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Archeology of the Tampa Bay Area

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Archeology of the Tampa Bay Area

While we speak of archeology as pre-history, it is as much a part of the history of any region as that which is recorded contemporaneously in writing, even though it does not relate to our own ancestors. So two of the papers read at our annual meeting were on Florida archeology. Ripley P. Bullen, Assistant Florida State Archeologist recounted the highlights of what has been learned of the central west coast.

He said in part:

The pre-history of the Tampa Bay region is the story of an indigenous population whose industrial products and ways of life were gradually modified by cultural influences from the north. From the earliest times until their abandonment of the region around 1700, life of the inhabitants of the area was closely tied to Tampa Bay and its nearby waters. From these waters came most of their sustenance as evidenced by tremendous shell middens, more recently turned into roads. Even during relatively late times, when agriculture was extensively practiced, a considerable portion of their intake was still seafood. . . .

We know relatively little about life in the Tampa Bay region during early times. The economy was one of food collecting as opposed to food producing. Remains indicate shellfish to have been the chief food, abundantly supplemented with meat from turtles, deer, fishes, and alligators. Other game was no doubt taken, and nuts and roots eaten.

We have little knowledge of the means used to procure these foods. Projectile points were stemmed, fairly large, and, presumably, propelled by means of atlatls or spear throwers. Stone knives, of course, were in common use. Hafted ***Strombus*** shell hammers and chisels or gouges made from columellae of conches were prominent tools. Fragments of bone pins are also found. Whether these were hair ornaments or awls for more utilitarian purposes is not known. Perforated ***Pecten*** shells, while possibly weights for fishing nets, would seem more likely to have been

ornaments for personal adornment. In either case they imply the presence of cordage or hence the probability of nets and snares.

The above list has been limited to artifacts known to have been present during the early or Perico Island period (*circa* 200 B.C.-650 A.D.). Other tools, found in the Tampa Bay region but believed to be later in date, include shell celts, shell pendants or plummet-shaped objects, **Venus** shell anvils, perforated **Venus** shells as weights for fish nets, **Olivella** beads, **Busycon** hammers and **Busycon** dippers. . . .

We can envision people living on their shell middens, probably with some form of shelter, busily engaged in their everyday occupations, including frequent trips of greater or lesser distances to procure food and firewood. It is very doubtful if any agriculture was practiced early. . . . There was extensive inter-regional communication. A fair percentage of Weeden Island period (*circa* 650-1400 A.D.) pottery of the Tampa Bay region is made of chalky paste characteristic of east Florida. Plain vessels typical of the Belle Glade area are also present. An important trait is the importation of greenstone celts from the north. Such material is not found in Florida. Some projectile points are smaller, suggesting the bow and arrow to have been another introduction from the north. . . .

Burial mounds were common features of the landscape. In places where the land was wet, causeways were built to connect these mounds with the shell midden village areas as at Terra Ceia and Shaws Point. Pottery vessels, either whole or fragmentary, were deposited with or for the dead. . . .

All these things testify to an energetic, increasing population in Weeden Island times. The numerous new features in the culture and its artistic peak suggest cultural cross-fertilization. It would seem likely that to some extent these changes were in part brought about by people, probably relatively small in number, who migrated into the Tampa Bay region.

While the artistic peak of aboriginal life in the Tampa Bay region may have been during the Weeden Island period, the cultural climax in terms of large sites and density of population occurred during the succeeding Safety Harbor period (*circa* 1400-1700). This was a full-fledged agricultural period whose people were encountered by the early Spaniards.

Several important changes in Indian life coincided with the Safety Harbor period. The first is the successful practice of agriculture, supplemented by animal and sea food, which gave the Indians a stable life with an excess of storable food and more spare time. Another was the construction of large, flat-topped "temple" mounds about which centered the ceremonial life of the community.

That this was a satisfactory or at least a successful way of life is indicated by the number of sites of this period bordering the coast of the Tampa Bay region. . . . These people undoubtedly suffered from the four epidemics which visited the Indians of Florida between 1613 and 1726. The remainder probably withdrew southward. By 1750 Indians from the north, later to be known as Seminoles, occupied most of North Florida and were near if not in the Tampa Bay region.

Throughout all known periods the Tampa Bay region has been subjected to repeated and increasingly more powerful influences from the north. Even to-day, history repeats itself.