

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE BURIAL EXCAVATED IN JANUARY 2013 AT NOCOROCO POINT (8VO82) IN TOMOKA STATE PARK

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Introduction

The Nocoroco site (8VO82) in Tomoka State Park is severely threatened by erosion. This damage is exposing artifacts and unmarked burials to illicit collection. Visitors to the park discovered bones on Nocoroco point in July and December of 2012. In January 2013, I conducted a site inspection and excavated a burial that likely dates to the plantation era. Further work is needed to determine the presence of other interments. I suggest both immediate short term and long term erosion control measures be enacted to mitigate these threats to both unmarked burials and the Nocoroco point midden.

Background

The Nocoroco site was first investigated by Griffin and Smith (1949), who noted an extensive black earth and shell midden. They identified the site as the likely location of a settlement visited by Alvaro Mexia, a soldier garrisoned in St. Augustine, in 1605 (Griffin and Smith 1949; Piatek 1992a). As far back as the 1940s, archaeologists described erosion destroying the site (Griffin and Smith 1949). Griffin and Smith (1949) also noted the discovery of a fragmented human skull in the base of an uprooted palm near the north end of the site. They identified the skull as belonging to an American Indian, although they provided no supporting evidence other than the fact that it came from a site featuring a prehistoric midden deposit. Based on more recent discoveries (Dupras and Schultz 2007), including those described in this report, I suspect that this skull may have belonged to a person of African ancestry associated with the late 18th century plantation settlement.

Survey and excavation in the 1990s (Baker 1995; Johnson, et al. 1996; Payne 1997; Piatek 1992a,b,c) demonstrated that the Nocoroco site had been occupied as far back as the Late Archaic period, based on the discovery of Orange ware pottery. Survey also found evidence settlement by enslaved African Americans associated with the Ormond plantation (Payne 1997; Piatek 1992a,b,c). Historic records demonstrate that the Ormond plantation was occupied from 1766 to 1784. The plantation primarily produced indigo and was home to up to 240 enslaved people (Piatek 1992a:322). Nocoroco point was later reoccupied in 1819, but was again abandoned in 1835 due to the Second Seminole War (Piatek 1992a:324). The point was not reoccupied until the 1920s when it was developed into a recreational area. The State of Florida purchased the land in the 1930s and developed it into a state park in the 1950s (Piatek 1992a:324).

In 1983 a young boy visiting Tomoka state park discovered a skull (Castagnacci 1983). In 2007 authorities were alerted to the discovery of human remains on the point. Law enforcement personnel conducted a recovery and forensic osteologists identified these remains as matching the skull discovered in 1983 (Dupras and Schultz 2007). Dupras and Schultz (2007) identified the remains as belonging to a woman in her mid-30s of African ancestry. She was of short stature, measuring only 4'7" to 4'11" tall. Based on their preservation, the remains were identified as being historical and of no forensic significance (Dupras and Schultz 2007). We lack contextual evidence about the nature of the burial and their precise

antiquity because the remains were not recovered through archaeological excavation. The skeletonized remains received attention from the popular press and they were nicknamed “Ms. Tomoka.” Ryan Wheeler and Kevin Porter, who were at that time archaeologists with the BAR, arranged to have the remains reburied at a local African American cemetery.

Narrative

Additional human remains were discovered by visitors from the same location on Nocoroco Point in July 2012 and December 2012. This area was nearby where the remains of “Ms. Tomoka” were discovered. Triel Lindstrom, an archaeologist with the Florida Park Service, visited the site in September 2012 and found no evidence of additional bones (Lindstrom 2012). Subsequently, a visitor to the park found human remains in the root ball of a fallen palm tree in the same location in December 2012. All recovered bone was eventually sent to the BAR. The ancestry of the remains was uncertain because we lacked diagnosable materials such as incisors or associated artifacts.

On January 14 2013, I visited the site in order to better understand the nature of the remains found at Nocoroco point. Phil Rand and Joe Isaacs, managers at Tomoka State Park accompanied me and guided me to the human remains recovery location. Jon Krigbaum, a professor with the University of Florida Department, and his student, Kristen Hall, accompanied me for the initial investigation of the area.

Upon arriving, we conducted a systematic surface survey of the eroding beach area (Figure 1). We saw significant signs of erosion of the prehistoric midden (Figure 2). We found scatterings of sand tempered pottery throughout our surface collecting area (Figure 1). We encountered additional human remains on the ground under the palm root ball where the visitor found bones in December 2012. There were no additional remains outside of this area.



Figure 1. Map of Nocoroco point (8VO82) highlighting areas of archaeological investigations. Burial 1 denotes the burial excavated in January 2013. The surface survey area denotes the area approximate covered during pedestrian survey.



Figure 2. Eroding midden material at Nocoroco (8VO82). Note the portion of eroding midden and the area of Burial #1 pre excavation.

After completing the surface collection, we documented and collected the human remains on the surface (Figure 3). The remains were found approximately 85 cm below the surface of the midden. Next, we scraped the surface area using trowels to look for potential burial features. After scraping off the first centimeter or so, an area of dark staining became apparent, suggesting a burial. I designated this interment as “Burial #1” (Figure 4). More scraping revealed a complete burial in a hexagonal coffin. We delineated the coffin outline and began excavation.



Figure 3. Cranial fragment discovered on the surface of Burial #1.



Figure 4. Scraping the top of Burial #1 to expose dark staining and human remains.

The burial was obviously historic and of no forensic significance given the coffin and its east-west alignment. The discovery of non-shovel shaped incisors in the field made apparent that individual was likely not of American Indian ancestry. Given the history of Nocoroco point, and the ancestry of “Ms. Tomoka,” the individual was most likely African American. More precise information awaits complete osteological analysis.

Dr. Krigbaum and his student left in the afternoon of January 14th and I continued excavating the burial through January 15, 2013 with the assistance of Joe Isaacs. I exposed and documented the burial (Figures 5, 6, and 7). The burial was well preserved in the shell-rich soils, although the bones were wet and fragile because it was within the tidal zone. Portions of the burial and coffin, especially those in the torso area, were highly calcified, likely due to chemical reactions involving the shell-rich sand, tidal fluctuations, and the decay process. Some of the ribs and other torso portions were not evident in photographs due to this calcification. After documenting the exposed burial, I removed the bones, wrapped them in foil, and placed them in plastic bags and containers for transport back to BAR laboratories for analysis. I also collected a sample of coffin wood and nails to help date the interment. I completely removed the burial and there are no remaining artifacts or human remains in the exposed erosion area (Figure 8). Once excavation was completed, I searched the surrounding root balls but found no evidence of additional human remains. I then backfilled the area with fill sand brought from another part of the park (Figure 9).



Figure 5. Photograph of Burial #1. Note the cut coquina and the hexagonal coffin shape.



Figure 6. Photograph of Burial #1. Note the cut coquina and the hexagonal coffin shape.



Figure 7. Photograph of Burial #1. Note the cut coquina and the hexagonal coffin shape.



Figure 8. Photograph of Burial #1 after the skeleton was removed.



Figure 9. Photograph of Burial #1 after removing the coffin hardware and refilling the area.

Excavations made clear that there was only a single burial in the immediate vicinity. The bones found in July and December 2012 likely came from the burial, including those from the left pelvis, left lower arm, and cranial bones. Initial analysis of the remains suggests that they represent a short-statured female. Further interpretations await osteological analysis.

The burial was likely dug through the prehistoric midden during the late 18th or 19th centuries. I found no grave goods, so dating may rely on analyzing the coffin nails, if they are sufficiently preserved. Two pieces of sand tempered pottery were found on top of the burial, but those are likely from the extensive prehistoric midden and not directly associated with the burial. A portion of the burial shaft cut through coquina rock underlying the midden. The burial has since been exposed due to the extensive erosion at the site. The entire overlaying midden layer is now missing. Two palm trees directly to the south of the burial are severely undercut and may soon fall over, exposing more midden area and potentially, more burials.

Management Recommendations

Both immediate and long term erosion control is needed at Nocoroco point. Thus far, at least two burials have been discovered in the erosional zone at Nocoroco point. There is a strong possibility that more burials lay beneath the midden layer in the remaining portion of the site. Erosion has been occurring

at the point since at least the 1940s (Griffin and Smith 1949). The pace of erosion has increased in the past several years. As palm trees are undercut and fall, large portions of the midden and potential burials will be exposed.

Unlawful collection of artifacts and human remains by visitors becomes more likely as erosion exposes more portions of the site. Despite park staff restricting pedestrian traffic to the area, boaters and fishermen frequent the point. Park staff reported that the bones found in December were initiated by an individual attempting to illicitly collect artifacts. In addition to potential unmarked burials, the midden at the Nocoroco site is an archaeological site great research potential that is worth protecting.

I recommend subsurface remote sensing to help detect other potential unmarked burials in the midden site. As my excavations demonstrated, the burials intruded into the midden, and should be discernable using Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR). Magnetometers may also be useful at detecting coffin hardware, such as nails. I also suggest using GPR and probing to detect the extent of the shell midden in order to aid in any more detailed management plans for the site.

In summation, erosion control is of the utmost priority at Nocoroco point. I recommend both short-term immediate solutions as well as longer term projects. In the short term, I suggest implementing measures to mitigate the erosion around the burial area in order to prevent exposing more interments (Figure 1). Protecting potential unmarked burials and the Nocoroco site should be a major consideration in any long-term erosion control undertaking. I advise that the park continue restricting access to the northern end of Nocoroco point until the area is sufficiently stabilized.

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