associated with the relocation of the I-70 highway corridor, also known as the New Mississippi River Bridge (NMRB) project, represents one of the largest archaeological mitigations in the modern era, and this report is one of a number completed or in preparation under the direction of the Illinois State Archaeological Survey.

The project area and its natural and historic setting, including the local prehistoric sequence, previous archaeological investigations, and the reasons for the current field program are provided in an introductory chapter by Tamira K. Brennan. The mound was built during the early Mississippian Lohmann phase, and the area appears to have continued in use into and perhaps beyond the Stirling phase, toward the end of which the East St. Louis center precipitously declined. The Main Street Mound thus provides an important window on developments associated with the use of ridgetop mounds as well as the emergence of Mississippian itself, both locally and, through comparison with similar mounds, across the larger region.

The excavations within the mound area are described and extensively illustrated in Chapter 2, also by Brennan. Following surface cleaning and feature mapping, some 90 m of narrow excavation profiles were opened and mapped. The mound area was then grid-ded and a series of 2x2 m units opened and carefully excavated. Numerous remarkably clear and clean color photographs and drawings of the features and profiles document the
work, together with drawings of the immediate excavations as well as areas examined around the mound during other phases of the NMRB project. While the Main Street Mound was isolated from other mounds within the complex, a number of features were present nearby, including a possible cemetery and plaza area to the west, while to the south were several borrow pits, two major post pits and several residential and specialized nondomestic structures. The archaeological findings in this chapter are complemented by the discussion of “Landscape Modification” in Chapter 5 by Brennan, Michael F. Kolb, and Steven L. Boles, where the natural landscape and considerable anthropogenic modification to it is documented in the vicinity of the mound. A major program of coring and profile excavation and analysis demonstrates that nearby swales were filled in and the pre mound surface was carefully prepared, with borrowing and filling used to create the mound and plazas around it, a process that was ongoing and not restricted to a single event. As with many Mississippian sites, the excavations at the Main Street Mound demonstrate that monumentality at Mississippian centers involved much more than simply building mounds.

Chapter 3, by Lenna M. Nash, Tamira K. Brennan, and Kristin M. Hedman, summarizes the burials and human remains found during the excavations, while Chapter 4, by Brennan, documents the ceramic, lithic, floral, and faunal artifacts, and the dating results. These two chapters include state of the art analyses, with results summarized in numerous tables and figures, providing many details about the diet, health, technology, and lifeways of the local inhabitants, with results that complement one another. The radiocarbon dating supports a Terminal Late Woodland/early Lohmann phase use of the mound area, continuing into the Stirling phase, the earlier use is also clearly demonstrated by the ceramics, most of which are early. While preservation was poor, of the 18 individuals recovered in burials, two and possibly as many as six were female, and most appeared to be adolescent to young adult in age. Stable carbon and nitrogen isotope analyses were conducted with samples from four burials, while strontium was examined using teeth from 12 individuals; the results show that maize was an important part of the diet for these early Mississippian people, but that consumption was more varied than in later populations at the site, and that most of the people appear to have originated locally. The fact that the NMRB mitigation memorandum of agreement allowed for the removal and analysis of human remains is why so much was able to be learned about early Mississippian life and, as importantly, the fact that repatriation, interment, and preservation of the mound and burial area in perpetuity was arranged demonstrates the respect accorded these same people.

The final chapter, by Brennan, provides a valuable discussion about the 17 other known ridgetop mounds, all but one in the local Mississippian Central Political-Administrative Complex, with one known from the St. Louis and two from the East St. Louis mound groups, one to the north at Mitchell, and the remainder in or near Cahokia. While Shiloh, Tennessee and Carson, Mississippi are sites where possible ridgetop mounds may also occur, the discussion properly focuses on the local situation. Unfortunately, as the author documents, few ridgetop mounds have been well excavated to fairly contemporary standards locally, making the work at Main Street Mound
of great importance. The excavations at Main Street and Cahokia’s Mound 72, in fact, demonstrate that burial in mounds was not restricted to males in early Mississippian locally, leading researchers like Emerson to suggest that early Cahokian religion may have had many female aspects, as reflected in both burials and some of the figures represented in Missouri flint clay pipes.

Perhaps the most remarkable part of this report is what is not actually physically present in the volume, and that is the wealth of data in the 24 online appendices (41 files, 456 mb) which I was able to access and download with ease at https://uofi.app.box.com/Research-Report-36. This information, coupled with the report and the curated assemblages, means the findings at the Main Street Mound can be subject to re-examination by future generations of archaeologists, bringing new insights and interpretations.

To conclude, archaeologists who excavate well are admired by their colleagues, but the highest accolades rightly go to those who then take the next step and write detailed descriptive and interpretive monographs. This report is an exemplar of the kind of reporting that should accompany all archaeological fieldwork, and should be studied as such by those wishing to grow as archaeologists, and improve their fieldwork and writing. We learn the data collection aspects of our profession in something of an apprenticeship fashion, training usually thought to occur in the field, but that in reality includes extensive time in laboratories and at desks, in analysis and writing activity. Just as we learn how to create squared walls and floors and identify artifacts from mentors who have worked with them before, in the same way we learn what is acceptable reporting by examining existing monographs. What particularly impresses me about the Main Street Mound report is the extent of the reporting and illustration, and the masses of data in the appendices, which can be used by many researchers in the future, apart from or in conjunction with new analyses of the collections and records themselves, which have been carefully curated. Such projects are rarer than they should be, but will become more common given examples like this. The profession owes a debt of gratitude to the leadership of the Illinois State Archaeological Survey and the Illinois Department of Transportation for supporting such work, and to the archaeologists, particularly Tamira K. Brennan, who conducted the fieldwork and put this report together.