Discovering History Through Archaeology

Traces of the past are buried beneath the ground of Phillippi Estate Park. Today we see a well-maintained park, a flowing river and an historic mansion and farmhouse. It is hard to imagine the thousands of years of previous habitation and activities on this property. For the period before the Spanish sighted Florida in 1513, an archaeological study is the main route for discovering the many different histories along Phillippi Creek.

**Excavations 1988, 1995 and 2016**

Archaeology opens an avenue to the activities of the ancient peoples who lived and used this land.

In 1988, Archaeological Consultants, Inc., identified three archaeological epochs on this property – the Archaic, the Manasota and the early 1900s. Thousands of years separate the epochs, but this landscape unites them all.

The 1995 excavations attempted to determine the size of the Manasota-period site.

In 2016, Uzi Baram of the New College Public Archaeology Lab and Steve Koski of Sarasota County Historical Resources, along with many volunteers, led excavations that expanded public interest and exposed more information on the Manasota period for the property.

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The 2016 excavations unearthed pieces of pottery, shells and shell tools. These are part of a coastal way of life that lasted for centuries. Research indicates the peoples of the Manasota period (2,500 – 1,300 years ago) found ways to use Phillippi Creek and this land as part of a network of camps, villages and cemeteries that extended along Sarasota Bay. For thousands of years people lived on Phillippi Creek, their lives making history.
Debates About Ancient History

Sarasota is rich in history; how far back the human past goes is debated by scholars. Two newspaper accounts tell of J.E. Moore claiming to have found a fossil human on Phillippi Creek in April 1926. The realtor and fossil hunter sent the skeleton to the American Museum of Natural History, but there are no records of the specimen. For most of the 20th century, anthropologists placed the start of the peopling of the Americas at 12,000 years ago, too recent for fossils. Current archaeological studies recognize that the ancestors of Native Americans lived in Florida approximately 2,500 years earlier, or about 14,500 years ago. What Moore found was likely the result of rapid mineralization, which can occur over a few centuries, rather than thousands of years; other such skeletons are mentioned by those exploring the shoreline in the early 20th century. Old Sarasota newspaper accounts show the interest in the deep past along Phillippi Creek.

Life During the Archaic

The earliest period for people in North America, including Florida, is known as the Paleoindian period, ending sometime between 10,000 and 9,500 years ago. After that era, archaeologists label the thousands of years of changing hunter-gatherer cultures as the Archaic period. It ends about 2,500 years ago and is divided into Early, Middle, and Late, based on recognized changes in the archaeological record. During that era, human populations expanded in size and the archaeological evidence shows that the variety of tools increased, as projectile points and other stone tools changed with the changing cultures and environment. Eight-thousand years ago, human foraging bands were scattered over the landscape. They would come together at favored locations for marriages, trade of information and goods, and rituals and ceremonies. Returning to a place over many years might have been the start of settling down for these ancient peoples. But their way of life encouraged mobility with hunting, which focused on smaller mammals like white-tailed deer, and gathering, which included a wide range of plants.

Changing Shorelines

The earliest human histories for this region take into account Florida as a much larger landmass than today. Vast ice sheets covered the northern latitudes so the sea levels were much lower than the present. Over the Archaic period, sea levels steadily rose. During the Late Archaic, 4,000 years ago, the development of barrier islands, bays, and estuaries facilitated coastal living. The inhabitants of the region during the Archaic period, including those who left the flakes recovered by excavations at Phillippi Estate Park, confronted rising sea levels. Those Archaic period peoples offer lessons for resilience and cultural accommodation to such changes in the landscape. About 2,000 years ago, the shoreline stabilized roughly to our present-day position.

Evidence of the Archaic: Lithic Flakes

Archaeologists call the tools made of stone "lithics." For coastal Sarasota, shells often were used as the raw materials to make tools. Flakey stones for lithic tools were imported or brought to the region by the mobile peoples of the Archaic period.

Stratigraphy

How do archaeologists know the flakes are earlier than the Manasota midden? Stone flakes cannot be dated but the contexts of those flakes are consistently under the midden, showing that they came first and the layer of soil between the two strata indicates time passed between the eras on this property. The 1988 excavations at Phillippi Estate Park identified the lithic scatter as probably dating between 7,000 and 4,000 years ago.

The Regional Archaic

Archaeological evidence for the Archaic period at Phillippi Estate Park consists of a scatter of lithic flakes. Elsewhere in Sarasota County, much larger Archaic period sites have been documented by archaeologists. In North Port, Warm Mineral Springs and Little Salt Spring are Late Paleoindian through Middle Archaic-period sites with human remains. In Osprey, Historic Spanish Point preserves a shell ring from the Archaic period. The Hill Cottage Midden is an example of grand architecture built gradually, through many centuries, by Archaic period peoples.
Manasota Period at Phillippi Creek

**Lifestyles:** From archaeological excavations, the evidence points to the Manasota people being able to adapt to the coastal environment. The major sites are located on the shores of Sarasota Bay with interior locations being short-term camping sites. The Manasota people used the rich resources of the waters for fishing, gathering shellfish and canoe travel. The majority of the archaeological evidence for the time period is shells, material that lasts through centuries.

**Artifacts:** The shellfish of coastal waters provided the Manasota people with food and also with the raw material for tools. In a region with few natural outcroppings of stone, an alternative material is shell. Shells were modified to be scrapers, hammers, adzes and net sinkers. Some materials used by the ancient peoples, such as wood, skins and plant fibers did not preserve. Other materials, like ceramics, did preserve although usually only in fragments that archaeologists piece together to reveal the original bowls and pots.

**The Shell Midden:** Phillippi Estate Park has raised ground that holds the material remains of ancient peoples. A Manasota-period (2,500-1,300 years ago) midden contains shells, pottery, charcoal, animal bones, stone tool fragments, and much more from the daily life of Native peoples. Many shell middens contain remnants from fire pits, architecture (seen as post molds by archaeologists), house floors, and even burials. Some shell middens are architectural, including being used as elevated ground where Native peoples could enjoy breezes, see farther into the distance, and escape some insects and even floods. Archaeologists use the location of shell middens to figure out the patterns of where and how ancient people lived in the region. The consistent placement of Manasota-period middens near the shores of the river and bay indicate the close connection between the people of those centuries and the maritime ecology. Shell middens are important sources of information on past ways of life.

**Definition of an Archaeological Culture**
Archaeologists define prehistoric cultures based on geographical regions where sites are located. These sites contain artifacts and other remnants that vary within and between regions and through time. For a period from 2,500 to 1,300 years ago, the distinctive way of life represented in the archaeological record found from Tampa Bay to Charlotte Harbor is defined as the Manasota culture, combining the names of the two local counties: Manatee and Sarasota.
Starting in the 1770s, fisher folk would sail from Havana, Cuba to the Florida Gulf Coast and set up temporary camps, known as ranchos. In the early 1800s, some ranchos became year-round settlements. The Cuban fishing industry, connecting Cuba and Gulf Coast Florida, lasted into the 1840s, declining with the Second Seminole War (1835-1842).

1849 John Casey and Billy Bowlegs at Felipe Bermudez’s rancho on Sarasota Bay

In the mid-1800s, Sarasota was a frontier. Only a few places were cleared. On Sarasota Bay was the rancho of Felipe Bermudez, a place known to the United States military and to the Seminoles. In 1849, seven years after the United States declared the end of the Second Seminole War, the trust between U.S. Captain John Casey and Seminole leader Billy Bowlegs averted military clashes for a short while. The two men were able to negotiate in a troubled time and to reach agreement.

The history is centered by the relationship between the Indian Emigration Agent Captain John Casey (for whom Casey Key is named) and Holata Micco, otherwise known as Billy Bowlegs. In July 1849, five Seminole men murdered an Anglo-American and then attacked a trading post. War between the U.S. and the Seminoles seemed inevitable.

Holata Micco, seeking a diplomatic solution, sent messengers to leave a peace token at the rancho residence of Felipe Bermudez. The letters from Captain Casey to Fort Brooke described an invitation to resolve the matter—a flag made of white heron feathers and three dashes followed by a circle then three more dashes drawn on Felipe’s cabin. Three days after the full moon, Casey agreed to allow Holata Micco to punish the murderers, who the Seminoles considered outlaws. Three were brought to the U.S. military in Tampa along with evidence that the fourth was dead.

As Casey wrote to General D.E. Twiggs at Fort Brooke, “The affair is now completed to our satisfaction. The Indians had redeemed their promises, and I believe, for the first time in their history, yielded one of their number by a solemn act of the nation, to the justice of whites. Having expressed my high sense of the worthy manner in which they acted, I proceed to submit to them the question of emigration, and to urge it by every argument at my command.” The Seminoles were in an untenable colonial situation; their leadership could not stop the goals of the U.S. government; however, they acted honorably.

The Fishing Industry

The fish from the bay and gulf waters, dried or salted for Havana, allowed the ranchos to prosper. The ranchos included Native Americans, Seminoles and Spanish Indians (who were baptized Catholic in Cuba), and maroons (known in Florida as Black Seminoles), who were integrated into the rancho life.
Creating Phillipi Estate

Sarasota is ever-changing, with the current day transforming the landscape. In 1883, the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey documented the depths for Sarasota Bay and Phillipi Creek. That year W.J. Drumwright, a farmer and beekeeper, acquired forty acres on the south side of the creek. George H. Matheny and his son purchased the property in 1910, dredged the waters and developed a subdivision called Phillipi Park. Mabel Linn, a Chicago socialite, purchased parcels but sold them to Edson Keith in 1915. The first building erected on the site in 1916 was a clapboard farmhouse; then Nettie and Edson Keith built their mansion. The farmhouse and their Italian Renaissance home still stand today.

The Keith family created a self-sustaining estate. The grounds included wide lawns, ornamental plantings and a formal rose garden as well as vegetable gardens, a citrus grove and fields for hay and fodder; they kept chickens, cows and a mule on the property. Beyond their Italian Renaissance mansion, the farmhouse, laundry and dock marked the landscape visible from the newly created Tampa to Miami road, called Tamiami Trail, which opened in 1928, fueling the boom in South Florida tourism.

Edson Keith died in 1939; Nettie sold the estate in 1942 to Mae Hansen and her husband Charlie Prodie. While Mae went to the Far East to set up factories to produce wardrobes for Barbie dolls, Charlie ran the elite Phillipi Plantation Inn and Restaurant. The restaurant served meals in the living and dining rooms of the mansion, while upstairs bedrooms as well as rooms in the farmhouse became overnight accommodations. Later, Mae Prodie rented the Keith Farmhouse to artists who held Sunday afternoon art shows on the lawn.

After Mae Prodie died, Sarasota County purchased the property to be a 60-acre natural areas park, one with a rich heritage. As Sarasota matures, so does the interest in its past. The history for this region includes thousands of years of human activities, from the earliest native inhabitants to the ones who created contemporary Sarasota. From the fragments of pottery, shell tools, bottles, and architecture, whether midden or mansion, the archaeology of this landscape tells the tale of those lives that make up this region's heritage.