

2018 Most Endangered Historic Places in Illinois

Kincaid Mounds

- **Location:** Massac and Pope Counties, near Brookport
- **Built:** circa 1050 A.D.
- **Architect:** N/A
- **Current owners:** State of Illinois and private ownership
- **Historic significance:** A rare, archeological site built by settlers in the Middle Mississippian period more than a thousand years ago. The site is a National Historic Landmark.
- **Why it is endangered:** Lack of funding, soil erosion and the ongoing threat of amateur archaeologists disturbing the mounds.



Credit: Mike Walker, Kincaid Mounds Support Organization

Almost one thousand years ago, during the Middle Mississippian period, Mississippian people began building a settlement at the site that is now known as Kincaid Mounds. Today, however, flooding and limited funding is threatening the survival of this prehistoric resource.

Located at the southernmost tip of Illinois, straddling present day Massac and Pope Counties, these early people selected a wide section of the Ohio River floodplain to construct a village. On a large ridge they began to build a civic and cultural center to that would serve as the ceremonial and administrative hub of their community.

Over the next 300 years, these people constructed 19 flat-top earth mounds, nine of which survive today. From atop some of these mounds, Chiefs and elite leaders would have lived and ruled, while others were used for religious purposes. Archeological remains indicate that large buildings, such as temples or council houses, were once situated on top of the mounds. These earthen works encircled a large central plaza that was most likely used for ceremonies and games. The plazas most important function however was the annual “green corn festival,” a renewal ritual that took place in late summer as the corn harvest ripened.

By about 1400 A.D., occupation at the site seems to have ceased, likely due to a climate shift, exhaustion of timber resources, or the decline of a central government. When European settlers arrived in the region in the late 18th century, Native Americans had repopulated the area, but were not aware of who constructed the mounds or for what reason. In 1838, the site was purchased and settled by John Kincaid.

During the 1930s and 1940s, Kincaid was the site of excavation and research carried out by anthropologist Fay-Cooper Cole of the University of Chicago. Much of what is known today about the site and its people was discovered during Cole's investigation. Also during this time, Richard MacNeish, the archeologist credited with discovering the origins of maize, trained under Cole at the site. In more recent years, Kincaid Mounds has continued to be the subject of archeological investigation and research carried out by Southern Illinois University.



Credit: Mike Walker, Kincaid Mounds Support Organization

Kincaid Mounds was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1964 and was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1966. The Massac County portion of the site was purchased in 1975 by the State of Illinois. It is now a state historic site under the jurisdiction of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, while the site is managed under contract by the non-profit Kincaid Mounds Support Organization (KMSO). The Pope County portion of the site is privately owned.

The Kincaid Mounds Support Organization (KMSO) is a volunteer organization that provides maintenance, interpretation and events for the historic site. With no full-time staff dedicated to the Kincaid Mounds, KMSO has been challenged in monitoring the site following significant soil erosion in 2017; fundraising to complete the paving of the access road to increase accessibility; and replacing sun-faded interpretive panels. KMSO also believes the mounds would benefit from new technology for interpretation, including cell phones and augmented reality programs. Facing the ongoing threat of amateur archeologists disturbing the mounds, KMSO also has the goal of uniting the entirety of the mounds under public ownership to better protect this National Historic Landmark.

What you can do:

- To learn more and support the Kincaid Mounds Support Organization, visit: <http://www.kincaidmounds.com/contact.htm>

Additional Links:

- “Kincaid Mounds: A Prehistoric Cultural and Religious Center in Southern Illinois,” *Kincaid Mounds Support Organization*.
<http://www.kincaidmounds.com/history.htm>
- Experience History: Kincaid Mounds
<https://www2.illinois.gov/dnrhistoric/Experience/Sites/Southeast/Pages/Kincaid-Mounds.aspx>