

Aboriginal Occupation of Gasparilla Island

By Robert F. Edic

Excerpted with permission from *Maritime Archaeology of*

Lemon Bay, Florida, Florida Anthropological Society

Publications, No. 14 (Spring 1999)

In 1980 I moved to Gasparilla Island. By 1982 I had found an unrecorded aboriginal shell midden on land being cleared for house construction. By 1989 I had discovered six additional aboriginal sites on Gasparilla Island, and two more on adjacent small islands, Hoagen and Sisters keys. Some of these sites date to c. A.D. 800 - 1500 and reveal that indigenous Florida Indians used Gasparilla Island more intensively than previously known.

Environment

At the end of the last Ice Age, about 20,000 years ago, the sea level was lower (approximately 200 feet) and Florida's Gulf coast was about 100 miles west of its present location. By 6,000 years ago, rising sea levels had started to inundate the area that is now Charlotte Harbor.

Gasparilla Island is part of a chain of barrier islands at the mouth of Charlotte Harbor. The island is of recent origin. Radiocarbon dating of shells from beach-ridge deposits suggests the island is no more than approximately 3,000 years old. An isolated artifact - a chipped-stone projectile point or knife (Bolen Plain) made from fossil (silicified) coral -found on the beach by state park ranger Anne Marie Sampley, probably dates to ca. 7,000 B.C., well before the island formed.

There is a general trend for erosion and shoreline recession along the western edge of Gasparilla Island, fronting the Gulf of Mexico. Archaeological sites are lacking there, and it is presumed that erosion has removed evidence of early sites that might have existed. In contrast, the eastern shoreline of the island along Gasparilla Sound and Charlotte Harbor is more stable, and a number of sites occur there.

No large village sites have been found on Gasparilla Island. Claims by historian Lindsey Williams, that there were Indian mounds at each end of the island in the 1860s are unsupported by my research, which has revealed no shell midden or other aboriginal material in these locations. However, major villages were located on the nearby mainland. Remnants of these can be seen at Coral Creek (8CH15), Catfish Point (8CH9), Big Mound Key (8CH10), Cash Mound (8CH38) and John Quiet Mound (8CH45), all located on the fringe of the Cape Haze Peninsula.

For the Indians, Gasparilla Island offered a variety of natural habitats and resources. The natural habitats can be divided into roughly three zones: the east side of the island with its mangrove bay shores, the west side with its beaches; and the interior with hammocks and savannahs, the latter with fresh water. Some of these habitats probably resembled those of present-day Cayo Costa that are described by Herwitz.²

Modern land alterations have been extensive on Gasparilla Island. In the first two decades of the 1900s a railroad was built down the length of the island, and a deep water port was constructed at the island's south end. The town of Boca Grande began to be constructed at that time. Between 1909 and 1926 a yacht basin and a tidal area known as the "Hole in the Wall" were dredged three times. In the 1930s a golf course was built on tidal mangrove wetlands at mid-island³ and, in the 1970s and 1980s, remaining lands were platted for development.

(figure 2.2.1) **The above picture was obtained from Florida State Archives. It was described simply as Indian Mound: Boca Grande, Florida and dated 1926. Its location remains a mystery.** (bghs 06-0056)



Cultural background

Indians known as the "Calusa" developed a complex social system in the Charlotte Harbor area. By A.D. 500 their ancestors began to construct large shell mounds in the estuaries to the east of Gasparilla Island, but not on Gasparilla Island.

Spanish documents dating to the 1500s reveal that the Calusa had developed permanent villages by that time. These were based on the natural abundance of the marine environment, not on agriculture. The rich coastal environment of southwest Florida filled the role usually played by agriculture in other complex societies⁴. The Calusa dominated much of southwest Florida, from Charlotte Harbor to the Florida Keys, at the time of early European contact in the 1500s. However, the sophisticated estuarine-based cultural system that was flourishing at the time of Spanish contact vanished over the next 200 years.

From the archaeological data recovered so far, we can now say with some certainty that the Calusa did not pass into oblivion as a result of disease or by depletion of their fishing resources. Franciscan records show that the Calusa were still in their homelands and still exerting pressure on other local groups as late as 1698.⁵ This was long after many other native Florida Indians had succumbed to diseases, slavery, and Spanish militarism and missionization. After the mid-1700s, however, the Calusa ceased to exist as a group.

In the late 1600s, Indian refugees from colonial expansion in northern Florida and Georgia began to arrive in southern Florida.⁶ Archaeological evidence suggests that northern Florida mission Indians who fled raids of the English Colonel James Moore might have settled in the Charlotte Harbor area after 1704⁷ or that indigenous Indians along the southwest Florida coast might have obtained mission items through trade in the 1600s.⁸

In the mid-1700s, Indians in Charlotte Harbor who fished for the Spanish became known as Spanish Indians." Although by now the Calusa, for the most part, had disappeared as a culture, it is possible that remnants of the Calusa were still living in isolated areas of Charlotte Harbor.⁹

When the English took over Florida from the Spanish in 1763, renegades of the Creek Nation were called "cimarones" (later, "Seminoles" or "wild ones").

These and other Indians were pushing down the Florida peninsula, escaping the English to the north. The English concluded there were no indigenous Florida Indians left. This allowed all Indians in Florida to be labeled as Seminoles, even if they were Spanish Indians or perhaps Calusa remnants.

No archaeological evidence or historical documentation supports the local legend that a pirate named "Jose Gaspar" visited the southwest coast of Florida in the late 1700s and early 1800s. Instead, historians have shown that he was an invention of 20th Century tourism.

They further suggest that the name of Gasparilla Island was derived from "Friar Gaspar," which was a name applied on a chart to the inlet at the north end of the island (Gibson 1982: 13, 70). The inlet is called "Boca Gasparilla" by Bernard Romans on his 1774 chart.¹⁰

In 1835, Seminoles ambushed and killed 105 of the 108 troops under the command of Major Francis Dade north of Tampa. After the massacre, some Seminoles were forced south by federal reprisals. A band of Seminole braves, led by Chief Wyhokee, fled through Charlotte Harbor, attacking and burning a settlement at Useppa Island. As a result of these conflicts, some Spanish Indians were deported to Oklahoma; others might have been forced to Cuba, perhaps returning to the area later.

Previous research

Before my research in the 1980s and 1990s, very little attention had been paid to the aboriginal archaeology of Gasparilla Island. The antiquarian Clarence B. Moore (1905) visited the area, apparently digging at nearby Cayo Pelau. Willey (1949), probably in error, attributed Moore's digging to Gasparilla Island. In 1953 a party of students under the direction of archaeologist John M. Goggin visited the island and recorded two sites. This was the extent of research when I arrived in 1980. Since that time, cultural resource surveys¹² have located three previously unrecorded sites. Thirteen aboriginal sites have been recorded on Gasparilla Island or immediately adjacent keys.

Discussion

I suggest that the Indians who utilized Gasparilla Island used dugout canoes in many of their daily activities. They needed canoes to reach the island and to leave it. Around the "edges of the island they

would have used canoes in gathering shellfish and in fishing. Such activities were affected by the wind and weather. For example, a westerly wind made the island's bayside a lee shore. As such, it provided a long, calm corridor for canoeing, fishing and shellfish gathering. Conversely, an easterly wind made the Gulfside a lee shore, favoring its use.

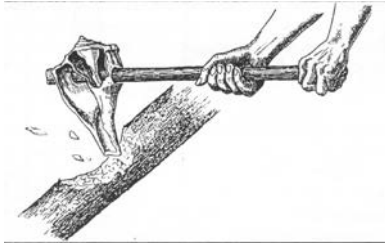
A narrow stretch at mid-Gasparilla Island, now known as The Narrows, could have provided safe access to the Gulf, either by foot or as a canoe haul-over. In addition, the island's southern end offered the shortest crossing of Charlotte Harbor (only .75 miles) to the north shore of Cayo Costa), thereby facilitating north-south canoe travel.

The shell tools and pottery sherds found at the Gasparilla Island sites are the same as ones found on nearby sites around the fringe of the Cape Haze Peninsula. The Indians might have obtained some of their pottery at these nearby sites and then brought them to the island. The similar kinds of shell tools found on Gasparilla Island and nearby sites indicate that the people who lived on these sites were part of the wider community.

While encamped on Gasparilla Island, the Indians used surrounding waters for fishing and shell-fishing. The middens hint at this. For example, bay scallop shells at BG#1 show that tidal flats in Gasparilla Sound were exploited. In addition, surf clam shells at BG#1 show that the beach was also utilized. Further analysis of midden contents may help show that the Indians exploited inlets at each end of Gasparilla Island, as well as near-shore Gulf waters. For example, they might have fished for sharks, rays, grouper and sea turtles in the Gulf. They probably caught catfish, trout, redfish, flounder and many other fish in passes and the bay. It also has been suggested that the island's beaches and inlets were sources of robust whelk shells that were transported to more landward sites where they were fashioned into shell tools.¹³

Furthermore, Indians on Gasparilla Island probably took advantage of natural events such as freezes or winter storms to obtain fish and shellfish. For example, large numbers of pen shells often are washed up on Gasparilla Island beaches after strong winter storms, and both their meat and their "sea silk," or byssus tufts, are usable.¹⁴

Figure 2.2.2 **Cutting-edged tools, like this whelk shell axe used to hew wood, have been found on Gasparilla Island.** Drawing by Merald Clark, courtesy, Florida Museum of Natural History (bghs #06-0051)



The Indians also used the barrier island's plant resources. Shell cutting-edged tools from various sites show that the Indians were hewing wood, probably from the island's mangrove forests. Wood was valuable as firewood and for making tools. Evacuation and archaeo-botanical analysis could reveal that the Indians here utilizing the island's sea grapes, cabbage palm berries, saw palmetto dates, coco-plums, prickly pear cactus fruits and other plant resources.

The opened food shells and the shell tools that I have observed at several sites show that these locations were used for extractive purposes such as for shucking shellfish and for cutting wood. The small amounts of clam shells present at both sites may indicate that clams were taken off-site.

(figure 2.2.3) **Map of undeveloped Gasparilla Island 1860, verse a 1978 map with location of sites visited by the author.** (bghs #06-0049)

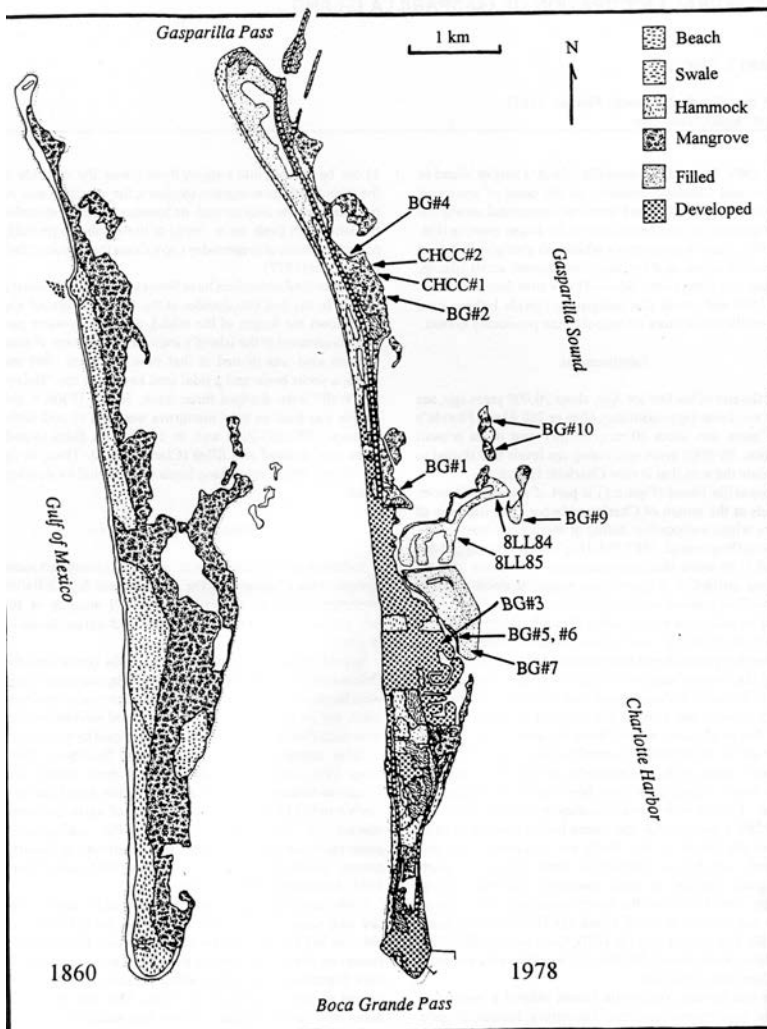


Figure 1. Undeveloped Gasparilla Island in 1860 versus developed island in 1978 (based on Clark 1978). Note locations of aboriginal archaeological sites.

Summary

During the last 20 years I have located a number of archaeological sites on Gasparilla Island. These are small sites, but they deserve further investigation, and should be protected and preserved. I believe that further research of these sites is important because it will help reveal how Charlotte Harbor's original Indian inhabitants utilized Gasparilla Island. These Indians made their living by combining fishing, hunting, gathering and bartering. Their use of Gasparilla Island was undoubtedly complex, and we have a poor understanding of how they used it and other barrier islands in the region.

Future archaeological research can show how the Indians used the island's location on the Gulf and its resources, such as fish, shellfish, sea turtles and other animals as well as plants. These were somewhat limited, given the size of the island, and so the island's Indian population would have been small. I suggest that a small number of Indians may have lived on the island more or less year-round. I also suggest that there was some seasonal use of the land by Indians who lived nearby during most of the year, such as to the north and east along the fringe of the Cape Haze Peninsula.

Table 1. List of aboriginal archaeological sites on Gasparilla Island.

Edic's Survey Designation	Florida Site File Number	Local Name or Location
BG#1	8LL1946	Badcock site
BG#2	8LL749	Tract "A" (GICIA easement)
CHCC#1	8LL1918	Tract "A" (east of 48th St.)
CHCC#2	8LL1919	Tract "A" (east of 48th St.)
BG#3	8LL1945	Harbor Dr. and 4th St.
BG#4	8LL1944	Jones site (Grouper Hole Ct.)
BG#5	8LL1759	Smaller Shell Pile site (on Gasparilla Inn Golf Course)
BG#6	8LL1760	Larger Shell Pile site (on Gasparilla Inn Golf Course)
BG#7	8LL1761	Pond site
BG#9	8LL1943	Sisters Key
BG#10	8LL1942	Small midden on NE and SE sides of Hoagen Key
Jack Point	8LL84	NE tip of Boca Grande Isles
Unnamed	8LL85	SE shore of Boca Grande Isles

Since this article was written several other sites have been located on Gasparilla Island thanks to local informants. They have yet to be investigated or have Florida Site File numbers assigned to them.

References

1. Williams, Lindsey, *Boldly Onward*, Precision Publishing Co., Charlotte Harbor, Fla., 1986: p. 174; *A Charlotte Harbor Perspective on de Solo's Landing*, *The Florida Anthropologist*, 1989: p. 288, fig. 5.
2. Herwitz, Stanley, *The Natural History of Cayo-Costa Island*, New College Environmental Studies Program, Pub. No.14, Sarasota, Fla., 1977.
3. Gibson, Charles D., *Boca Grande: A Series of Historical Essays*, Great Outdoors Publishing Co., St. Petersburg, Fla., 1982. pp. 205 - 210.
4. Goggin, John M. and Sturtevant, William C., *The Calusa: A Stratified, Nonagricultural Society*, in *Explorations in Cultural Anthropology: Essays in Honor of George Peter Murdoch*, edited by Ward H. Goodenough, McGraw Hill, New York, 1964, pp. 179 - 219; Hann, John H., *Missions to the Calusa*, University of Florida Press, Gainesville, Fla., 1991; Marquardt, William H., *Politics and Production Among the Calusa of South Florida*, in *Hunters and Gatherers, Volume 1: History, Evolution and Social Change* edited by Tim Ingold, David Riches and James Woodburn, Dept. of Anthropology, University College, Berg Publishers, London 1988, pp. 161 - 188; Marquardt, William H., *Culture and Environment in the Domain of the Calusa*, University of Florida, Institute of Archaeology and Paleoenvironmental Studies, Monograph No. 1, Gainesville, Fla.; 1992; Widmer, Randolph, *The Evolution of the Calusa: A Non-Agricultural Chieftdom on the Southwest Florida Coast*, University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa, 1988.
5. Hann, John H., *Mission to the Calusa*, University of Florida Press, Gainesville, Fla., 1991.

6. Swanton, John R., *The Indians of the Southeastern United States*, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 137, Washington, D.C., 1946. p. 102.
7. Bullen, Ripley P. and Bullen, Adelaide K., *Excavations on the Cape Haze Peninsula, Florida*, Contributions of the Florida State Museum, Social Sciences, Number 1, Gainesville, Fla., 1956, pp. 2-3,47-48,51,53.
8. Luer, George M., *A Third Ceremonial Tablet from the Goodnoe Mound, Highlands County, Florida; with Notes on Some Peninsular Tribes and Other Tablets*, *The Florida Anthropologist* 47, 1994: pp. 183-1&4.
9. Edic, Robert K., *Fisherfolk of Charlotte Harbor, Florida*, University of Florida, Institute of Archaeology and Paleoenvironmental Studies, Gainesville, Fla., 1996. pp. 37-38; Gibson, *Boca Grande: A Series of Historical Essays*, pp. 15-16, 79.
10. Williams, *Boldly Onward*, p. 150, Fig. 3.
11. Gibson, *Boca Grande: A Series of Historical Essays*, p. 28.
12. Austin, Robert J., *An Archaeological Site Inventory and Zone Management Plan for Lee County, Florida*, report prepared for the Lee County Division of Planning by Piper Archaeological Research, St. Petersburg, Fla., 1987; Edic, Robert F., *Archaeological and Historical Survey, Charlotte Harbor Clam Company*, report prepared for Charlotte Harbor Clam Company, on file, Florida Division of Historical Resources, Tallahassee, 1996.
13. Luer, George M., Allerton, David, Hazeltine, Dan, Hatfield, Ronald and Hood, Darden, *Whelk Shell Tool Blanks from Big Mound Key (8CMO), Charlotte County, Florida; With Notes on Certain Whelk Shell Tools*, in *Shells and Archaeology in Southern Florida*, edited by George M. Luer, Florida Anthropological Society Publication No. 12, Tallahassee, 1986, pp. 95-98, 121.
14. Edic, Robert F., *Fisherfolk of Charlotte Harbor, Florida*, pp. 152-154.