



THE BELL AND PONTIAC'S MURDER

Much of Cahokia today consists of a 20th century vernacular landscape, one that belies its early French colonial urbanism based on a typical orthogonal grid. Cahokia sprawls across mostly flat land, with ranch houses, parking lots and retail buildings dodging occasional creeks, channels and green spaces. Camp Jackson Road remains the central commercial thoroughfare, with its roadscapes fully linear and fully in the mode of retail strip. Nothing in the built environment divulges that Cahokia in fact is Illinois' oldest town.

Among the big boxes, gas stations and strip malls of the road stands a small studio and art space called "The Bell." Presented by Bortolami Gallery and organized by Los Angeles-based artist Eric Wesley, The Bell is one of the American Bottom's oddest adaptive reuses. The Bell also conjures a morass of conflicting American modes of cultural identification. This Mission Revival structure, built in 1980, invokes traditions of Mexican food, Spanish colonialism and white American fast food culture – in the middle of a town founded by French colonists and named for a Mississippian settlement.

That the Taco Bell, a sturdy building rendered in concrete block made as brick and clay tile, opens into the confusion of European settlement of North America is clear. The symbolic mundane, however, is also apparent. Taco Bell is a ubiquitous signifier, and without a clever reuse such as an art gallery, almost signifies nothing in roadside America. Of course, the original Taco Bell in Downey, California, built on 1962 and the architectural prototype upon which the three-arch and belfry-carrying Cahokia building is based, became the subject of an intense historic preservation campaign last year. The image of the Taco Bell of 1962 was legible cultural heritage – so too may the 1980 building, as it embodies the chain's early expansion. (Ironically, the first restaurant closed around the time that the Cahokia branch opened.)

Somewhere to the east of The Bell, the great American warrior Chief Pontiac met his demise. There is no tension to note between the two sites, except for the anxiety that quietly obscure, taken-for-granted generic American landscapes may induce. Something is always silent that would shatter the calm. The geographic locus of Pontiac's demise is not specific, but its enunciation speaks to the racial strife that continues to define North American partitioning. Pontiac died in Cahokia because the French of the town, founded after the establishment of a mission in 1696, recognized First Americans as equals. Yet the circumstances of Pontiac's death invoke hostility between the British and native tribes that foreshadowed later American tribal expulsion. Cahokia stands as a site of rare continental consilience between First Americans and Europeans.

Pontiac had risen to chief of the Ottawa by 1755 and later chief of the Council of Three Tribes, consisting of the Ottawa, Potawatami and Ojibwa. Pontiac led a campaign to expel the British from tribal lands, while providing support to French settlement. In 1763, Pontiac led a successful series of battles against the British around Fort Detroit, but never captured the fort itself. As Pontiac retreated to the Illinois territory, the French ended up shifting political alliances to the British in 1764. Loss of French support and erosion of tribal solidarity would throw Pontiac into exilic inhabitation of the American Bottom.

In July 1766, Pontiac signed a peace treaty at Fort de Chartres that bred resentment among Ottawa that he had overused his authority. While Pontiac's relationships with tribespeople became fraught, and his power declined, his bonhomie with French colonists remained strong. Pontiac relocated to Cahokia, and engaged in organizing against British occupation of Illinois and the St. Louis area. French army Captain Louis St. Ange de Bellerive, whose own whereabouts and authority were challenged by the British conquest of Illinois in 1765 and the Spanish takeover of St. Louis in 1766, sympathized with his friend Pontiac.

St. Ange de Bellerive warned Pontiac of a potential assassination, but reportedly met the rebuke from Pontiac: "Captain, I am a man. I know how to fight." On April 20, 1769 a member of the Kaskaskia tribe murdered Pontiac after the chief had been drinking in a tavern. Pontiac's body was buried in St. Louis, near Fourth and Walnut streets downtown. Today, the sites of both Pontiac's murder and burial are unmarked, erased places. Cahokia itself is not even the same place as when Pontiac fell; the village declined toward the nineteenth century and many early buildings were lost. Flooding hastened decline, while railroads tamped any resurgence. In 1814, St. Clair County moved its seat to Belleville, leaving Cahokia as one of Illinois' many disempowered seats of territorial statecraft.

The Bell may be the prototype for the architectural symbols of the American Bottom: commonplace at first glance, seeming to belong to a generic American vernacular, signifiers that seem tautological in the presence of meaning. Yet The Bell is situated in a suburban landscape yet fully surveyed, whose cultural patterns and meanings are quiet perhaps only because they lack the robust historic inquiry that old Cahokia has received. The Bell also is a marker pointing elsewhere, because it is so generic. The visitor seeking meaning always already looks elsewhere when faced with such a building, so it points to relational geographic meaning that eventually may unlock its own presence. At the least, The Bell raises the consciousness needed to "find" Pontiac's death site. A landscape of demystified objects tells no real story of the American Bottom, because the American Bottom is inherently mystified and defined by the lack (not abundance) of such objects.