

Archaeological Investigation at Lignum Vita Key,  
2/11/67 - 2/12/67 and 4/15/67 - 4/16/67

by William M. Straight, M.D.

An unpublished manuscript written in 1967

MONROE COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY  
HELEN WADLEY BRANCH  
POST OFFICE BOX 1129  
ISLAMORADA, FLORIDA 33036

FLORIDA  
COLLECTION

REFERENCE

## ARCHIOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION AT LIGNUM VITA KEY

2/11/67 - 2/12/67

HARVARD COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY  
HELEN WADLEY BRANCH  
POST OFFICE BOX 1129  
ISLAMORADA, FLORIDA 33036

This investigation was carried out by Magnus S. Altmyer, Jr., Gilbert Haas and William M. Straight, M. D. We went to Lignum Vita Key via a rented outboard motor boat as guests of Russell and Charlotte Nischan. (P.O. Box 212, Islamorada, Florida; marine operator motor vessel Lignum Vita). We arrived about noon on 2/11/67 and departed at 4:25 P.M. on 2/12/67.

Lignum Vita Key is just south and west of the Indian Key Drew. It is approximately 2 miles into Florida Bay from the highway and can be reached, at this time, only by boat. The northeast end of the island is high land with hard woods growing on it while the south and western portions of the island gradually becomes mangrove swamps. According to Russell, Calusa Indians have had a burial mound on this island more than 1,200 years. This mound which lies in the southwest corner of the island rises about 5 or 6 feet above the surrounding area. The surrounding area is mangrove swamp to the west and south and Tap Rock of variegated color to the north and east. On the mound are Gunbo limbo, a palm which was planted there some years ago and other scrub trees which I could not identify. The surface of the mound is dark soil that appears to be humus from the decaying vegetation.

The mound has been opened many times in the past. The first desecration of the mound was a trench dug across the mound by unidentified boys back in the early 1930's. At this time the island was owned by the Matheson family and discovering the skulls that had been removed they insisted that these be replaced and the trench covered up. The remnants of this trench were easily ascertained. At two other points there have been obvious excavations made as shown on the accompanying diagram. Bits of bleached bone are readily visible on various areas of the mound though some of these may not be human bone.

We chose to mark out a test pit 17' 7" due south of the single palm tree. This is a sturdy palm and was thought to be a good land mark. The site we chose seemed on the surface to be undisturbed. At this site we excavated a pit probably 2 feet in diameter as we never managed to come to our lines. Our original intention was to excavate a 4 foot square pit. After removing the ground cover of creeping vine we proceeded slowly with trench spade and trowel. The first 2 or 3 inches of soil was very fine and fairly black. It was quite dry and appeared to be humus. Our first bones were long bones found lying parallel along the southern edge of our pit at a depth of 7". Although these could not be all identified they appeared to be tibia, femur, radius or ulna fragments. Also at this level we found the occiput of a skull. All of these bones were dry and firm in consistency. At a depth of 9" we uncovered a humerus that was clearly identifiable and which I have in my possession. We also identified an ulna at this level though some distance from the humerus - see accompanying diagram. Also at this level we uncovered approximately half of a jaw bone without teeth. At a depth of 16" we uncovered the remains of a skull and at a depth of almost 2 feet we uncovered a complete skull minus the mandible. This skull which we dubbed Yorick, was facing east and although in apparent good condition while in the ground fell apart as we lifted it out. The remains of this skull are in my possession. The skull seems to have almost no forehead and not to be very large in size. The measurements taken shortly after removal indicate a distance of 6" from zygomatic process to the opposite zygomatic process;  $6\frac{1}{2}$ " from the supr orbital ridge to the occiput and approximately 6" from the vault to the base. The eye brows were not particularly marked. The sand from which this was taken is coarse beach sand containing small welks and finger coral. It is white in consistency and was damp. The skull was filled with sand which may have added to the problem of keeping it together. The color of the bone was almost natural

though the inside of the bone was more yellow than expected. Approximately 6" south and slightly east was uncovered a mandible containing 4 teeth. While it is not clear that this mandible belongs to Yorick's skull, it seemed a likely possibility. This mandible overlies a bone which appeared to be a femur fragment.

At a level of 2' 4" on the southwest wall of the pit we uncovered another complete skull which we dubbed, Sidney. Sidney's skull was facing west and lay in the angle of two bones which appeared to be tibia as judged from their sharp angular surface. Neither of these bones contained the articulating condyles. The tibia were in good preservation and the skull came out in one piece. However, later the skull was dropped and broken. There seemed to be little, or at least less sand inside the cranium of this skull. We were unable to identify other bones belonging to this skull except possibly a fragment of vertebra. The mandible was missing except for a small fragment containing two teeth. Again there is no forehead, the sand in which it lay was damp, white and coarse like beach sand, and the color of bone was almost natural on the outside.

According to Russell, previous carbon dating of the mound has indicated that in the superficial layers it is about 600 years old and in deeper layers (he did not specify the depth) it is something more than 1,200 years old. The two skulls we found were less than 2 feet apart indicating a high density within the mound. The absence of pelvic bones, vertebra, bones of the hands and feet, and definitely identifiable ribs makes it seem likely that these burials were secondary to burials after the bones had been removed from the bodies. We found nothing to suggest "bundle burials" or prone burials. The parallel bones found at the depth of 7" suggests the parallel bone type of burial and perhaps the two skulls represent the burial of skulls separate and apart from the possessors bones. However, both skulls were in close proximity with other bones of the long bone type. We were all struck by the fact that all of the bones found were broken. In some instances there were transverse fractures of a humerus or femur. There was no clear evidence that the bones had been split and the marrow removed. Many of the bones did crumble apart but this was thought due to decay rather than previous injury. I could identify no specific disease on any of the bones.

There were no Indian artifacts found in the pit or on the surface of the mound. Specifically there were no bits of pottery, bone points, busycon picks, awls or scrapers. We have retained the remains of the two skulls and will attempt to re-constitute them.

Russell states that the Indians buried there are Calusa Indians. However, such reading as I have done leaves doubt whether these were Calusa or Tequesta. As there are kitchen middens on the lower end of upper Maticumbe Key and the upper end of lower Maticumbe Key, it seems likely that the Indians living on these middens buried their dead on Lignum Vita Key. It is quite possible that the coarse beach sand was carried from Maticumbe Key to Lignum Vita Key in canoes. However, perhaps many years ago there was a beach on Lignum Vita. At present there is only a very small beach and no evidence of a sand pit from which sand might have been taken.

We ceased excavation at the depth of 2' 4" after the removal of the skull of Sidney. Unfortunately, time would not permit further digging. We left a paper bag in the bottom of the pit to indicate the depth we had reached and hope that we can excavate this more thoroughly at a future date.

WILLIAM M. STRAIGHT, M. D., Narrator

MS/se