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Ancient canoe found in Florida

By **Keith Morelli** Media General News Service



ST. PETERSBURG — Stuck somewhere in the millennial muck of Weedon Island is a significant piece of history.

A 45-foot canoe, buried for 10 centuries, more or less, and used by a long-dead culture of American Indians, has worked its way to the surface. Now authorities are trying to figure out how best to preserve it.

The vessel is carved out of a single pine tree, and archaeologists say it was used to paddle the open, sometimes roughwaters of Tampa Bay — unlike the other ancient canoes uncovered in Florida over the

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years, which were used to ply the calmer waters of lakes and rivers.

With the back end of the canoe broken off, it measures 39 feet, 11 inches. Attaching the missing piece, archaeologists say, would add an estimated 5 feet to the length.

The size of the vessel and configuration of the bow leads archaeologists to think it may have been used to trade with people living some distance away.

"It's the longest prehistoric canoe ever found in the state of Florida," said Weedon Island Preserve Center manager Phyllis Kolianos.

Archaeologists define prehistoric in North and South America as anything prior to Columbus' arrival.

"I think it's fascinating," Kolianos said. "I think it's a very important find, and it's very significant. It gives us an understanding that these weren't simple people living here, that they were probably trading with other cultures."

The dugout is the first pre-Columbian seagoing vessel uncovered in Florida. It points to a culture that thrived in what would become the Tampa Bay area and traded with others along the Gulf of Mexico coast and beyond. The influence of the Weedon Island culture stretched to places as far away as Georgia, archaeologists say.

Kolianos said that the carbon dating of the canoe shows it to be about 1,100 years old.

The Weedon Island culture blossomed between the third century and 1200.

"This was a heavily populated area," she said.

The canoe first was found seven years ago when a beachcomber searching for old bottles spotted part of the vessel protruding from the ground.

Because the preserve didn't have a history center at the time, the discovery went unreported for years, Kolianos said. Finally, it came to light, and a team of state and local archaeologists, including Kolianos, mounted a plan to excavate the vessel.

In December, about 10 archaeology students, volunteers and state archaeologists plodded through the mangroves to the site. They built a makeshift dam with sandbags and plastic to keep the tide out, and they began digging.

They uncovered the vessel's rotting gunwales and dug beneath it to take measurements. Under the keel, they found a long pole about 3 inches in diameter. The pole could have been used to propel the canoe, or it might have been used to roll it onto the shore.

A sample of the wood from the canoe was taken for carbon dating and the preserving muck was replaced, Kolianos said.

Covering the artifact with the muck is the best preservation option available.

Ultimately, the goal is to excavate the canoe, chemically preserve it and put it on display. But doing that is difficult and expensive. To be properly treated, the canoe has to sit in a vat of chemical preservative for three years, she said. Nowhere in the state is there a vat that big.

So, for now, the artifact, as significant as it is, lies in an undisclosed location beneath a layer of muck — submerged during high tides — safe and sound.

“The best place for it right now,” Kolianos said, “is in the ground.”

According to the Weedon Island Preserve’s Web site, the island on the east side of St. Petersburg has been well-populated for thousands of years. People lived there as long ago as 14,000 years, when the climate gradually turned warm and moist. The sea levels rose and coastal conditions easily supported large groups of people.

Nomadic populations began to settle on the island about 5,000 years ago and survived mostly on fish and oysters. They prospered and about 1,800 years ago became what is now known as the Manasota culture. During the next 1,000 years, the population evolved into what is referred to today as the Weedon Island culture.

While Weedon Island people did greet the first Europeans visiting the state, the population that actually called Weedon Island home never had direct contact with the Spanish.

KEITH MORELLI is a staff writer for The Tampa Tribune

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