

Florida Canoes:
A Maritime Heritage
From The Past

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FLORIDA CANOES: A MARITIME HERITAGE FROM THE PAST

Lee Ann Newsom and Barbara A. Purdy

Abstract

A maritime heritage exists in Florida that deserves to be investigated and preserved. The largest number of prehistoric and early historic canoes in the world have survived in the state's numerous waterways. Records exist for nearly 200 canoes that date from 5120 years BP to the 19th century; thus they span the Archaic through the Seminole Indian periods. In this paper we summarize what is known about these canoes and what should be done in order to make the records more complete. Investigations are needed to organize and expand the existing canoe records in a four-phase project. Phase 1: contact canoe owners (including institutions such as museums) to determine if the canoes still exist and to request permission to measure, photograph, and sketch them, acquire wood samples for radiocarbon dating and microscopic identification of the species, and assess their present condition and preservation requirements. Phase 2: obtain radiocarbon dates and identify the wood species. Phase 3: conduct a literature search to bring together historic descriptions of canoe manufacture and use, and produce a monograph that includes all of the data about the canoes and examines the importance of watercraft to the early inhabitants of Florida. It is possible to speculate about universal behaviors in maritime environments that crosscut time, space, and culture. Phase 4: undertake the preservation of the canoes and exhibit them either in a centralized location or in the various areas where each was found.

Introduction

Prehistoric and early historic canoes form one segment of our investigations of all wooden artifacts that have survived in Florida (MacDonald and Purdy 1982; Purdy and Newsom 1985; Purdy 1988). Canoes are reported at the rate of one or more a month. Twenty canoes, for example, were reported in 1985 (Newsom and Purdy 1986) and 19 canoes were retrieved and examined when Florida experienced drought conditions in 1977. Emergency funds for the 1977 project were provided by the National Science Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. In that year also, two wooden totems were found in the St. Johns River near Hontoon Island in the same vicinity as the owl totem recovered in 1955 (Bullen 1955).

We now have records of nearly 200 canoes, by far the largest number of prehistoric and early historic watercraft in the world. Hundreds more must have been found that were not reported or were destroyed during peat mining operations, development projects, or installation of drainage canals for agriculture. Hundreds more are probably still entombed. Destruction of canoes is not a thing of the past as is illustrated by the following story.

In the summer of 1985, we received a call from the public relations people of a large corporation who told us that a number of canoes, wooden structures, and other artifacts had been uncovered by their earth moving equipment. The people were helpful when we visited the area and permitted us to take a sample of one of

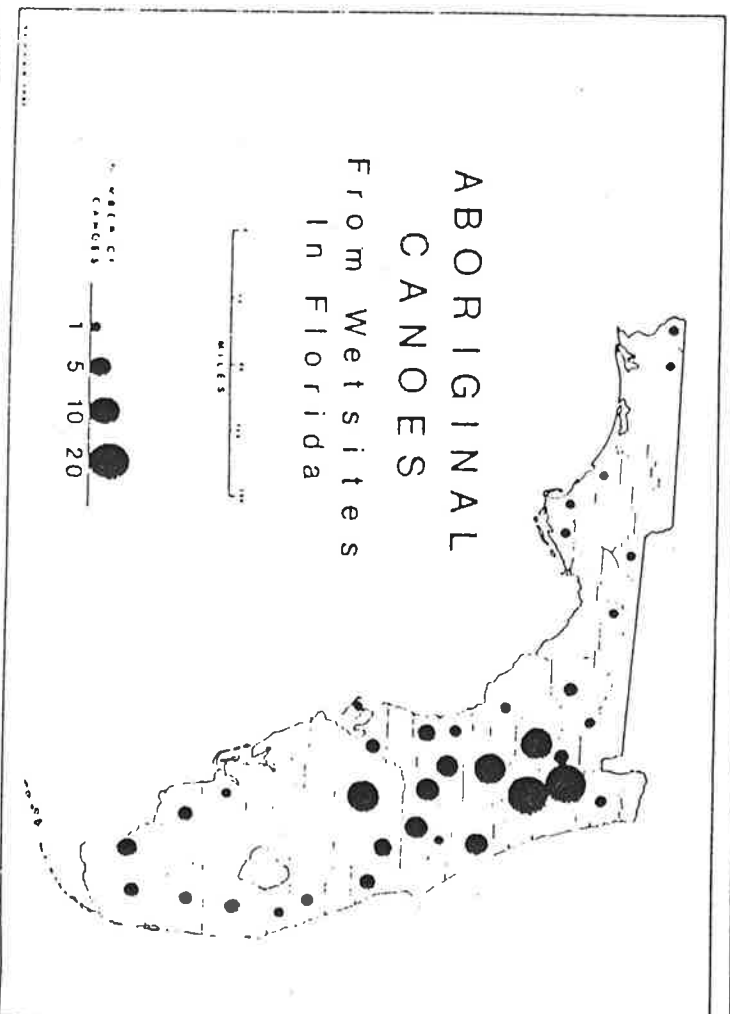
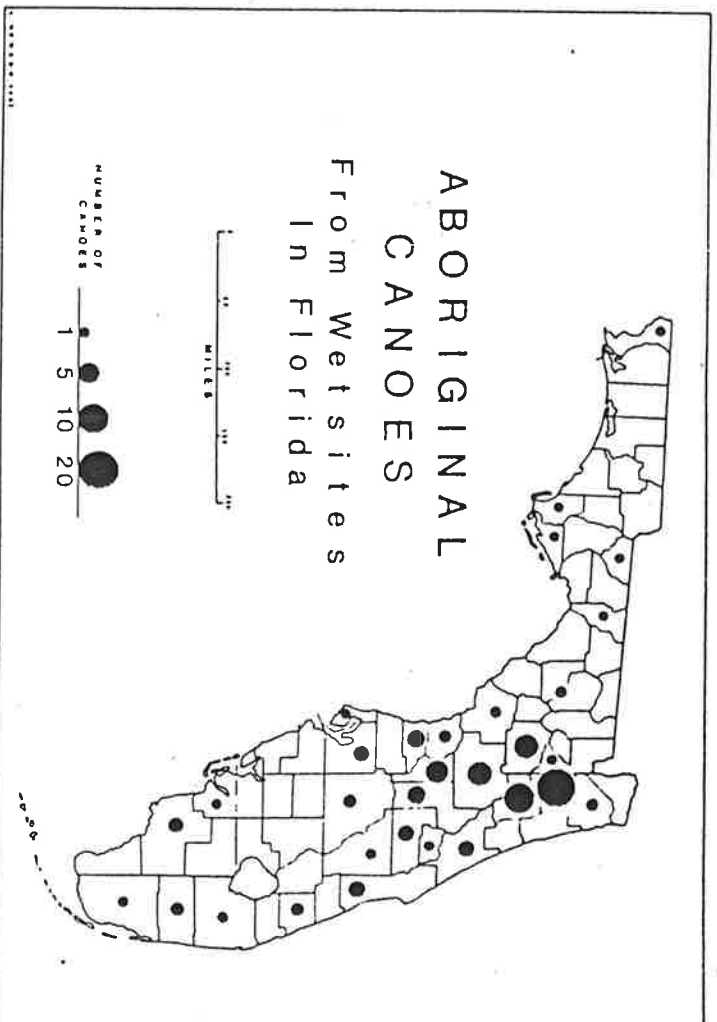


Figure 2. An Illustration of the Nature of the Deposits in Which Many Canoes are Encombed. Photograph Shows Oilie Stricklin at the Stricklin Peat Co., Clay County.



Figure 3. The Oldest Canoe in the Western Hemisphere from Delton Springs, Florida. (5140 BP).

