A Visit to Fort San Antón de Carlos

Spanish mission and fort were founded 450 years ago on Mound Key

by Bill Marquardt

“Deep within my heart lies a melody — a song of old San Antón. Where in dreams I live with a memory, beneath the stars all alone.”

So begins one of the best known songs of the American West, written and first played by Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys in 1938. A romantic tale of lost love, it has been recorded by many artists and is still a featured tune of Western swing bands today.

This song refers to San Antonio, Texas, of course, but few Floridians know that their state had its own San Antón, a fortified mission and garrison built 450 years ago in the Calusa capital town located on today’s Mound Key. The full name was Fort San Antón de Carlos, because the Spaniards referred to the capital (and its king) as “Carlos;” not Calos or Caalus as it was more properly pronounced.

Why “San Antón?” In the Catholic religion, Saint Anthony (San Antón in Spanish) is the patron saint of lost things. The initial voyage of Pedro Menéndez de Avilés to Southwest Florida in 1566 was motivated in part by his desire to find Spanish shipwreck survivors rumored to be captives of King Caalus. According to written accounts, Menéndez “had many masses said to Saint Anthony, so that he should intercede with Our Lord so that they might find the port where those Christians were, and the Christians themselves” (trans. by J. Worth). When Menéndez located the town of Calos and found some of the captives, he named the settlement in the saint’s honor. The name was also extended to the sister of King Caalus, who was named “doña Antonia.”

As reported in the March 2015 Friends of the RRC Newsletter, we had previously located both the king’s house (on Mound 1) and the much larger area of the Spanish fort and Jesuit mission (on Mound 2) using a combination of remote sensing, coring, and archaeological excavations. We returned to Mound Key May 8 through June 1, 2017 to explore what appeared from ground-penetrating radar (GPR) to be one or more linear structures. We thought these might be walls of the fortified mission, first built in the fall of 1566 and garrisoned with some 35 men early in 1567. Our suspicions were confirmed.

We opened a 3-x-3-meter excavation on the highest flat elevation and another 2-x-2-meter square downslope, where GPR had indicated structures. No more than a foot beneath the surface, stains of posts were clearly visible in both excavations. In many cases, these dark soil stains were surrounded by a crude tabby (a concrete made by burning oyster shells to create lime, then mixing this with water, sand, ash, and broken shells). Tabby is known from other early Spanish structures in the Carolinas and Florida, and it was later adopted by the English. The tabby walls at Mound Key are among the earliest known in the New World. We found only a few artifacts, principally Spanish ceramic sherds and beads, but that is not surprising because historic documents indicate that items of value were removed when the fort was abandoned in 1569.

In spite of its brief occupation, San Antón de Carlos witnessed the tragic clash of two cultures that neither side could win. The Calusa refused to be converted and conquered, and the Spaniards

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For students from impoverished homes, school field trips may be their only access to the community beyond their neighborhoods. Research shows that educational field trips increase student engagement and help teach facts and concepts. Research on the value of learning outdoors has demonstrated benefits as varied as greater concentration and higher levels of “happiness” among students of all ages.

But field trip costs can be a significant barrier that prevents teachers from getting students to places that connect and extend classroom teaching. In Florida’s social studies curriculum, grade 4 is the time when students are being introduced to Native Florida people, and the Calusa Heritage Trail is an ideal destination for supporting those studies. However, while teachers face financial barriers, we face a barrier of too few staff to instruct students, especially since it is most cost effective to have two classes of students travel on one bus, meaning fifty or more students for each field trip!

Enter Judith and Tim Sear, RRC supporters with a keen interest in insuring that students have access to quality learning opportunities regardless of financial situation and who both hold an appreciation for archaeological research and preservation. In school year 2016-2017, Judith and Tim funded a pilot program that covered costs for all fourth graders of three local schools identified as being Title One schools. At Title One schools, a high percent of students live in poverty. The funds paid for bus transportation and allowed us to hire part-time instructors and prepare student materials. The schools had to be within a 30-minute drive because field trip buses are only available between 9:30 a.m. and 1 p.m. and we needed adequate time for the activities.

Teachers at the identified schools applied for the opportunity and all fourth graders from Hector Caferrata, J. Colin English, and Caloosa elementary schools participated. Throughout the day they took part in hands-on activities exploring how archaeologists use excavated fish bones to learn about past environments, climbing midden mounds to learn how they were constructed, making their own inferences about how tools were used by examining replicas, and using the illustrated trail signs as portals to the past to see Pineland as the busy town it once was.

The dozens of thank you notes we received were rife with evidence of how much the trip meant to the students. Eleana from Ms. Lally’s class at Caloosa Elementary wrote, “Before I only knew a few things about the Calusa, I learned a lot. I saw how to make a net. I was amazed how they did it.” Matthew added, “It was a very neat experience there was a lot of nature around me.” and Kyle added, “I am so grateful for this trip.” The RRC staff and volunteers noted benefits too, including building partnerships with area schools and being reminded of the creativity of children.

With firm evidence that the program was a success, and with the pieces in place for it to continue, Judith and Tim have established the Judith and Tim Sear Family Endowment, which will generate income in perpetuity for these field trips to targeted student groups. Like Kyle, we are so grateful!
archaeological research informs us about the landscapes of the second century, how sea level rises of the past are different from those we are experiencing today, and why we are concerned about those changes. If you have not walked the extension, we hope to see you at the Trail soon and when you go please provide your comments so we can continue to improve our interpretation.

As we reported in our last newsletter, on March 25 at Calusa Heritage Day we opened an extended Calusa Heritage Trail allowing visitors to view the intact portion of the Smith (burial) Mound, see a portion of the Calusa-excavated waterway that encircled the mound, and walk to Low Mound, a midden-mound dating to 300 AD. Now, thanks to funding from the Florida Humanities Council, interpretive signs have been created and were installed in June. Merald Clark created the illustrations which, along with photographs and text from archaeological research and historic documents, provide information about Pineland’s people and their landscapes.

At the base of the Smith Mound, we share the story of Captain John Smith who in 1926 saved the portion of the mound seen today from destruction and we show a photograph of the intact mound taken in 1895 by Frank Hamilton Cushing of the Smithsonian Institution. It reminds us we can all be preservation heroes. Once inside a gate and adjacent to a bench dedicated “In Memory of the Calusa People,” Clark’s artwork and the words of Spanish priests are included on a sign reminding us that death, loss, grief and related cultural practices are universal for all people. At Low Mound, located farther inland and near an ancient shoreline, we describe how archaeological research informs us about the landscapes of the second century, how sea level rises of the past are different from those we are experiencing today, and why we are concerned about those changes. If you have not walked the extension, we hope to see you at the Trail soon and when you go please provide your comments so we can continue to improve our interpretation.

Interpretive sign at path approaching the Low Mound. (Photo by Charles O’Connor.)
refused to act as Calusa allies in their conflicts with other Native groups. Hostilities between Europeans and the Natives of South Florida became the rule rather than the exception throughout the region. King Caalus plotted to overthrow the Spaniards, but – betrayed by his cousin – he was killed by them. Hostilities intensified to the point that early in 1568 Spanish forts at Tocobaga (modern-day Tampa Bay) and Tequesta (modern-day Miami) were abandoned. The remaining Spaniards from Tequesta were moved to a reinforced Fort San Antón in April, 1568. Upon the death of Caalus, his cousin Felipe became king. But Felipe was ultimately unable to walk the uneasy tightrope between Spanish demands and pressure from the Calusa nobles and met his end at the hands of the Spaniards in 1569. Following Felipe’s assassination, the Calusa abandoned their town. With no one left to convert or govern, and no one to provide them labor, the Spaniards dismantled the fort and left the island in June, 1569.

Our 2017 excavations uncovered substantial remains of what may be an outer defensive wall or gate, as well as narrower walls of an interior building of unknown function. If only walls could talk, they might shed more light on the Calusa people and their responses to changes in the world around them. Obviously this work has revealed only a small sample of a vast structure, and much more can be learned from future work on Mound Key. As it is, with each new set of findings, we learn more about Florida’s “old San Antón.”

We are again grateful to Tim, Ted, and Todd McGee for permission to use their dock and to excavate on their property.

Field school students brush loose sand from tabby wall in 2x2-meter square, possibly the outer wall of the fort. (Photo by Victor Thompson.)

Field work was performed by University of Georgia archaeological field school students (Ian Berrigan, Kate Ganas, Rachael Horton, Hannah Locovozzi, Nicole Oster, Sarah Refuss, and Sidney Reynolds) under the supervision of Professor Victor Thompson and graduate assistants Kat Napor a and Isabelle Lulewicz. They were joined by Karen Walker and Bill Marquardt of the Florida Museum of Natural History/Randell Research Center. This work is supported by a collaborate research grant from the National Science Foundation.

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Sincerely,

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