

Florida anthropologist

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EXCAVATIONS AT THE OLD OAK SITE, SARASOTA, FLORIDA:
A LATE WEEDEN ISLAND-SAFETY HARBOR PERIOD SITE

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In 1955 the family of the author purchased a two acre lot on the shore of Sarasota Bay. Part of a shell midden extended through the property. In 1956 the family built, upon midden deposit, a house overlooking Sarasota Bay. The author, born soon after the completion of the house, has known of and been fascinated by the midden "in my yard" as long as he is able to remember.

Figures 1 and 2 indicate the location of the midden, the Old Oak site along Sarasota Bay. Pinelands, now residential areas, once stretched to the north, east, and south of the site. Just west of the Old Oak site and extending southward into Roberts Bay is a large tidal flat now interrupted by the Siesta Key Bridge, the San Remo development, and the Intracoastal Waterway and accompanying spoil islands. Big Pass lies two kilometers to the west of the Old Oak site and downtown Sarasota three kilometers to the north.

A hammock of live oak (*Quercus virginiana*) and cabbage palm (*Sabal palmetto*) with some red cedar (*Juniperus silicicola*) covers the two shell heaps of the Old Oak site. Man has cleared the undergrowth from the northern midden but the southern is still in a natural climax condition. It possesses a dense understory of wild coffee (*Psychotria undata*) and mariberry (*Ardisia escallonioides*). Such growth is typical only of well-drained, lime-rich coastal situations such as shell middens or the naturally afforded old coastal ridges of barrier keys. Immediately east of the shell heaps the sandy soil supports a forest that is in an advanced state of transition, due in part to the lack of fire, from one of slash pine (*Pinus elliotii densa*) and palmetto (*Serenoa repens*) to one principally of live oak and cabbage palm.

A contour map, Figure 3, depicts the configuration of the two middens at the Old Oak site prior to the placement of fill-dirt upon the northern half of the northern shell heap in 1973, the construction of two houses on the northern heap in 1956 and 1974, and the addition of filled land west of the middens in 1955. The shell middens were, and in places still are, well-defined and the contour of the land underlying the middens (the pre-occupation surface) is, noting the gradual slope of the surrounding natural ground surface, readily imaginable. The shell heaps extend about 50 m inland although shell is scattered eastward another 135 m toward a natural spring. Sometime during the early 1950's developers dredged the spring and accompanying small swamp to create a lake and filled the encircling lowland for homesites. A creek, which drained the swamp and continues to drain the lake, flows by the southern shell midden and into Sarasota Bay. What appears to be a causeway, composed of sand and shell, at places

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Fig. 1. Southern Sarasota Bay, ca. A.D. 1900; stippled area represents grass or sand shallows, remaining shaded area represents mangroves; 1, the Old Oak site; 2, the Post Office site; 3, site at Mound Street.