



Friends of the Randell Research Center

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Nine Lives Well Lived

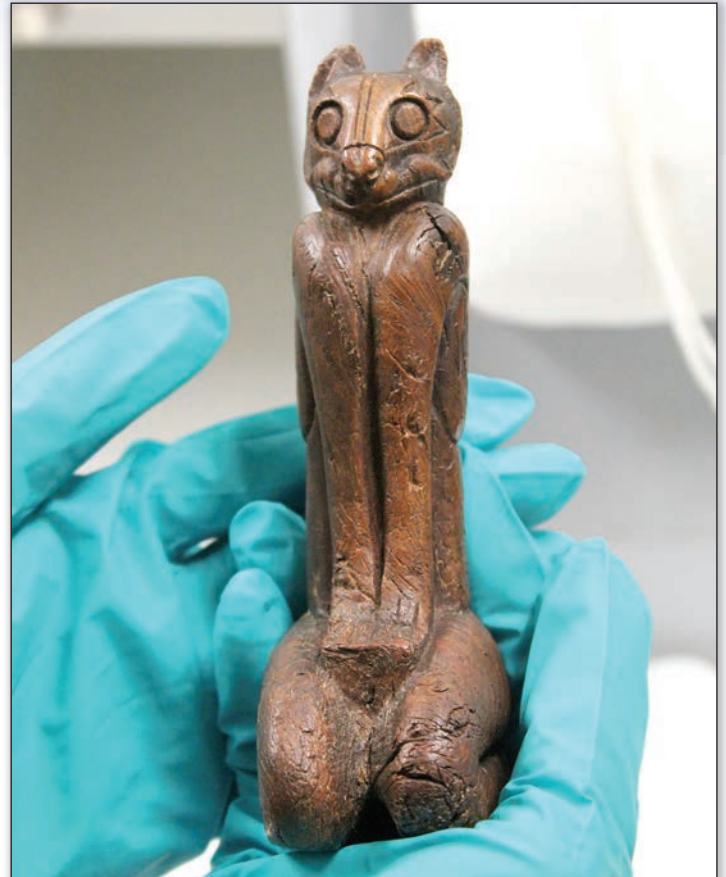
New book describes the lives and times of the Key Marco Cat

by Cindy Bear

No one is more surprised than Austin Bell that he has become the foremost authority on the Key Marco Cat, one of the most enigmatic artifacts of indigenous North Americans. His new book, *The Nine Lives of Florida's Famous Key Marco Cat*, being released in September, is described by Torben C. Rick, Curator of North American Archaeology, Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, as, "An outstanding book on one of North America's most iconic artifacts."

The Cat is part of the Key Marco collection of artifacts excavated by Frank Hamilton Cushing in 1896 not far from the Marco Island Historical Museum where Bell serves as curator. The Cat and other artifacts have resided at the Smithsonian, while other artifacts from the collection have been cared for at the Penn Museum and the Florida Museum of Natural History (FLMNH), parent organization of the RRC.

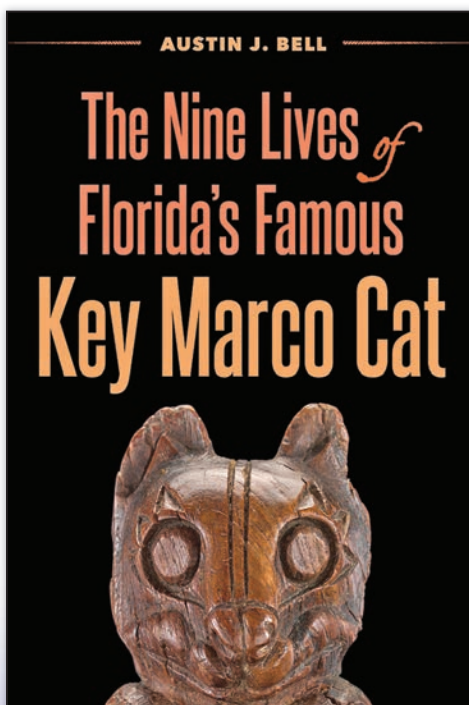
In 2009, Bell was hired as a curatorial assistant and given the task of creating a collection inventory of the FLMNH's Key Marco holdings by Karen Walker, RRC Co-Director and FLMNH Collections Manager for South Florida Archaeology and Ethnography. The work transformed Bell's life as he changed his focus from aerospace engineering to graduate work in



The Key Marco Cat at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History. (Photo by Austin Bell.)

Museum Studies. Following graduation, in 2013 Bell began working with the Marco Island Historical Society to bring the Cat home, temporarily, to its place of origin.

He describes being "awestruck, even emotional" when he first saw the Cat in 2014. "I found myself holding my breath, not wanting to breathe on the object for fear of somehow damaging it. I didn't even hold it in my hands when offered the chance, although I did on a later visit, having regretted the missed opportunity." To him, the Cat represents a significant and timeless work of art. "The Cat is simultaneously familiar and foreign, likely inspired in part by the recognizable Florida panther, but created by a culture so distant that all we know about it comes from archaeology and limited ethnohistorical records. And it looks like it could have been carved yesterday. Its preservation is so remarkable that it is hard to comprehend that it was likely carved using shark-tooth tools more than 500 years ago."



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Austin Bell, Author of *Nine Lives of Florida's Famous Key Marco Cat*.

His admiration extends to Frank Hamilton Cushing, who excavated the Key Marco site in 1896, noting that Cushing was multifaceted in his skills and talented in an ability to describe landscapes as they were in the past. What Bell describes as Cushing's "empathy to his subjects" and "sincerity in his communications" are traits he emulates in his scholarship.

Before A.D. 1300, the Key Marco site was in the area occupied histori-

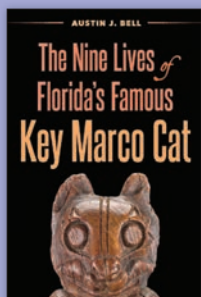
cally by the Muspa, but sometime after, the Muspa were allied with and probably under Calusa control. In the book, and the exhibit at the MHS, Bell explains the basic differences in pottery styles that set apart the Muspa from the Calusa. However, he carefully presents the artifacts as either Muspa or Calusa due to uncertainties that have arisen related to dating the materials.

He points out, "It's important to be forthcoming about what we don't know (which is a lot) while giving credit where it is due, which in the case of the Key Marco artifacts, may well be with the Muspa and not the Calusa, as is often automatically assumed." A full chapter is devoted to the fateful day(s) in which the Key Marco artifacts were deposited into the muck, left there by their creator(s) to be unearthed centuries later. Various theories and explanations are detailed by Bell who explains that the scenarios depend on just when that fateful day occurred.

Having the Cat and other items from the Key Marco collection at the MHS has been a significant experience for the local community and visitors. Many people comment on the Cat's small stature, according to Bell, who also describes people in

tears as they see the object. "People on Marco Island, the Cat's place of origin, are so proud to have it back on loan. It has really become a symbol of local identity here, emblazoned on street signs and all sorts of local merchandise. The fact that it is on loan from the Smithsonian Institution brings with it a cachet that really speaks to peoples' perceptions of our little museum, instilling further pride in the community it serves. In 2019, the first year of the Cat loan, we broke our annual visitation record after a little more than three months, which really showed us the Cat's amazing power. While numbers aren't everything, museum visits are proven to improve general wellbeing and quality of life, and the fact that we can provide those to more people in the community than usual is thanks largely to the Cat."

The *Nine Lives of Florida's Famous Key Marco Cat* promises to further highlight the significance of Southwest Florida's indigenous people, the legacies that can be discovered with careful research, and the importance of Native American art to today's people. All of us at the RRC congratulate Austin on his new book and look forward to offering it for sale in our RRC Gift Store.



Purchase the Book, See the Cat, Learn More

To pre-order the *Nine Lives of Florida's Famous Key Marco Cat*, hardcover, \$26.95, visit the website of the University Press of Florida at upf.com and enter the book title. It will be available at the RRC Gift Store after September.

The Cat, and other artifacts from the Key Marco Collection, will be displayed at the Marco Island Historical Museum, through April 2026. For more information

call 239-389-6447 or visit <https://themihis.info/keymarcoartifacts/>.

To see digital photographs of some of the artifacts in the Key Marco Collection at the Florida Museum, visit <https://www.floridamuseum.ufl.edu/sflarch/collections/key-marco/>.

For further information about the Key Marco Collection, see:

- Marion Spjut Gilliland, *The Material Culture of Key Marco, Florida* (University Presses of Florida, 1975).

- Marion Spjut Gilliland, *Key Marco's Buried Treasure: Archaeology and Adventure in the Nineteenth Century* (University of Florida Press, 1989).
- Frank Hamilton Cushing, 1897, *Exploration of Ancient Key-Dweller Remains on the Gulf Coast of Florida*. Reprinted with an introduction by Randolph J. Widmer (University Press of Florida, 2000).



Scenes from the Calusa Heritage Trail

Photos by Charles O'Connor



Lydia Cuni, Field Biologist, Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden, left, and Tiffany Moore, Butterfly Specialist, Zoo Miami, visited Pineland to assess habitats for possible reintroduction of the endangered Miami blue butterfly.



A tiny bladderwort, *Utricularia subulata*, caught the eye of Lydia.



Ripening papaya fruit overhang the Smith Mound trail. Papaya seeds over a thousand years old were identified in excavations at Pineland.



Modern masks at an ancient site.



Prized volunteer Nancy O'Brien removes invasive, exotic plants.



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Good Questions

Where Did the People of Pineland Get Their Fresh Water?

by Cindy Bear

Today at Pineland, there is no obvious drinking water source for people who thrived here for over 1500 years. The only obvious water bodies are brackish or salty, the water not fit for drinking. So, where did the Calusa and their ancestors at Pineland get their freshwater?

First, in places now altered by dynamic, ecological processes and obscured by human-driven land changes, artesian springs once percolated to the surface. Second, at least one spring-fed creek flowed to the estuary.


Evidence for the springs comes from excavations in several forms. In some, flowing water from buried springs flooded bottoms of trenches dug by archaeologists across the site. At others, where middens from past people were discovered below the current water table, pumps allowed excavation of ancient plant seeds, wood carving debris, and twisted palm fibers. A study of excavations where these centuries old plant parts and pieces preserved, rather than rotted, as is typical, showed that a combination of at least two of three factors: eleva-

tion, age, and closeness to freshwater flow were required for survivability. And, freshwater from artesian sources was found to have been the key factor in preserving plant materials left behind at a time when overall drier conditions would have contributed to their decomposition.

Evidence for a western flowing creek, that crossed a southwestern section of the site as long ago as A.D. 250-300, includes 12 different wetland plant types identified from an excavation near Old Mound. In addition to the seeds of cypress, sedges, and sawgrass were preserved spores of freshwater algae and seeds of water-shield along with remains of freshwater gar and shells of landsnails that

must have been washed into the area. Other clues point to the creek flowing with more vigor during the wet summer period.

In oral histories associated with Pineland, Ted Smith recalled plentiful, clear, spring water near his family home in the early 1900s. The home was situated near Low Mound east of the Old Mound excavation. Traces of that spring and creek are indicated today by low areas filled with leather ferns and other wetland vegetation.

Other property across Pine Island's estuarine shorelines also supported artesian springs. The presence of both percolating and flowing freshwater, however, made Pineland an ideal location for a large, permanent village. 

RRC News

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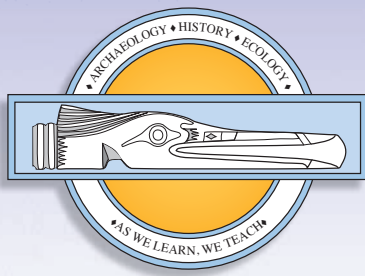


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Friends of the Randell Research Center

Pineland, Florida • March 2021
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Dear Friend,

You are cordially invited to join, or renew your membership in, the RRC's support society, *Friends of the Randell Research Center*. All Friends of the RRC receive a quarterly newsletter and free admission to the Calusa Heritage Trail at Pineland. Supporters at higher levels are entitled to discounts on our books and merchandise, advance notice of programs, and special recognition. Your continuing support is vital to our mission. It means more research, more education, and continued site improvements at the Randell Research Center. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Cindy Bear
Co-Director
Randell Research Center



Please check the membership level you prefer, and send this form with your check payable to University of Florida Foundation, to:

Membership Coordinator • Randell Research Center • PO Box 608 • Pineland, Florida 33945

To join using a credit card, please phone UFF Gifts & Records at (352) 392-8091 or (877) 351-2377 and reference the fund number 05449 or donate online at <https://www.uff.ufl.edu/giving-opportunities/005449-randell-research-center/>.

- ☐ **Individual (\$30) and Student (\$15):** quarterly Newsletter and free admission to Calusa Heritage Trail
- ☐ **Family (\$50):** The above + advance notice on special events and programs
- ☐ **Contributor (\$100-\$499):** The above + 10% discount on RRC publications and merchandise
- ☐ **Sponsor (\$500-\$999):** The above + invitation to annual Director's tour and reception
- ☐ **Supporter (\$1,000-\$4,999):** The above + listing on annual donor plaque at Pineland site
- ☐ **Sustaining Members (\$5,000-\$19,999), Benefactors (\$20,000-\$99,999), and Patrons (\$100,000 and above):** receive all of the above + complimentary RRC publications and special briefings from the Director.
- ☐ **Donation:** This donation is in addition to my membership in order to support RRC programs. (Please contact us to earmark donations to special projects.)

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Photo by A. Bell

For more information about establishing an endowment, creating a bequest or charitable remainder trust, or giving gifts of property or securities, please contact Marie Emmerson, Senior Director of Development, emmerson@ufl.edu, cell: 352-256-9614.

The Randell Research Center is a program of the Florida Museum of Natural History, University of Florida.

Thank you for your support.



A Tour of the Islands of Pine Island Sound, Florida: Their Geology, Archaeology, and History

The Plant World of the Calusa: A View from Pineland

The Calusa and Their Legacy: South Florida People and Their Environments

The Archaeology of Pineland: A Coastal Southwest Florida Site Complex, A.D. 50-1710, edited by

Discovering Florida: First-Contact Narratives from Spanish Expeditions along the Lower Gulf Coast

The Florida Journals of Frank Hamilton Cushing

The Archaeology of Useppa Island

New Words, Old Songs: Understanding the Lives of Ancient Peoples in

Fisherfolk of Charlotte Harbor, Florida

Missions to the Calusa

Randy Wayne White's Ultimate Tarpon Book: The Birth of Big Game Fishing

The Material Culture of Key Marco, Florida

The Crafts of Florida's First People

Water from Stone: Archaeology and Conservation at Florida's Springs

Florida Weather and Climate

Sea Level Rise in Florida: Science, Impacts, and Options

by A. C. Hine, D. P. Chambers, T. D. Clayton, M.R. Hafen and G. T. Mitchum. U. Press of Florida, hardcover, \$34.95

Images from the Calusa Heritage Trail

RRC postcards

Art by Patricia Randell, 4" x 6" black and white, set of 4, \$4.00

RRC logo hat \$22.99

Calusa Heritage Trail T-shirts designed by Merald Clark:

Specify size (S, M, L, XL)

- Seven Masks (black with white image, seven Calusa masks), \$21.99

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