

Volume 1

Number 1

Fall 2022

# *New Britain Dispatch*



**A Journal of the  
Ormond Beach Historical Society  
Ormond Beach, Florida**



# The Tomoka Mound and Midden Complex: A National Treasure

by Randy Jaye

On November 27, 2020, the Tomoka Mound and Midden Complex became the Ormond Beach area's most recent addition to the National Register of Historic Places as a site that has yielded information important in prehistory.

The Tomoka Mound and Midden Complex is an indigenous mortuary and habitation site located on a peninsula between the Halifax and Tomoka Rivers in the Tomoka State Park area.

The site represents indigenous human occupation and activity that lasted from at least 5,100 years before the present (BP) and continued after European contact in 1513 up until the mid-1700s.

The earliest artifacts found so far were made by people who were most likely the ancestors of the Timucuan.<sup>1</sup> It is not known what these people called themselves as they left no written records, so archaeologists have grouped them into cultural names representing different periods of time, such as: including: Mount Taylor, Orange, St. Johns I and St. Johns II.

Dr. Jon C. Endonino explains, "The majority of the artifacts from Tomoka were made during the Thornhill Lake phase<sup>2</sup> of the Mount Taylor [period]<sup>3</sup> and at the site are dated from about 5100-4200 BP. We have only small amounts of pottery or other artifacts from the St. Johns I period which at the site is dated 3400-1800 BP. There's also a trace amount of St. Johns II and most of that is associated with the Contact/Colonial occupation of Nocoroco<sup>4</sup> at the north end of the peninsula and is dated about 430-300 BP. Now those folks, during the period 430-300 BP were Timucuan, that is certain."

The site was used by indigenous people for multiple purposes including a cemetery, religious ceremonies and a domestic village. It consists of 12 sand and shell mounds, five shell ridges/knolls, and extensive subsurface midden and borrow pits. Some of the important cultural materials that have been discovered at the site include worked shell tools and artifacts, the remains of both vertebrate and invertebrate fauna, stone tools and ceramics.

Six of the mounds were used as mortuaries while the others served domestic purposes. Based on radiocarbon testing four of the mortuary mounds date to the Thornhill Lake phase, and one was reused to bury people during the St. Johns period (3,600-456 BP).<sup>5</sup> The sixth mortuary mound is later than the others and was constructed during the St. Johns period.

The land on which the Tomoka Mound and Midden Complex is located was once part of the 20,000-acre Mount Oswald Plantation, which was purchased in 1766 by Richard Oswald (the British peace commissioner who negotiated the Peace of Paris in 1782, which led to the set of treaties that ended the American Revolutionary War). The plantation was abandoned around 1784 after the British returned Florida to the Spanish.

The site is currently owned and managed by the state of Florida and the Department of Environmental Protection, which shields and protects it from modern development.

## Archaeological Significance

The Tomoka Mound and Midden Complex is one of the oldest known mortuary mound complexes in the state of Florida and in the United States. It is also the largest known preceramic<sup>6</sup> Archaic Period<sup>7</sup> site in coastal northeast Florida.

The site was excavated several times in the past including the first written account by A.E. Davis (1881-1885), the state of Florida's survey by John W. Griffin and Hale G. Smith (1946), the first detailed inventory of the mounds by Daniel and Haviser (1979), the Florida Recreation and Park's series of surveys and excavations by Bruce Piatek (early 1990s) and the long term Tomoka Archaeology Project which began in 2013.

The main features of the Tomoka Mound and Midden Complex remain mostly intact and undisturbed despite previous looting, minor erosion, minor landscape modifications during the Plantation Period and previous archaeological excavations.

Excavations and research at the Tomoka Mound and Midden Complex have led to a better understanding of preceramic Middle and Late Archaic periods and the Mount Taylor and Orange<sup>8</sup> period cultures at the site specific and regional levels.

Future excavations and research are likely to yield additional data related to ancient environments, subsistence, interaction and trade, craft production, settlement patterns, seasonality and community organization throughout the thousands of years that Native Floridians occupied the site.

The Tomoka Mound and Midden Complex is truly a unique national treasure.



*Tomoka River at Tomoka State Park. Photo by Randy Jaye.*



*Tomoka Mound Number 5 - Photo Courtesy of Jon C. Endonino, Ph.D.*



*Tomoka Mound Number 6 - Photo Courtesy of Jon C. Endonino, Ph.D.*



*Anterior bone (dentary) and other bone fragments worked into tools and ornamental objects by indigenous people found at the Tomoka Mound and Midden Complex – Photos and Chart Courtesy of graphic designer Jen Brown.*



*Stone objects worked into tools by indigenous people found at the Tomoka Mound and Midden Complex – Photos and Chart Courtesy of graphic designer Jen Brown.*

## Acknowledgements

Much of the information in this article is based on recent excavations and research work conducted at the Tomoka Mound and Midden Complex led by Jon C. Endonino, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Anthropology, Eastern Kentucky University. The work was a joint project between Eastern Kentucky University and the Gulf Archaeology Research Institute in cooperation with the Florida Park Service and with contributions from colleagues at the Florida Public Archaeology Network, Flagler College, Florida Atlantic University, University of South Florida and the National Park Service.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The **Timucua** were indigenous people who lived in present-day Georgia and north central Florida. At the time of European contact in 1513 it is estimated they numbered about 200,000 and were organized into 35 chiefdoms over an area covering 19,200 square miles. By 1800, these people were eradicated due mainly to Eurasian-introduced infectious diseases, the slave trade and warfare against European colonists and their native allies.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Jon C. Endonino explains the **Thornhill Lake phase** as "...the latter portion of the Mount Taylor Period from 5,600 to 4,700 BP [years before the present] and is characterized by the construction and use of sand burial mounds, and increase in exchange with neighboring regions of the southeast, and the occurrence of "exotic" ground and polished stone artifacts like banner stones (from Savannah River Valley in GA and SC, and stone beads from Mississippi obtained through interregional exchange)."

<sup>3</sup> The **Mount Taylor period culture** was a pre-ceramic hunter-gatherer archaeological culture based in the northeastern Florida area during the middle to late Archaic period. Most of their known sites are located in the St. Johns River valley.

<sup>4</sup> **Nocoroco** is the site of a Timucuan village located in Tomoka State Park. On May 7, 1973, it was added onto the National Register of Historic Places as a site significant for its information potential in the area of aboriginal history.

<sup>5</sup> The **St. Johns culture** was an archaeological culture located along the St. Johns River and along the Atlantic coast in northeastern Florida. It lasted from about 2,500 BP to shortly after European contact in the 1500s. This culture is mostly identified by its style of pottery, plain chalky was the dominate type, which was made from clay obtained from fresh water sources.

<sup>6</sup> The **preceramic period** refers to the age or culture prior to the advent of pottery making.

<sup>7</sup> **Archaic Period**, in the North American chronology, is subdivided into three periods: Early Archaic (11,500 to 3,200 BP), Middle Archaic (8,900 to 5,800 BP) and the Late Archaic (5,800 to 3,200 BP).

<sup>8</sup> The **Orange period culture** was a Late-Archaic archaeological culture located along the eastern side of the Florida peninsula that lasted from about 4,000 to 2,500 BP. The Orange period culture is mainly identified by Orange-series fiber-tempered pottery.

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## Editor's Note

This article was originally published in the *Halifax Herald*, Volume 39, Number 1, (Summer 2021). (Minor revisions have been made to this version of the article.)



*Timucua Indian Village of Nocoroco - Florida Historical Marker - Tomoka State Park.  
Photo by Randy Jaye.*