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ARCHEOLOGICAL NOTES ON LOWER FISHEATING CREEK

John M. Goggin

Fisheating Creek rises in the highland area of South Central Florida, wanders southward off the Pleistocene escarpment and then, swinging to the east, flows into Lake Okeechobee. Carrying water most of the time, the stream is a concentration point for a rich assortment of animal life attractive to primitive man. Moreover, it is an easy artery of travel by canoe between the lake and inland areas.

For much of its course the stream passes through reasonably elevated country, but shortly before entering the lake it opens into a wide marsh, the northwestern tip of the Everglades. At the point where dry banks widen away there is on the south a high dry hammock. Now an ideal spot for hunters or fishermen, it apparently appealed to many early peoples for abundant evidence may be found here of early Indian occupation as well as remains of an early U. S. Army post.¹

PREVIOUS ARCHEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

The establishment here of a small block house, Fort Center, during the Seminole wars focused the attention of various military men on the site. The high sand mound (G1 12) attracted most discussion, its elevation in this flat country being grossly overestimated (Ives, 1856:37). This mound came to the notice of later archeological writers among them Charles Kenworthy who also greatly exaggerated the height, reporting it was forty feet (Kenworthy, 1875:307) and later as fifty feet (Kenworthy, 1883:633). Le Baron (1884:778-779) also notes the site in his general survey. However, after this time the sites drops into oblivion for many years.

An unusual find in the early 1930's again brought attention to the area. A local resident found near the major mound a large wooden figure of a bird standing on a post (Anon., 1933:292). This specimen is now in the Florida State Museum in an excellent state of preservation.

The writer first visited the Fort Center area in 1944, making a small sherd collection for the Yale Peabody Museum. In the summer of 1947 another visit

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was made with John W. Griffin of the Florida Park Service and material collected at that time is in both the Yale Peabody Museum and the Florida Park Service collection. Later several brief visits were made in 1949, each giving more insight into the extent of the site and enabling plans to be made for test excavations and a more thorough survey of the whole area.

The sites excavated do not appear to have been mentioned in the literature unless the Platt site is the large "shell mound" near Lakeport mentioned by Fewkes (1928:2). It does not appear to be from his reference, but no other comparable site is reported in the vicinity by local inhabitants.

THE FORT CENTER AREA

Centering around the site of old Fort Center are a number of distinct archaeological remains. These are of varied nature, perhaps of different ages, and spread over an area less than a mile square. For that reason each has been given a single number or sub-number, but we will use the term Fort Center site as an inclusive term for the whole group. The greatest number of these remains are located in or adjacent to the oak hammock which borders the south bank of Fisheating Creek, where the stream flows into the prairie bordering Lake Okeechobee.

The hammock, and palmetto-pine complex behind it, are high and dry areas during rainy seasons and the sites are above water at all normal times. These sites include a series of small middens along the river edge, all considered as one site but individually designated by letters (G1 13A, 13B, 13C, 13D). The possible site of Fort Center (G1 23) itself is indicated by a restricted concentration of early 19th century chinaware. The large sand mound and its associated platform (G1 12) are the most widely recognized features of the site. However, even as important but not so casually recognized, is the large circular canal (G1 22) several thousand feet long. Several small mounds have unknown functions (G1 18, 19, 20). Another mound or ridge on the floor plain (G1 21) has refuse on the surface.

The prairie to the east is often covered with several inches or more of water and the sites lying in it appear as small cabbage palm islands at such a time. These individual sites include two pairs of ridges (G1 24, G1 25), two pairs of ridges with terminal mounds (G1 11, G1 15), a small mound of unknown nature (G1 16), and a long narrow ridge (G1 17) probably a refuse midden which may have once lain along the stream when a past meander took it closer. Another pair of ridges lies across the flood plain on the opposite side of the creek (G1 26).

About three quarters of a mile to the east, on the prairie, are two more sites (G1 10 and G1 14). The first is a small mound but the second, called the Platt Site, is a refuse heap forming a large mound. This is bordered in places by the creek.