

“Early Footprints in the Sand: Pre-Columbian Settlements along the Pinellas Peninsula and the Legacies of First Contact”

Remarks Delivered during a Lecture at the Nelson Poynter Memorial Library

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Mr. Jim Schnur

Special Collections Librarian, University of South Florida St. Petersburg

OPENING SLIDE Thank you for joining us this afternoon. Throughout the year, the State of Florida will commemorate the quincentenary of Juan Ponce de Leon’s arrival in La Florida, an early chapter of contact between Europeans and the indigenous people of North America. **VIVA500** Today’s program has two parts. I will provide an overview of important moments and chapters of our human history that span millennia. Few written records exist, and those that do came after the contact. Much of the evidence we must consider exists in the form of pottery pieces and stone and shell tools from more than 500 years ago. **EXHIBIT** To guide us in an understanding of these sources, Ms. Elizabeth Southard, a December 2012 graduate of USFSP’s undergraduate program in Anthropology, will in talk about a collection she is processing in the Nelson Poynter Memorial Library that holds keys to our past. Liz has participated in field works both locally, at places such as Weedon Island, and in class trips to sites in places such as Africa. History and anthropology share many guiding principles, and I am proud to mention that Ms. Southard was recently recognized for her historical research as a recipient of the Tampa Bay History Center’s Leland Hawes Prize, a juried competition for papers focusing on Florida history.

Before learning about the Butch Evans Collection, let’s take a trip back in time and examine changes in the landscape along the Florida peninsula. Prior to 6000 B.C.E., the **earliest human settlers in Florida** roamed between food and water sources, hunted big game, and foraged for small game and plants during a period that archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians refer to as the **Paleoindian Culture**.

MAP At the end of the last Ice Age, the Gulf Coast was more than forty miles to the west of where it is today. Tampa Bay did not exist. The area possessed a drier climate, with sea levels as much as 100 feet lower along the continental shelf. In addition to deer, opossums, raccoons, and turtles, early Paleoindians would have encountered mammoths and **mastodons**. Many of the original coastal settlements occupied by Paleoindians along the Gulf of Mexico are presently submerged below 60 to 120 feet of water. As sea levels began to rise, Tampa Bay took shape and the Pinellas peninsula became a distinct geological feature.¹

During the **Early Archaic Period**, between approximately 6000 B.C.E. and 5000 B.C.E., settled communities began to appear, with people adapting to the fisher-hunter lifestyle and incorporating a wider array of plant and animal foods. They employed a larger number of **stone tools (lithics)**, including **bifacial knives and scrapers**, though most remained simple in composition. Coastal communities along

¹ James Anthony Schnur, Pinellas County Master Lecture Notes. In possession of the author.

the Gulf of Mexico moved eastward as the sea levels rose and the Florida peninsula shrank. Oaks and hardwood forests covered much of the peninsula. Some larger species, such as the mastodon, disappeared from the landscape. Alligators, land and amphibious turtles, deer, opossums, squirrels, frogs, fish, panthers, and bobcats proliferated.²

During the ***Middle Archaic Period***, between approximately 5000 B.C.E. and 2000 B.C.E., the population became more sedentary and used a greater variety of tools **SHELL TOOLS**. Sea levels stabilized at or near the current shoreline. Tampa Bay, Boca Ciega Bay, and other estuaries took shape. Animal populations resembled those of the Early Archaic period. Aboriginal settlements included **Mound Park 3 IMAGES** and **Bayboro** sites along **Booker Creek 3 IMAGES**, and **Salt Creek** south of downtown St. Petersburg, near USF St. Petersburg.³

The ***Late Archaic Period***, between approximately 2000 B.C.E. and 1200 B.C.E., marked a time when indigenous populations began to make fiber-tempered pottery. Small villages took shape at or near shell mounds. The environment became increasingly moist. Pines outnumbered oaks as forests included a wider variety of species. **TURTLECRAWL POINT** Food sources were similar to the Middle Archaic Period, with coastal settlements becoming more reliant upon aquaculture as a source of food.⁴

EXHIBIT Between 1200 B.C.E. and 500 B.C.E., the ***Early Woodland*** or ***Florida Transitional Period*** was a time when settled communities with more complex political systems and religious practices started to develop. New styles of pottery replaced fiber-tempered works. Sand and limestone pieces, along with soapstone pottery and ornamental decorations, became more common. Environmental changes continued from the Late Archaic period, as moist and humid conditions regularly blanketed the peninsula. Established sites along the Pinellas peninsula, such as Mound Park and Pinellas Point, continued to support settlement.⁵

Settlements engaged in trade activities with other peoples who lived in what is now the present-day southeastern and mid-western United States during the ***Middle Woodland*** or ***Manasota Period*** that ran from about 500 B.C.E. to 700 C.E. (or A.D.). Burial ceremonies became more common and elaborate during this period. Indigenous populations created a wide variety of pottery, some tending to be thicker and more ornamental in style. **DRAWING** Firing methods for pottery improved. While Middle Woodland populations in other parts of America generally focused on interior settlements, Manasota populations settled along saltwater marshes, freshwater lakes, and coastal hammocks. Bears, bobcats, Florida panthers, and a wider variety of species lived in west central Florida. **Yat Kitischee 2 IMAGES** (central Pinellas County, along Old Tampa Bay) and the ***Safford Mound*** (Tarpon Springs, Pinellas County) are representative sites from this time period.⁶

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

Trade networks with other cultures multiplied during the **Late Woodland or Weedon Island Period** **6 IMAGES** through the end of the first millennium. Burial mounds appeared in greater numbers, with mortuary pottery entombed within the shell and earthen middens. Settlers created painted pottery, effigy pots, as well as decorated pots with sophisticated designs; incised and punctated pottery became more common. **EXHIBIT** Larger shell mounds, sometimes thirty feet in width, rose near areas with long-established settlements. Permanent settlements developed in some areas. Crop harvesting during seasonal cycles became more commonplace. Turkey, deer, and an abundance of seafood sustained the populations and allowed for population increase as humanity's footprint on the peninsula grew. Mosquitoes and other pests brought discomfort during the warm and humid summers. Weedon Island (Pinellas County) and the Bayshore Homes site (western St. Petersburg, Pinellas County) were areas of settlement that were popular at this time.⁷

Settlements from the **Mississippian or Safety Harbor Period** **SAFETY HARBOR SIGN** of the period from approximately 1000 through 1500 exhibited an increasingly complex social order with chiefs, temple mounds, and a greater emphasis on ceremonial activities. Pottery traditions from the Weedon Island culture continued, **2 POTTERY IMAGES** although some pieces lacked the decorations and may have been more hastily made. Corns, beans, and squash arrived in the Florida Panhandle, where they became an important food source. Agricultural practices improved as settlers followed seasonal growing cycles when cultivating crops. A wide array of land animals and seafood sustained coastal and estuarine settlements. A variety of locations took shape throughout the region, **PHILIPPE PARK 3 IMAGES** including **Safety Harbor** and **Tierra Verde** **2 SIGNS**.⁸

EXHIBIT **Tocobagas** settled along a broad area of Florida's west coast between Charlotte Harbor and Crystal River, including the Pinellas peninsula. Known for small shell mounds close to the shore, they occupied small settlements and maintain separate areas for temples/communal sites and burial grounds. Tocobagas trade with other tribes of the Mississippian Culture in the immediate area, including the Calusa of southwest Florida, the Tequesta of southeast Florida, and the Ais of the east coast, to name a few. Although many of the original mounds have faced desecration or obliteration since the early 1900s, a few do exist in the areas of Safety Harbor, Jungle Prada, Bay Pines, and near Pinellas Point **MAXIMO**.⁹

Christopher Columbus's voyage to the New World in 1492 reconnected peoples and cultures separated by space and time. Yes, we must remember the **Viking voyages** to sites in North America that they referred to as Vinland, but those expeditions from around 1000 C.E. (or A.D.) did not leave the same legacy of impact. By 1510, Spaniards may have made early visits to the Florida Keys and lower end of the peninsula in search of Indian slaves. Some records indicate that Spanish ships had sailed along Florida by 1510. Records of any such early expeditions are lost. **FLA MAP** By late 1512, the King of Spain conferred upon Juan Ponce de León a commission to colonize the "Island of Bimini," lands thought to be part of

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Rick Baker, *Mangroves to Major League: A Timeline of St. Petersburg, Florida (Prehistory to 2000 A.D.)* (St. Petersburg: Southern Heritage Press, 2000), 3-4.

peninsular Florida. In March 1513, he and his crew embarked upon three ships on a mission to locate “Bimini.”¹⁰

In April 1513, aided by the Gulf Stream, **Juan Ponce de León** sailed along the Straits of Florida and arrived somewhere along the northeast or east-central coast of Florida. Although de León never set foot upon the Pinellas peninsula, he did become the first documented conquistador to visit Florida. After the initial contact between Europeans and Indians, the **depopulation of the indigenous settlements** accelerated at a rapid pace, largely due to **smallpox** and other diseases for which the Pre-Columbian cultures had no tolerance. Although battles with and enslavement by the “cross and sword” of the Spaniards and other European colonizers certainly killed many Indians, an untold number died from outbreaks of smallpox and similar illnesses. It is highly likely that depopulation of the local tribes, such as the Tocobaga, began long before first contact with the conquistadors along the Pinellas peninsula due to trade practices and meetings between Indians long before the first Europeans encountered Tampa Bay.¹¹

A 1519 map drawn by **Alonso Álvarez de Pineda** is **the earliest known map** of European origin showing the mouth of Tampa Bay and the Pinellas peninsula. The Spanish governor of Jamaica had dispatched him on a mission to explore the Gulf coast of Florida to determine whether this land was a series of islands or a larger continental body. At that time, they were not entirely sure if the yet unnamed Gulf of Mexico directly connected with the Pacific Ocean. His journey along the Gulf passed by the Pinellas peninsula and continued along the Panhandle, beyond the mouth of the Mississippi River (a body of water he named River of the Holy Spirit, or *Rio del Espiritu Santo*), and later along the present coastlines of Texas and Mexico. He sought a water passage from the Gulf of Mexico into Asia.¹²

Although Juan Ponce de León returned to Florida in February 1521 with hopes of establishing a colony somewhere south of the mouth of Tampa Bay, perhaps near Charlotte Harbor, he a mortal wound during skirmishes with the Calusa, and later died in Havana. His death brought an end to this plan settlement. Spanish King Carlos I (also known as Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor) granted longtime conquistador **Pánfilo de Narváez** permission to take possession of *La Florida*. He sailed from Andalusia in southern Spain with five ships and over 400 men in June 1527. During his journey, the ships stopped at islands in the Caribbean and encountered some storms. Some of the crew deserted before the final trip to Florida in early 1528.¹³

The **Pánfilo de Narváez** expedition arrives along the west coast of Florida in mid-April 1528 with at least 350 (and perhaps more than 500) men. By most accounts, they reached a site they called *Rio de las Palmas* (River of the Palms) at or near **Jungle Prada 2 IMAGES** in present-day St. Petersburg. Hearing

¹⁰ Paul Eugen Camp, *Conquistadors in the Land of Flowers: A Chronology of Spanish Florida 1513 to 1821* (Tampa: Special Collections Department, University of South Florida Tampa Library, 2001), 1.

¹¹ Camp, *Conquistadors*, 1; Schnur Lecture Notes.

¹² Camp, *Conquistadors*, 2; Schnur Lecture Notes.

¹³ Camp, *Conquistadors*, 2-3.

about rumors of gold northward in the interior of *La Florida* at a place known as *Ocali*, Narváez remembered the success of the Hernán Cortés expedition into the Aztec Empire in February 1519 that led to the discovery of gold and the downfall of Montezuma. Narváez had originally been dispatched in early 1520 on an unsuccessful mission to capture Cortés. Most of Narváez's men joined Cortés. Narváez sought to locate similar wealth in Spanish Florida. Among those on the journey were **Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca** (the expedition's treasurer) and **Estebanico** (or Estevanico, *the first known person of African descent who set foot in Pinellas County and the present-day United States*) During his interactions with the local Ucita tribe and other Tocobaga cultures along Pinellas and Manatee counties, Narváez showed deception and brutality.¹⁴

By early May, Narváez, Cabeza de Vaca, Estebanico, and approximately 300 men wandered into the Florida interior in search of gold. Narváez ordered his ships to meet with him at an undetermined point along the coastline, perhaps the Pánuco River (a river he was familiar with that flows from Mexico City to the Gulf of Mexico). The Narváez expedition survived the intense summer and reached a point at or near St. Marks along the Panhandle. Some have speculated that they may have traveled further along the Gulf Coast towards present-day Alabama. After failing to locate gold, they decided to transform their metal armor into weapons and nails. They planned to construct boats and sail to Mexico, but failed to reach their destination. Somewhere along the upper Gulf Coast, tragedy struck as most members of the expedition perished in storms and battles with Indians. Only Cabeza de Vaca, Estebanico, and two others survived; they traveled amongst the Indians, sometimes became slaves of the Indians, and finally reached an outpost on the remote northern boundary of New Spain (Mexico) in 1536.¹⁵

EXHIBIT Later in 1528, a search party returned to the mouth of Tampa Bay in an attempt to locate members of the Narváez expedition. According to existing reports, Chief Hirrihigua of the Ucita tribe captured and killed many members of this expedition, perhaps in retaliation for the brutality they encountered from Narváez. One person from this expedition, **Juan Ortiz**, was to be executed by decapitation or being cooked on a wooden rack; however, Hirrihigua's wife and daughter urged the chief to allow Ortiz to live. Ortiz became fluent in the local languages and lived with the Ucita, possibly as a slave. His survival at the insistence of the chief's daughter also became the basis for the first Pocahontas legend (of Captain John Smith's life supposedly being saved by Pocahontas in 1607, nearly eighty years later).¹⁶

Other expeditions came to the west coast of Florida, most notably the **Hernando de Soto** expedition that arrived at or near the mouth of Tampa Bay with approximately 600 men and approximately 200 horses in May 1539. Shortly after arriving, de Soto encountered **Juan Ortiz**, liberated him nearly eleven years after Ortiz's capture, and used him as a translator. Ortiz's familiarity with the geography in the immediate Tampa Bay region proved useful, though his value diminished as they moved northward along the peninsula in yet another failed expedition. In June 1549, **Luis Cancer de Barbastro**, a member

¹⁴ Camp, *Conquistadors*, 3; Schnur Lecture Notes.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

of the Dominican order who had some success in pacification of Indians while in Mexico, decided to bring a group of missionaries eastward across the Gulf of Mexico. They hoped to land at a site where previous interactions with violent conquistadors had not occurred, with the hope of spreading the faith to those they encountered. Unfortunately, Barbastro and his entourage arrived near the southern tip of the Pinellas peninsula. Local members of the Tocobaga tribe used clubs to pummel them to death.¹⁷

1562 MAP Thus, by the mid-1500s, Spanish incursions into Florida had failed to produce the riches and gold found by conquistadors in the former Aztec and Inca empires of Central and South America. What had happened, however, was that these expeditions accelerated the decline in the indigenous population in Florida and elsewhere. This trend continued as the *Tristán de Luna* expedition came from New Spain (Mexico) to Pensacola Harbor to establish the first permanent European settlement known to exist within the present-day boundaries of Florida in 1559, long after an expedition of **French Huguenots** (Protestants) led by *Jean Ribault* approached the mouth of the St. Johns River near present-day Jacksonville and established Fort Caroline about forty years after the Protestant Reformation began to rattle Europe, and long after Catholic King Phillip II of Spain commissioned noted naval officer **Pedro Menéndez de Avilés** as governor (*adelantado*) of Florida and ordered him to remove or kill the Huguenots and occupy a site along the peninsula to protect Spanish shipping interests and establish Saint Augustine in 1565.¹⁸

Menéndez even visited the Indian settlement at *Tocobaga* along Old Tampa Bay in mid-1567 at present-day Safety Harbor. He stationed a garrison of thirty men that served under orders of a captain at this site, an encampment destroyed by the Indians by 1568. Although the indigenous population may have prevailed in this skirmish, little remained of the once vibrant cultures that called this area their home. The few existing written records, such as Cabeza de Vaca's diaries, offer glimpses but are far from objective. What we have are pottery fragments and other small pieces of the past, but, as I would like to add for a moment before turning the presentation over to Liz, even that record has been corrupted.¹⁹

Take Weedon Island for example. Dr. Leslie Weedon of Tampa acquired this tract of land. **WEEDON FAMILY** He protected the mounds on the undeveloped site with a plan to preserve their integrity. Weedon later met Eugene M. Elliott, an entrepreneur who came to St. Petersburg with big dreams. During the Florida Land Boom of the early 1920s, Elliott oversaw the financial operations of George S. Gandy's enterprises **GANDY DREDGE** when construction began on the **Gandy Bridge**, the first span across Tampa Bay. A year before the bridge opened to traffic in November 1924, Elliott had acquired large tracts from Weedon and established a land development company.

Hoping to capitalize on the location near St. Petersburg's gateway, Elliot placed some bones, trinkets, and potsherds of foreign provenance near the existing mounds. He then contacted the Smithsonian

¹⁷ Camp, *Conquistadors*, 3-4; Schnur Lecture Notes.

¹⁸ Camp, *Conquistadors*, 4-5; Schnur Lecture Notes.

¹⁹ Camp, *Conquistadors*, 7; Eugene Lyon, "Pedro Menéndez 's Strategic Plan for the Florida Peninsula," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 67 (1) (July 1988): 1-14.

Institution, expecting that the discovery of these fake relics by scientific authorities would encourage newcomers to buy land and build homes alongside the mounds.

J. Walter Fewkes, the Smithsonian's bureau chief for American ethnology, arrived in St. Petersburg in November 1923. He conducted a number of surveys of the site. Fewkes actually allowed one of Elliott's employees to take charge of the first cross-section dig of a large shell mound. Fewkes bypassed the fake and foreign items that Elliott had planted and soon discovered evidence of Late Woodland and Mississippian settlements at Weedon Island.

CROWDS Before the end of the month, Elliott's firm ran full-page advertisements inviting potential property owners to watch crews from the Smithsonian excavate pottery bits, stone tools, and human remains. In one promotion, he encouraged visitors to "go and examine the hills and pits dug on Weedon's Island and scratch about in the debris cast aside by the Smithsonian men and recover for yourself pieces of pottery, stone, shell and bone."

In 1925, another promotion by Elliott's company promised to present visitors with pottery fragments from the mounds as a gift. Elliott's plans to turn Weedon Island into a residential enclave ended as the Land Boom collapsed in 1926. Years later, he looked back on this period with a sense of regret—not because of the desecration of the mounds, but instead for the funds he paid to promote the development. He allegedly told a friend, "To think I spent all that money to plant those phony bones."

MOUND Well, my friends, there is nothing phony about what you are about to see here. Liz will take you on a real and valuable journey of discovery through surface finds that are now preserved in the Poynter Library . . . *[transition to Liz's presentation]*