

SOME BACKGROUND TO ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN LAKE WORTH BEACH

Research Conducted

In 2020, the Historical Society of Lake Worth (HSLW) commissioned archeological research regarding the archaeological resources that reveal something of the “pre-history” of the area in the pre-Columbian era between 1000 BC and 1500 AD. The research presented in *The Archaeology of the City of Lake Worth Beach* was conducted by well-regarded local anthropologist, Dorothy Block, M.A. (Anthropology, emphasis Archaeology). A summary version is located on the Historical Society of Lake Worth website and Facebook page. The full paper is being submitted to a professional, peer review journal for future publication.

Block’s paper focuses on Pre-Columbian Mounds found in and around the City of Lake Worth. Block’s work adds a new site, Marion’s 1913 Mound (named for Marion Cone of HSLW), to Florida’s Master Site File of archaeological sites. It also locates The Lake Worth Mound on the Casino property and expands the known boundary of the Littlefield Site in College Park. In addition to the mounds, an isolated find, the Lake Osborne Canoe, is discussed. Two sites adjacent to Lake Worth on the barrier island are also explored: The Patrician Site and the Lake Worth Casino, Palm Beach. Her research ties up many “loose ends” regarding findings, locations, and current status of site materials, consolidating what is known, adding new information, and identify outstanding uncertainties. As a follow-up to the report, she has initiated updating of the state archaeological records as appropriate.

Anthropological context

To provide some context for the Block paper, the HSLW has prepared some general background material. This high-level overview is drawn from a range of secondary sources in the literature of Pre-Columbian archeology in Florida.

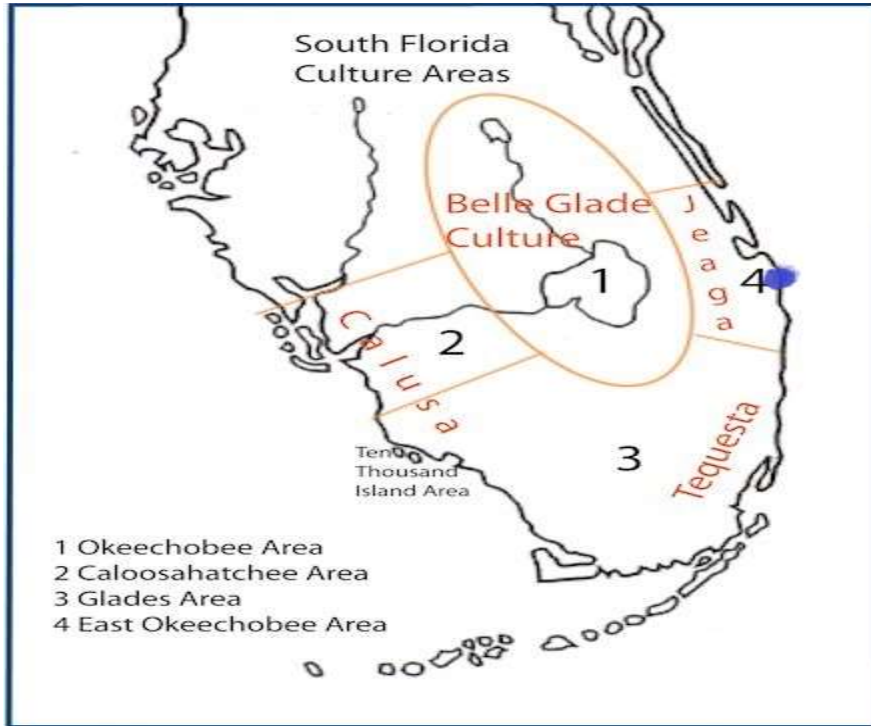
Our Pre-Columbian predecessors in Florida with a recognizable culture go back at last five millennia. There is some archeological evidence that people started coming to Southeast Florida at least 5000 years ago. Global climate stabilization resembling modern conditions was occurring by then, with the cypress swamps, hardwood forests and coastal ridges and barrier islands -- features familiar in the Lake Worth area today. Previously nomadic people began to adapt to varied environments around Florida, divided up into regional tribes and local subtribes.

South Florida was the last area of the state settled by indigenous tribes, estimated to occur around 1000 BC – two millennia before the “pioneers” of Lake Worth or the Seminole Indians. These original indigenous inhabitants – called the *Belle Glade Culture* by anthropologists -- had no writing, created no surviving structures, and left only modest signs of their occupation and culture and are distinguished largely by their characteristic tools, diet, and pottery.

When the Spanish arrived in south Florida in the late 1600s, they encountered these indigenous tribes in the Palm Beach county area –which they called the Jeaga and Tequesta (not to be mistaken with the Seminole Indians who arrived here from Alabama and Georgia in the 1700s). Their population has been estimated to be as high as 20,000. But by the 18th Century, the entire

indigenous population had been wiped out by disease, conflict, and slave trading and migration to Cuba. Exhibit 1 shows the location of the Belle Glade culture and the Jeaga people.

Exhibit 1 Pre-Columbian culture map of South Florida: Lake Worth Beach denoted with a blue dot



Source Block --*The Archaeology of the City of Lake Worth Beach*

The diaries and pictures created by 16th and 17th Century explorers left a few accounts of the inhabitants. Therefore, the archeological remains are a key source of knowledge regarding our pre-Columbian predecessors – our window into their world. However, coastal sea level rise, drainage projects and urban development in southeast Florida substantially wiped out the Jeaga habitat and with it most of the archeological remains of pre-Columbian inhabitants. As a result, less is known about Glades cultures than of those in other parts of Florida.

Archeological Evidence

Unlike their counterparts in other parts on the southeast, the tribes of the Glades Culture did not develop agriculture: rather, they were hunter-gatherers -- living off shellfish, fish, turtles, small animals. They apparently lived in small villages, located on high ground along the coastal ridge of Lake Worth at locations with easy access to both fresh and saltwater resources for food and transportation. They left no remains of structures behind. There are two principal records of their small settlements: “middens” and “burial mounds”.

“Middens” are basically areas that have been elevated by the accumulation of the refuse of generations of habitation including meal refuse and other garbage such as piles of discarded shells (especially oyster), broken tools (often made of shells), fragments of sand-tempered clay pottery, animal bones -- mixed in with the sand and soil of settlements. Middens can range in size from 15 feet to several acres.

“Mounds” are purposefully elevated constructions used for cemeteries and religious ceremonies. In some areas (not found in Lake Worth so far), other distinct ridge-like earthworks are also visible – possibly for fish impoundment or drainage purposes

Exhibit 2-A diorama of pre-Columbian life in Florida, Museum of Florida History, Tallahassee FL.



Source: Kenn Orphan Museum of Florida History, Tallahassee FL.

The contents of these mounds provide a record of what they ate, their ceramic pottery, wooden and shell tools, bodily ornaments, parts of weapons – as well as human remains – skulls and bone fragments. From these remains, archeologists and anthropologists can learn about they shaped and were shaped by their environment, including:

- Where and how they lived
- Ceremonial practices such as burial
- Their tools and technology
- Their diets, health and nutrition
- Cultural contact with other tribes in the region

Relative to other parts of the state, peninsular south Florida has not received much attention from academic archaeologists. However, Palm Beach County as a whole is the location of a number of major Pre-Columbian mound complexes, earthworks, mounds and middens – and even caves. Some of the more extensive sites have been documented and a few elements remain visible today.

Early residents of the City knew that they might be important. As commented in a *1913 Lake Worth Herald* article, neither the current occupants of Lake Worth –or their Seminole neighbors -- knew the origin of the mounds, but, as the article noted, they thought they deserved respect:

“The builders of these mounds have been generally designated as “Indians”, but further and exact identification seems to have never been made. As far as can be learned from the very taciturn and non-committal members of the Seminole tribe of Indians, a few of whom are still living in this part of the State, they nor their forefathers know nothing whatever about these mounds, either as to who built them or their significance.

Letting the questions rest as to who built these mounds or when they were built, or as to what their purposes, the fact is that, in laying off the new addition to Lake Worth, one of these mounds has been found right in the center of the street at the corner of old Street and second Avenue. Such things being great curiosities, it has been decided to leave the mound intact just as found, running the street around it and erecting a summer house on its top, thus adding another attraction to Lake Worth, and a very rare and unique one at that”

But there has been relatively little formal archeological investigation within the City of Lake Worth Beach. As described in the Block report, some mounds were noticed and commented on by residents (non-professionals) during the late 19th and early 20th during road and building construction. Bones fragments and artifacts uncovered were sent to professional archeologists at Smithsonian Institute in Washington (and later to the State Archeology Bureau) where they were analyzed and recorded. There was a spurt in Professional archeological investigation in 1930s when the depression era when the Works Progress Administration and the Smithsonian Institution sponsored excavations. But subsequent archeological investigation --primarily by state and local associations --has been spotty and focused on major sites.

In the meantime, the mounds themselves --both known and suspected -- have been disturbed or destroyed by Lake Worth’s rapid development since the early 1900s -- hauled away to be used for road fill or leveled to grade roadways or disturbed by treasure hunters. Nevertheless, there may still remain important opportunities to learn a little more.