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A Vessel of Indian Culture

By **STUART FERGUSON**



Florida Museum of Natural History

This magnificent centuries-old dugout, carved from a single pine tree, measures almost 19 feet long.

bed of the drought-stricken lake turned out to be dugout canoes, their bows and sterns emerging from the mud. Once state archaeologists were called in, 101 canoes or partial canoes were found and studied, their positions mapped and samples of their wood radiocarbon dated. Dugouts were found buried on top of one another, while more were discovered spread out farther down the shore. Three-quarters of the canoes examined were constructed from Southern hard pine; other woods used were cypress and conifers. Lab tests showed the vessels dated from 500 to 5,000 years ago; their lengths ranged from 15 to 31 feet. It was the single largest cache of prehistoric watercraft ever discovered.

Dugout Canoes: Paddling Through the Americas

Florida Museum of Natural History
Through November 2013

to remove from their protective environment. Earlier exposures of the lakebed over millennia had weakened

Gainesville, Fla.

In the spring of 2000 Steve Everett and his environmental-science students from Eastside High School here were examining the isolated north shore of the 5,800-acre Newnans Lake, six miles east of town, looking for signs of a former logging camp. But what at first seemed to be logs lying on the exposed

In a telephone interview, Mr. Everett said some of his students worked into the miserable, humid Florida summer, aiding the professional archaeologists as they learned what they could before the rising lake submerged the boats. And there, now under about five feet of water, the canoes remain—too fragile

the wood's structure, meaning anything removed without subsequent years of expensive restoration would turn to dust.

Some of the archaeologists were from the University of Florida, and the school's Florida Museum of Natural History wanted to share the information acquired from the dig, showing not just how canoes were used in the past, but how they still play a vital role among present-day Indians.

"Dugout Canoes: Paddling Through the Americas" makes clear these wooden vessels were—and are—the pickup trucks of Native America. Their owners piled their families, food and items for trade into dugouts to carry them across a lake or far across the sea.

A magnificent dugout, almost 19 feet long, discovered near Florahome (between Gainesville and the east coast) is the show's centerpiece. Dating from 400 years ago, it was made from a pine tree and has a slightly raised bow and stern like the canoes at Newnans Lake. A paddle, also on display, was found with the dugout—a very rare occurrence. Along the walls of the exhibit, separating its sections, are large scrim with reproductions of Theodor De Bry's prints depicting 16th-century Indians and their boats in North Carolina and Florida, based on the work of artists Gilbert White (who was with Walter Raleigh's Roanoke Colony) and Jacques Le Moyne (who saw the Timucua Indians of this area when he was with a French outpost near present-day Jacksonville).

"Dugout Canoes" covers a lot of temporal and geographic territory in a relatively compact space; this will make things easier when the show packs up and travels to other museums starting in 2013. Its scores of prehistoric and more recent artifacts tell us how dugouts were used to hunt and fish, and range from a little ivory Alaskan seal-killing club (sculpted in the form of its prey) to a wooden-turtle decoy from Panama. A 19th-century South American paddle has a handsome design on its blade, with a cornucopia and deer framed by palm fronds; other paddles with thinner blades carved into prongs could be used to trap fish in shallow waters.

From Vancouver Island in British Columbia comes a splendid 16-foot-long canoe, constructed about 40 years ago by craftsman Fred Peter for use by a local family. The carving represents Kulus, the younger brother of Thunderbird, with the prow having his head and wings, and the stern his tail. Red, white and black, with green eyes, this showstopper demonstrates the living tradition of dugouts.

Photographs, dioramas and very short videos show the Newnans Lake dig, how similar boats in the museum's collections are preserved, and how modern-day Indians make and use dugouts. There are hands-on activities for children; archaeologist Darcie MacMahon, the museum's head of exhibits, said families make up the majority of visitors here.

When in 1774 naturalist William Bartram traveled through this part of Florida (then an English colony), he came within a few miles of Newnans Lake, rhapsodizing over the abundant animals, beautiful setting and welcoming Seminoles. A few days later, on the nearby Suwannee River, he wrote in his "Travels": "These Indians have large handsome canoes [formed] out of the trunks of Cypress trees, some of them commodious enough to accommodate 20 or 30 warriors. In these . . . they descend the river on trading and hunting expeditions on the sea coast, neighboring islands and keys . . . and sometimes cross the gulph [of Mexico], extending their navigations to the Bahama Islands and even to Cuba." One such party had just returned from the latter island with "a cargo of spirituous liquors, Coffee, Sugar" and one of the Indians "politely presented me with a choice piece of Tobacco" given to him by the governor of Cuba.

"Dugout Canoes" also explores the trade routes, with maps and displays explaining that Gulf Coast seashells were a "hot commodity" found as far away as the Dakotas, that copper beads found near Gainesville could not have been made in Florida, and that feathers from birds found only in Brazil were exchanged for minerals and pigments that came from Missouri. Models of the dugout canoes themselves have been traded between different peoples from earliest times until the present.

After we viewed the exhibition, Ms. MacMahon and Donna Ruhl, an archaeobotanist who oversees the museum's Florida archaeology collection and who worked on the Newnans Lake site, took me to the lake. A short walk under live oak and cypress, Spanish moss dangling from every branch, brought us to the shore; my

guides pointed out the remote area across the water where the dugouts were excavated. No buildings were visible and no boats were out. A heron and white ibis were feeding along the banks, while an interested alligator cruised just off shore. Ms. Ruhl said theories for the large accumulation of dugouts here vary: Perhaps it was the place where the boats were made, or maybe prevailing winds carried the dugouts off from paleo-Indian settlements further down the lake.

Whatever the cause(s), perhaps the Newnans Lake find should not have come as a complete surprise: Later, at home, reading a scholarly article by Ms. Ruhl, I learned that the body of water was named for Daniel Newnan, a Georgia militia officer who fought the Seminoles near here in 1812. But when Bartram came through it was known by the Indians as Pithlachocco, which can be translated as "place of the long boats."

Mr. Ferguson is one of the Florida Historical Society's Rossetter Foundation Scholars.

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