

Harriet M. Smith: The First Female Field Archaeologist in Illinois

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Abstract

Harriet M. Smith (1911-1992) was Illinois's first female field archaeologist. Smith began her career as a graduate of Fay-Cooper Cole's program at the University of Chicago, one of the only programs at the time that trained women in archaeology. Entering the workforce during the New Deal, Smith was employed by the Illinois State Museum. Smith is best known for leading WPA excavations at Cahokia in 1941, directing the first professional large-scale excavations at Cahokia. Harriet Smith contributed many original, although controversial at the times, ideas about Cahokian archaeology; several of these for which she never received credit. This poster describes Smith's academic life and the contributions she made to midwestern archaeology.



Smith is the woman with a hat and her hands in her pockets. This photo was taken when she was part of a crew at 11W12 – Old Fort Site. Courtesy of the Illinois State Archaeological Survey and the Laboratory of Anthropology, University of Illinois

“I assure you, my training and qualifications are adequate and the whole problem hinges on whether my prospective employers are willing to take a chance on a young woman, in what by precedent, is a man's field.” – Harriet Smith (quoted in White et al. 1999:110).



Courtesy of Illinois State Museum

Fieldwork

Upon graduating with her doctorate, Smith looked for work, acknowledging her unique case as a woman. Although facing a male-dominated field, in 1938, Smith was employed by the Illinois State Museum as the State Supervisor of the Museum Project. She later took on the role of Assistant Site Supervisor on the Cahokia Courthouse and Fort Massac Projects, with supervision by Paul Maynard.

Excavating Murdock Mound

In 1940, archaeologist Dr. Titterington learned that Harry Murdock had been leveling the land (which included a mound) outside of the Cahokia Mounds park with a horse and scraper, in preparation of building houses. During his construction, he came across human bones. Titterington alerted Thorne Deuel, who was then director of the Illinois State Museum. In June 1941, Deuel sent Smith and a crew of WPA workers to salvage as much as they could of Murdock Mound (Mound #55) before further construction continued. Smith led the WPA excavations at Cahokia, marking her as the first female to direct excavations at Cahokia Mounds and in the state of Illinois.



Smith at Murdock Mound in 1941. Courtesy of Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site

She directed 12 WPA workers with another female University of Chicago student, Trava Wilson, assisting in excavations. This was to be the first salvage excavations in Illinois and the first modern, large-scale professional excavations at Cahokia. Murdock cooperated with the archaeologists, allowing Smith and her

workers to dig trenches into the mound. Smith and her team determined 13 stratigraphic layers, five layers below the mound, marking a habitation area, and eight mound layers. Her team unearthed a round structure next to a rectangular house. Smith suggested this could be the residence of a Cahokian priest, with the round building being a sacred space. Smith defined six levels of occupation, uncovering many structures.



Smith at Murdock Mound in 1941. Courtesy of Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site

Contributions to Midwestern Archaeology

At the time, Smith's original ideas were provocative; many fellow archaeologists rejected her contributions. In present day, the majority of Smith's original interpretations are now accepted and utilized, although she rarely receives credit for the advances she has helped us make.

“It is alright to be ahead of your time, so long as you're not too far ahead” – Joseph Caldwell to Smith (Young and Fowler 2000: 48).

- She was one of the first to estimate dates for the continuous occupation of Cahokia. Using stratigraphy and ceramics, she estimated A.D. 1000-1370. Most contemporary archaeologists date Cahokia from A.D. 1050-1375.
- She recognized that Cahokian houses were not built on the surface, but rather people dug small rectangular subterranean basins for their homes.
- Smith was the first to examine the organization and spatiality of the site. She proposed that Cahokia was a planned city and argued that the houses were oriented on a north-south axis, running parallel to Monks Mound. Smith hypothesized that Cahokia was planned with a 16.5 foot module in mind, similar to some Mesoamerican architecture.
- She designed a formula to estimate Murdock Mound's original height to be about 33 feet and predicted the mound had had two terraces.

Smith's Later Life

Excavations at Cahokia came to an abrupt halt when Pearl Harbor was bombed. Shortly after her excavations ended, Smith left the Illinois State Museum and started working in the



Smith, in the middle front wearing all blue, at a ceramics conference in 1986. Courtesy of Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site

education department of Chicago's Field Museum. While at the museum, Smith received a grant to fund anthropology trainings for students. A fellow instructor for the trainings was Margaret Brown, who later

became Cahokia's director. When Mound #55 was reconstructed under Brown's guidance, she followed Smith's reconstruction suggestions and included a design with two terraces.

Works Cited

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