Rehabilitation of the Marco Island Historical Society's Archaeological Collections: A National Endowment for the Humanities Project to Curate Recent Collections from Now-Legendary Sites in Southwest Florida

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Abstract

In 2016, the Marco Island Historical Society (MIHS) received a Preservation Assistance Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to purchase preservation supplies necessary to rehouse the entirety of its archaeological holdings from Marco Island, Florida. Sites represented in the collections include Key Marco, Caicosambas Point, and Hör’s Island, which have been well-known to archaeologists in Florida for a century. Between January 2017 and July 2018, with the assistance of student interns, the MIHS successfully rehabilitated these collections so that they not only be adequately preserved, but also be made readily available to academic researchers and the general public.

Background

Marco Island is home to some of the most well-known archaeological sites in Florida. For more than 100 years, artifacts from several prominent sites have been housed at the Marco Island Historical Museum (MIHM) at the Florida Museum of Natural History. The MIHM is currently co-managed by the MIHS and the University of Florida. The MIHS, under the guidance and oversight of its staff, has worked on an integrative focus on collections, including a long-term project to identify, document, and study archeological collections on the Island. The MIHM was the only organization to receive a Preservation Assistance Grant this year, and is the only organization in the State of Florida in 2016.

Methodology

- Review inventory of supplies, materials, and equipment outlined in grant application
- Order all materials as outlined in grant budget from corresponding vendors
- Collaborate on establishing proper procedures and protocol for rehabilitation of materials
- Draft procedural documents outlining steps necessary to collect materials
- Draft rehabilitation work on representative samples to establish procedures are accurate and appropriate
- Custodian procedural documents to each accession to ensure consistency in the final product
- Perform dry and wet-washing of a subset of unprocessed archaeological material from the MIHM's archaeological holdings
- For field-screened but unsorted materials (BCR007), used nested (11cm x 11cm) mesh screens to process, sort, and bag by type (by species, shell, and meter), and by type. Materials were then documented.

Results

Per its 2016 grant application, the MIHS possessed an estimated 84 cubic feet of archaeological material in various states of preservation, as well as approximately 120 associated photographs and 393 associated photographs. In the 2016 grant cycle, the MIHS was able to purchase conservation supplies and equipment necessary to complete the rehabilitation of its archaeological holdings. By July 31, 2018, the MIHS had successfully rehabilitated and rehoused the entirety of its archaeological holdings, as prescribed in its grant. The MIHS' 2015 grant for 300 cubic feet of preservation supplies and equipment was used to rehouse an additional 19 cubic feet of archaeological material, bringing the total cubic feet of space to 34 (a 32 cubic feet of space increase). The conservation estimate of $2.45/cubic feet was used to rehouse these materials. The MIHS has 1.5 cubic feet of additional archaeological collections.

Conclusions

- Complete rehabilitation and rehoming of the entirety of the MIHS archaeological holdings
- Complete rehabilitation and rehousing of all associated photographs and photographic negatives
- Establishment of clear institutional procedures for processing archaeological collections at the MIHS for future implementation
- Increase in collections accessibility for staff, researchers, and the public
- Increase in accountability and professionalism toward collections care at the MIHS
- Stronger relationships between the MIHS and Florida Gulf Coast University, the University of Florida (UF), the Florida Museum of Natural History, UF/IFAS, the Collier County Museum (ECMO), the Florida Public Archaeology Network (FPAN), and the Southwest Florida Archaeological Society (SWFAS)
- Academic credit for six university students (graduate and undergraduate) for their contributions to the project
- Increased public trust in collections care at the MIHS

Recommendations

In the late 19th Century, archaeological sites represented in the MIHS collections were extensively explored by eminent anthropologists such as Frank Hamilton Cushing, Charles R. Shreve, and David M. Jones. Volcanic material remains from these sites still exist in many museum collections across the United States. However, in the century that has elapsed since these initial explorations, many of these sites have been targeted for modern development. Thus, the more archeological collections that are rehoused, the more archeological preservation that is protected. Digitalization, although not a required outcome of the project, was integrated into the MIHS procedural documents and occurred occasionally within the context of the rehabilitation. In January 2018, the MIHS launched an online digital collections database, available at MIPHIS.Org, that enables users to browse materials included in many of these rehabilitated collections. This project would help to identify gaps in the MIHS archaeological collections and provide a basis to plan future projects to preserve and protect these resources.

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