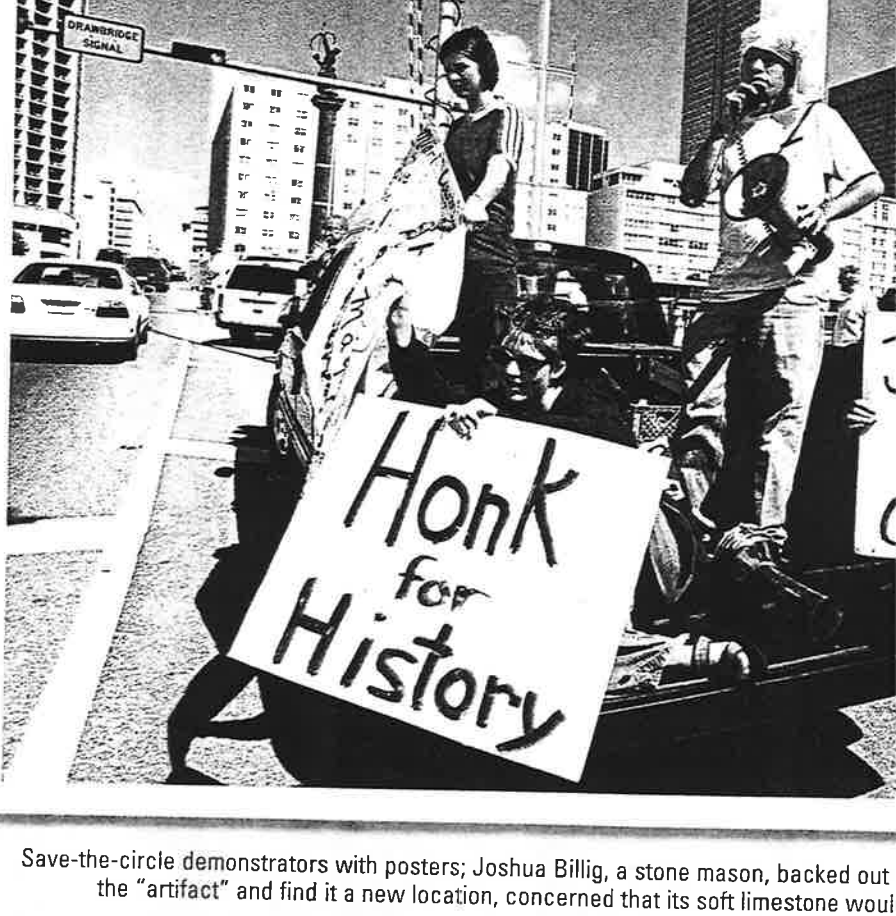
AMERICAN SCENE

Much Ado About a

Could Miami's heralded Indian site be a 1950s septic tank drain? / *by* **Jerald T. H**



Save-the-circle demonstrators with posters; Joshua Billig, a stone mason, backed out
the "artifact" and find it a new location, concerned that its soft limestone woul

NEW AGERS AND MORE TRADITIONAL CRANKS have all had a field day with what is now known internationally as the Miami Circle. One can log on to any of nearly

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a Miami-Dade County
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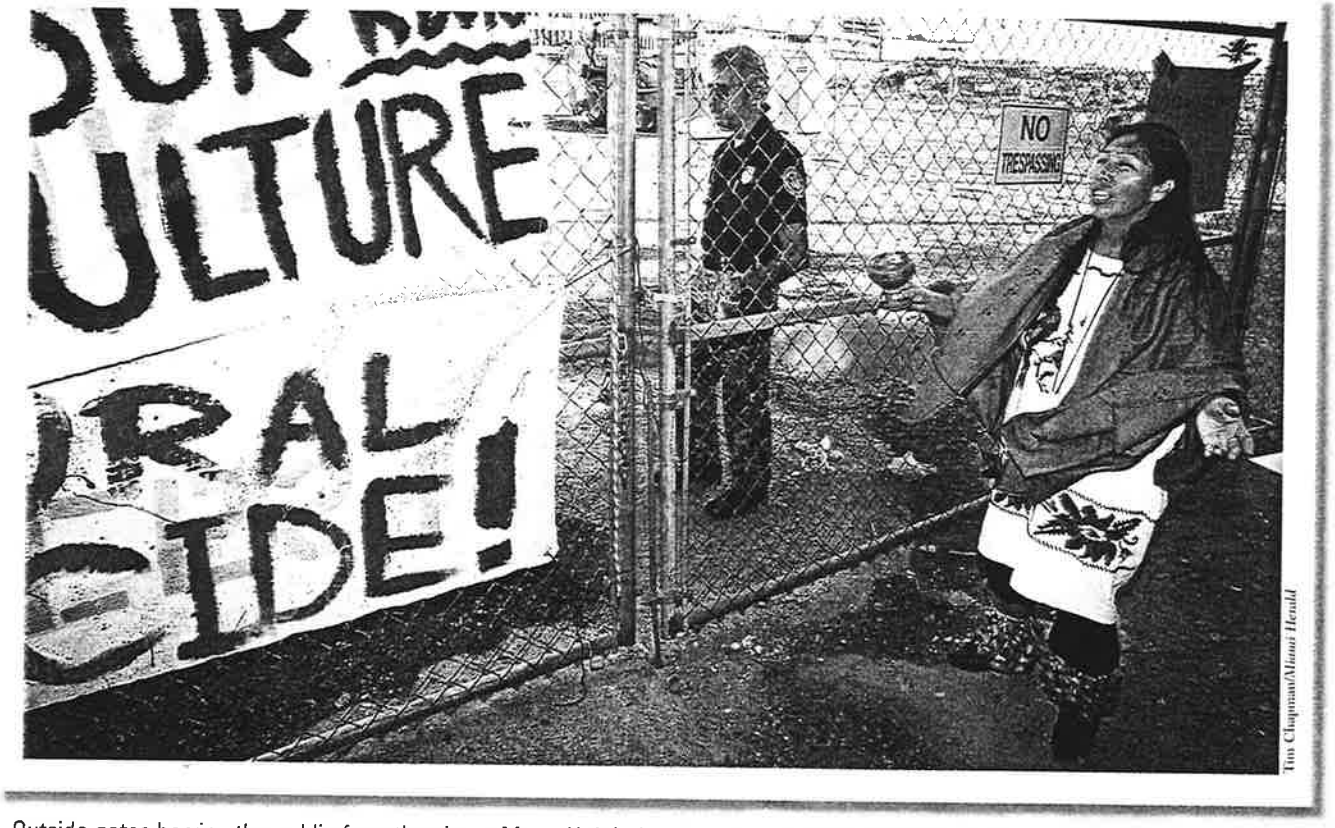
fall. The state has vo

ber of feet of draintile" typed in as "none," and why is that same line on the handwritten Building 4 form, dated September 20, 1950, left blank? Did the Brickell Apartment septic tanks, installed in limestone, not have traditional drain fields?

Second, find and interview people involved in construction of the apartments or people who might have lived in them prior to 1970, when the septic-tank system was abandoned and the apartments were hooked up to Miami's public sewage system. Did their toilets ever back up? Were there problems related to poor drainage between the buildings where the septic tanks were ?

Third, dig more. The judge in the eminent domain case and the property owner need to loosen up and let the archaeologists do their job. The Miami-Dade team currently does not even have access to the artifacts they excavated; those belong to the landowner until the court case is settled. Analyze them and prepare a detailed written report on the project to date. Radiocarbon date the sea turtle and shark remains. Correlate the artifact types with the radiocarbon dates. Process the soil samples taken from the limestone holes and see what is in them, especially flora and fauna. Pull out the Miami Circle septic tank and look under it. Any holes there? Cross section some of the holes and compare the presumed tool marks on their walls with the tool marks apparent on the inside of the hole cut into the limestone containing the septic tank. When I visited the site, it looked to me as though metal tools had been used to dig at least one of the holes, as well as that in which the septic tank was placed. Dig down into the limestone and cross section a sample of those 200+ presumed postholes. Any evidence of drills or tools or are they naturally formed? And what about that Building 4 footer that seems to overlie the east side of the circle? Does it? Which came first? The buildings or the septic tanks? Find and excavate around Building 4's southern septic tank. Any holes in the limestone around or near it? Then select a sample of two other septic tanks, one each from any of the other five buildings, and dig them also. Archaeology employs scientific methodology. When faced with coincidences and mysteries, an archaeologist needs to eliminate alternative explanations that may not agree with his or her own.



Outside gates barring the public from the site, a Maya-Huichol woman from Mexico performs a spirit dance to save the circle.

Is there a bright side to the Miami Circle? While I complain about the various cranks who were, and are, attracted by the circle, it is also important to note the many volunteers who worked to excavate and preserve the site. Whatever the circle is, or is not, it is encouraging to see so many people step forward when it seems an important archaeological monument is threatened. Because of the Miami Circle, a lot of people have learned a great deal about Native American history and now recognize that we must work together to understand and preserve that legacy. ■

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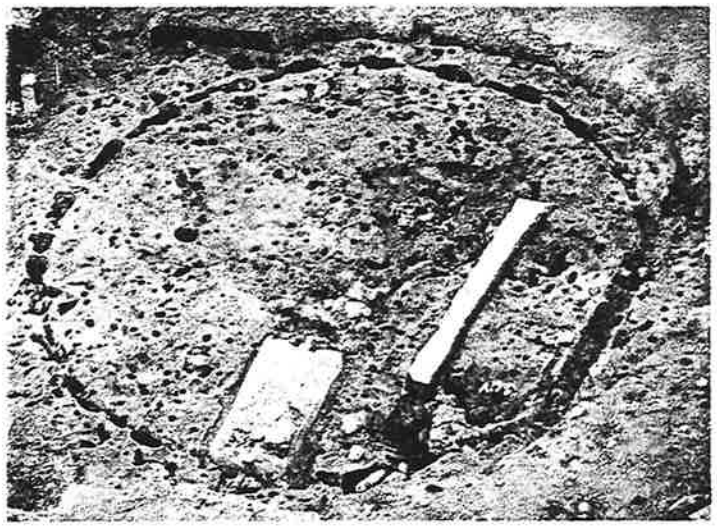
ment towers on prime real estate fronting the south side of the Miami River where it flows into Biscayne Bay in the city center. The building project would destroy whatever was left of the shell middens of the Brickell Point archaeological site, associated with the Tequesta Indians. Carr and his team were given permission by the developer to carry out limited excavations prior to construction. (Although a Miami-Dade County ordinance requires cultural resources to be taken into consideration before permits to build are granted, the developer was given such a permit before any archaeology was done.) Little did the excavators know what they would find, nor could they ever have anticipated the public interest their discovery would spark.

Late in the nineteenth century the banks of the Miami River near its mouth were blanketed with extensive shell and black-earth middens, and at least four burial mounds. Since then the mounds and most of the middens have been obliterated by development. In the 1940s archaeologist John M. Goggin gave the name Glades culture to the post-500 B.C. archaeological remains unearthed in Dade County. Glades sites are found in south Florida east and south of the Lake Okeechobee basin. A number have been dug, including the Grenada midden across the river from the circle. Salvage excavations there in the late 1970s yielded important information on the diet of the Glades people and demonstrated that villagers lived year-round along the river. The Granada midden no longer exists, the victim of hotel construction.



Chuck Fadely/*Miami Herald*

Aerial view of the 38-foot-diameter Miami Circle shows rectangular septic tank, center bottom, installed in 1950, and building footer of unknown date.

When Carr's team began excavating the Brickell Point site, what greeted them was not pretty. In 1950 six two-story apartment buildings, each with 12 units, and a swimming pool had been built on the property. After the tract was purchased for the planned high-rise towers, the buildings and pool were razed. What remained of the midden was buried beneath twentieth-century slabs of concrete, old pipes, and reinforcing rods.

Using volunteer labor, Carr and field director John Ricisak set to work. Intact midden deposits were indeed present under the recent debris. Dark soil with scattered shell was deposited over an 18-foot-thick layer of limestone bedrock. When excavations reached the limestone, they revealed a circle of 24 (or 28, depending on who's counting) holes cut into its surface. At the bottom of these rectangular holes were small, shallow, round impressions. In and around the circle were more than 200 other holes two to three inches in diameter also cut into the limestone. These, like their larger counterparts, were thought by Carr to be holes in which posts had been anchored. The larger posts had formed the wall of a circular building.

WITHIN THE MIDDEN DEPOSITS above this circle of postholes archaeologists uncovered a complete sea turtle carapace and the articulated remains of a shark. Teeth from a monk seal as well as four human teeth were found at the site, along with Glades pottery and other artifacts of shell, stone, and bone. Two small stone celts (ax heads) were recovered, one from a circle hole. A fact-sheet distributed by the historic preservation division notes that two radiocarbon dates of about A.D. 100 were obtained from pieces of charcoal found in another hole and in the midden. It also states the Miami Circle "may be of national significance as it is believed to be the only cut-in-rock prehistoric structural footprint ever found in eastern North America."

Press restraint—reporting the circle as possible evidence of a 2,000-year-old circular building associated with the Glades cultures—ceased after January 3 with the appearance of a *Miami Herald* article headlined "Archaeologists Sift Stunning Evidence of Ancient Culture." While reporting on the discovery and quoting Carr and Ricisak, the article also used information and quotations provided by T.L. Riggs, a 72-year-old surveyor who claimed the circle was carved in the rock 2,000 to 3,000 years ago by the Maya who came to south Florida from the Yucatán in huge canoes. The circle was a Maya astronomical observatory for calculating the passage of time, a sort of south Florida Limestonehenge.

During the next two months almost daily local news stories about the Miami Circle fueled international media coverage. Seminole Indians and New Agers visited the site, which was soon closed to the public. Huichol Indians from Mexico, a Maya shaman, kids skipping school, and people wishing to bask in the site's supernatural aura crowded the Brickell Avenue bridge overlooking the cir-

cle. A camera was mounted on the roof of a nearby skyscraper so that those not able to make a pilgrimage to the incipient shrine could check it out on their computer screens. Pro-circle demonstrators marched along highways with hand-lettered signs: "Honk to save the Miami Circle." As Ricisak told the *Herald*, the circle had become sacred ground.

Not everyone was in favor of saving the circle and voiding the developer's permits to build the apartment complex. Miami badly needed the tax dollars the project would bring. Initially something of a compromise was struck in the form of an ill thought-out plan to cut out and move the circle to a new location. A stone mason hired to do the job backed out at the last minute. It is uncertain whether the soft limestone could have withstood the move. Another plan to make a mold of the circle and build a facsimile elsewhere proved unworkable.

Miami Circle mania found me 350 miles north of Miami in my office at the Florida Museum of Natural History in Gainesville. Almost daily, reporters looking for a quotation or circle adherents looking for a statement of support called. I chose to offer only bland general statements. Why? Because I was skeptical. The Precolumbian inhabitants of Florida certainly made circular structures, small houses for people and much larger council houses and other types of buildings. But no archaeologists had ever found postholes cut into limestone. None was found at the Granada site. Moreover, I found it odd that the postholes were rectangular. All the Precolumbian postholes I had ever seen were round or oval.

If the circle supported wall posts for a Glades culture council house or chief's house, where was the other evidence usually associated with such a structure? There should have been a central hearth and evidence of sitting or sleeping benches along the structure's interior wall. You would also expect what archaeologists call a living floor, the earthen floor of the building on which people walked, danced, and threw trash, which they then swept under benches. Living floors are characterized by organic deposits, profusions of flat-lying artifacts, and other telltale signs. If the evidence for such a living floor had been destroyed by apartment construction in the 1950s or by razing those same apartments in 1998, why were the remains of a five-foot long shark found in situ? Wouldn't they have been disturbed along with the floor?

One caller to my office assured me it was not Indians who made the Miami Circle, but people from Atlantis. A February 17 *Miami Herald* article ran down various more mundane alternatives: the holes were the remains of a drain field of a septic tank, circular driveway, narrow-gauge railroad turntable, or water tower. In February James Randi, a.k.a. the Amazing Randi, a professional debunker of pseudo-science, notified his 9,000 e-mail list subscribers that his money was on the septic-tank drain field. The Miami-Dade archaeologists debunked Randi's sewage theory, pointing out, among other things, that the septic tank presumably had had a drain field running off to the south.

THIS PAST APRIL I VISITED the Miami Circle. Because of the legal proceedings, permission was needed from the circuit court presiding judge to see the site. John Ricisak gave a great tour, but I must admit I was most interested in the septic tank. Why was it aligned with one edge of the circle and lying on a north-south bisecting axis?

With millions of dollars and the reputation of Florida archaeology on the line, I pushed the septic-tank issue. Who put it in and when? Was it possible that the circle of holes had something to do with the original construction of the septic tank? Was it a drain field? The septic tank was installed in a large rectangular hole cut into the bedrock. If the tank ever leaked or overflowed or was disturbed by flooding of the Miami River, where did the overflow go if it could not seep through the surrounding and underlying limestone? Had the tank ever overflowed or leaked? Was it once standard practice for Miami septic tanks to be installed in holes in impermeable limestone? Did special conditions warrant special precautions? Were all those little holes in and around the circle actually seep holes drilled into the limestone?

Tough questions, for which the Miami-Dade archaeology team found a number of answers. Each of the six 1950 apartment buildings originally was hooked up to two septic tanks. The septic tank in the Miami Circle most likely was the northernmost 900 gallon tank, hooked up to Building 4. The circle itself is almost centered between former Buildings 4 and 5. What is probably a footing, a trench in which concrete was poured to support the east wall of Building 4, is visible just to the west of the circle, while what may be a west wall footing of Building 5 just covers the easternmost portion of the circle. A section of still another footing is in the interior of the circle. Though parallel to the others, its association with the buildings is uncertain.

Carr and Ricisak have tried to convince me the septic tank in the circle is a coincidence. They cite consultations with septic-tank experts who told them the Miami Circle did not resemble any septic-tank system they had ever seen. Carr and Ricisak note they found no archaeological indication that the circle holes ever connected with the septic tank and contrast the clean, sharp-cut limestone walls of the hole containing the tank with the weathered appearance of the "postholes." Pertinent information, no doubt, but I intend to remain skeptical until sufficient evidence is collected to prove that the Miami Circle was built by Native Americans one or two thousand years ago and is not a twentieth-century artifact.

How to find such evidence? I would implement a three-pronged project. On one front, continue to find and interpret construction records for all six buildings, such as the plumbing inspection records, which have been located. What more can be learned from them about the septic tanks and the drain fields that presumably ran from each? For instance, why, on the Building 3 plumbing inspection form dated September 21, 1950, is the "Num-

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