

from
Dr. Straight's
Miami Circle
file

MIAMI CIRCLE TALK BY BOB CARR, 2/10/99

I attended a talk given at the Whitten Learning Center, U. of. M., under the auspices of the Department of Anthropology, on Wednesday, 2/10/99, afternoon. The speaker, Robert S. Carr, has been the Dade County Archaeologist about twenty years and was to have retired three weeks ago but because of the Miami Circle [a.k.a. the Brickell Site and Brickell Pointe dig] he has deferred retirement. The following notes are of what seemed to me to be of particular interest.

The Brickell Mansion was built about where the Brickell Shearton Hotel now stands, just south of the Circle site. Carr states it was built on an Indian [Tequesta] burial mound. He and a friend picked up potsherds from under the mansion before Maude Brickell died and the Mansion was demolished.

He believes that the Circle site dates to 2000 years ago [BP] and that aborigines lived on both banks of the mouth of the Miami River at that time (ca. 1200-1300 A.D.), but when the Spanish came in the early 16th century, they had withdrawn their habitation to the north bank and used the south bank as a burial and ceremonial ground. [Thus far no human remains have been found on the south bank, but there is ample evidence of habitation at the Circle site – layers of black soil, obvious floor surfaces, artifacts, etc.] He states that the Tequesta and other pre-Seminole Indian tribes often tried to put a river or bay or even build a canal between their burial ground and their habitation. They believed the ghosts of their ancestors could not cross water and wreak evil upon them. [I have read they covered graves with mats and stationed guards to keep the spirits from coming out of the graves, but have never heard the "water" theory.]

The Circle dig began last summer as a routine archaeological investigation as required by Florida law when a developer wants to alter a site that may have been an Indian site. In early December (1998) a backhoe skimming off the overburden of "fill" uncovered a series of postholes (3-4" in diameter) in a curve suggesting a circle and along with these, larger (1-2 meters) "basins" which seem to be man-made, and according to at least one observer, suggest various sea creatures. Further excavation suggests East-West and North-South axis's. The post holes are remarkably smooth and symmetrical yet show lines suggesting human activity. No wood has been found in them but a basalt celt was found in one and an ornamental pendent made from the columella of a conch shell in another. John Ricisak, the on sight archaeologist, attached a large such columella to a pole and by turning the pole between his hands was able to duplicate the postholes. In all there are some 30 postholes; Carr believes these were made about 2000 years BP, but that the artifacts found date about 500 years BP.

Carr believes the two basalt celts found on the site were trade items and, while they might have come from the Mayan civilization, they might have come from further north. They have recovered about 1,000 artifacts which will be sorted and possibly some carbon-dated.

William M. Straight, MD 2/11/99

Dear Tom,

e-mail to Tom Chapple 1/16/99

Thank you for the copy of The Lovelace Medical Center which I received before your letter of yesterday. As of now I have only read parts of it but I find it an interesting, well written, beautifully illustrated and finely crafted book. I found your photograph first thing; it's excellent. You appear as you did when we were at Hopkins; too bad we have to age but such is life. Recently, my younger grandson requested I write some of my experiences as a medical officer during WWII from which he could create a paper for a history class in school. In addition to a five page narrative I sent him a photo of me taken aboard my ship in 1945. When I found the photo among the stacks of family photos, I was surprised at how young I looked.

Your letter of yesterday fills me in on aspects of your career about which the book had little to say. I enjoyed it. I also found the comments about your stroke and the subsequent confusion. I experience that too and occasionally still do. Just yesterday, for perhaps ten minutes, I had to struggle about what weekday it was. This came out of the blue and I found myself tossing events around in my mind trying to pin the day down without resorting to the calendar or the newspaper. Most annoying is my inability to come up with names and even common conversational words when talking.

Your cat, Dandy Lion, is one smart cat! You'd better be on guard, he'll outsmart you. Sara continues very slow progress but is improving. Momentarily I'm engrossed in an archaeological find at the mouth of the Miami River. A developer is getting ready to build a two-towered monstrosity of 67 stories each on a site in the heart of Miami. In preparing the ground he had to allow the state board of archaeology clear it first. To their surprise they found a circle of postholes, obviously man-made, in bed rock about four feet below the top soil. Indeed, one archaeologist sees carvings of fish next some of the postholes (others do not including a team sent from the Smithsonian) and hypothesized Mayans living at the mouth of the river 2,000 years ago. Most archaeologists think the postholes are those of a Tequesta Indian council house built between 500 A.D. and 1500 A.D. I've had a longterm interest in the inhabitants of prehistoric Florida and this area, so I viewed the site a week ago and checked books in my home library. I conclude these postholes were made, possibly by the Tequesta, as part of a fish weir. The incoming tide of Biscayne Bay brought fish into the weir to feed among the mangrove roots. At high tide the Indians closed the net held by the poles and with outgoing tide the fish were trapped and easily picked out of the shallow water. This method of fishing in Florida is historically documented in North Florida as early as 1563, but to date has not been documented in South Florida. So, in my opinion, we're looking at the first documentation of fishing by fish weirs in South Florida. It won't win me the Nobel Prize but it's been fun. You see, I've got the history bug in my craw.

Well, I must stop this palaver and get on with the day's chores. On weekends, I'm the nurse, cook, housekeeper and general factotum these days.

Our regards to Marianne.

Bill

January 13, 1999

Don Gaby
123 North Brook Lane
Ormand Beach, FL 32174

Dear Don,

Arva Parks and I went to the Brickell Point dig site yesterday and were given a guided tour by John Ricisak, the Field Director Archaeologist, Bob Carr being elsewhere. Although seeing the actual dig was stimulating, we learned little more about the findings. Ricisak is firmly of the belief the findings indicate Tequesta origin and evidence of construction of a council house, not a celestial observatory or the like. I must say I agree. So far no carbon dating has been done so we have no reliable evidence of when it was built. The few artifacts found are compatible with Tequestan or trade item origin. Thus far at this site no Spanish artifacts have been found that would suggest the contact period, c1565. No human bones have been found.

I'm enclosing a photocopy of an article I took off the Internet. It may be of interest to you.

Best wishes,

Bill Straight

1/28/99

This date John Ricisak called to discuss my fish weir theory, he thinks it interesting but unlikely. He admits he knows little about fish weirs.

He thinks a weir unlikely for the location of the postholes is too elevated for today's water levels, albeit he can't say what the water levels were 500 to 800 years ago. R.E. Widmer believes the sea levels varied up and down along the southwest coast between 150 B.C. and 450 A.D. [Milanich. *Archaeology of Precolumbian Florida*, p. 319] From my own observation when with Arva Parks I visited the site on 1/12/99, I'm not sure I agree with his view. However, the dig area has been so disturbed that it will take a careful survey to determine the level of "bed rock" in contrast to the level of water in the river.

Potsherds found in the holes are of the St. Johns type stamping which suggests the 500 to 800 years ago. He says they have a wealth of evidence of Indians living on the site of the "Miami Circle" – black soil indicative of a living midden, potsherds, stone, bone and shell tools, etc. In places the midden is 1 to 2 feet thick.

Ask how the Indians could fashion almost perfectly round post holes, he said they had duplicated the holes, on site, with the columella of a conch shell attached to a stick and rotated between the hands.

They have material suitable for carbon dating and will carry this out.

William M. Straight

Dear Jeffie

*Being the letters
from
Jeffries Wymann,
first director of the
Peabody Museum,
to his son,
Jeffries Wymann, Jr.*

Edited by
George E. Gifford, Jr.

QMP

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