

AnthroBytes

Anthropology Research Highlights

#6 Archaeology of Monumental Landscapes in the St. Johns Basin, Florida



Eroded shell mound at Hontoon Island as seen by C. B. Moore



Field school students testing shell deposits at Blue Springs State Park

The St. Johns River valley of northeast Florida contains a multitude of shell and earthen mounds, some measuring hundreds of meters long and up to 10 meters high. Scores of these mounds were documented by Jeffries Wyman in the late 19th century and a bit later by antiquarian C. B. Moore. But many more fell victim to shell mining in the early 20th century, long before the advent of scientific archaeology. Little is actually known about the age, content, and use of these fascinating features. Archaeologists have long speculated that mounds were ceremonial, particularly those that contained human interments. Others apparently formed as a result of accumulated food remains, notably the shells of freshwater snails, while still others may have been constructed as platforms for houses.

Since 2000 Dr. Kenneth Sassaman and graduate students at the University of Florida have been investigating shell mounds and associated sites in the middle St. Johns region. Most of the work has centered on Hontoon Island and Blue Spring State Parks, where an annual UF field school enables undergraduate students to learn the technical aspects of field work in the context of ongoing research. Results of this work will be featured in the dissertation of UF graduate student Asa Randall. Another Ph.D. candidate, Jon Endonino, is mapping and testing the Thornhill Lake site complex to the south, which has a mortuary mound with trade items from north Georgia.

Research findings to date from the middle St. Johns projects:

- Many shell mounds are much older than previously thought. Because they were used repeatedly throughout prehistory, mounds often contain late-period pottery in upper layers, but the lower layers date to as much as 6000 years ago, 2000 years before pottery was used.
- Shell mounds often conform to geometric patterns, suggesting planned construction or at least the routinized use of space. Crescent-shaped mounds are common.
- Mounds often contain evidence of habitation and refuse disposal at their base, but were then capped repeatedly with layers of shell, sometimes crushed and burned. The dead were sometimes interred in mounds only in the final stages of capping.