

Letter to the Editor

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Saving Florida's Past is Worth the Trouble

This week, Tampa Bay Times reporter, Ben Montgomery, and columnist, Daniel Ruth, dissed their readership by diminishing the importance of Florida archaeology and by continuing the idea that artifacts of prehistory (and those from historical times for that matter) are worth something in dollars and cents. They are worth much more than that. These remains have value intrinsic to the knowledge they can provide about the past. Montgomery and Ruth understate this importance when they minimize the fact that these objects were made and used by people who were entirely culturally different from us today.

However, similar to the great and mysterious state within which we live, Florida in the past was just as distinct and unique as it is today. Artifacts and archaeology sites, when properly preserved and purposefully excavated, offer clues to help tell these stories. Stories that, for instance, revolve around monumental architecture and land modification, burial practices and trade patterns, daily lives, and the civic and domestic routines of people whose ancestors arrived some 14,500 years ago. Archaeology and the basic artifact can only deliver these stories to us in pieces. It's up to us to fill in the blanks. Each piece adds value to these stories.

Some of these stories can be found near Lake Okeechobee or on Hontoon Island, on Tyndell Air Force Base or at Pinellas Point where early Floridians built huge mounds and earthworks from sand and things that we call artifacts but to them were used up and discarded food and tool remains. Together these bits and pieces of oyster, clam and whelk shell, animal and fish bones, ceramic pots and flakes of chert or agatized coral comprised the building materials of the day. If you believe Montgomery and Ruth's portrayal you might think that these people were just chunking rocks into rivers and moving along, or worse, you might not think of these people at all.

Some of these stories can also be found around Charlotte Harbor or along the Crystal River, on hilltops near Tallahassee or in a wetland near Titusville where people with basic community needs shared in religious and ceremonial activities and rituals. At these places, archaeology and artifacts tell us of trade networks that stretched as far away as present-day Michigan. These sites can also tell us about a person's last meal, as some of their bodies and stomach contents remained preserved in muck and mud for some 5,000 years. Archaeologists carefully recover these remains because they are finite, and they are the only evidence we have of these past ways of life. They cannot be replaced and they cannot be remade.

When we have the choice we choose to preserve these things in place but if that's not possible it is then and only then that they are carefully recovered. Instead of selling our history short by relegating it to the corner of a collector's living room we should celebrate and honor it in the best way we can by preserving it where it is or at the very least preserving the knowledge hidden within it. The men and their "plight" profiled by Montgomery and Ruth in recent articles are not just stealing rocks from state lands. What they have done is to steal knowledge from past, present, and future residents of this great and wacky state. This activity is more than worthy of punishment.

Jeff Moates & Becky O'Sullivan
Florida Public Archaeology Network