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, Caxambas Point, and Horr'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.

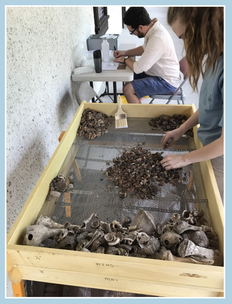
Background

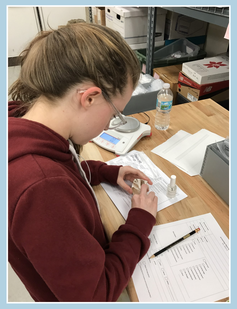
Marco Island is home to some of the most well-known archaeological sites in Florida. For more than 120 years, artifacts from Marco Island have been collected by revered institutions such as the National Museum of Natural History, National Museum of the American Indian, British Museum, Florida Museum of Natural History (FLMNH), and University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Notable sites include Key Marco (8CR49), Caxambas Point Shell Midden (8CR107), Horr's Island Archaic Village (8CR209), and Goodland Point (8CR45).

Now, the relatively young MIHS is developing a collection of its own, largely a consequence of required modern archaeological surveys. The collection holds potential as a resource for public access, education, and academic research, but prior to the receipt of an NEH grant in 2016, its accessibility was limited by inadequate curation and storage. Most materials were housed in deteriorating non-archival field bags and boxes, with associated context in danger of being lost. The MIHS had haphazardly accumulated materials since its formation in 1994, with varying degrees of documentation and provenance. Prior to hiring its first professional museum staff member in 2013, the MIHS did not consider the professional management of its collections a priority.

Under the guidance and recommendations of its staff, the MIHS embraced an increased focus on collections care, making significant financial investments, including the hiring of a second full-time professional in 2015. With a basic organizational framework and professionally-trained staff in place, the MIHS was prepared to systematically improve conditions for each of its collections on a case-by-case basis. The MIHS archaeological materials were deemed a top priority for rehabilitation due to their cultural importance, quantity, and poor storage and record conditions. The MIHS requested $6,000 from the NEH for preservation supplies to rehouse site records and archaeological materials, including bone, wood, shell, stone, and ceramics that document a Native American presence on Marco Island spanning more than 6,000 years.

Notified of its award in December 2016, the MIHS was the only organization to receive a Preservation Assistance Grant for Smaller Institutions in Florida and the only non-university organization to receive an NEH grant of any kind in the State of Florida in 2016.





Left to right (top):

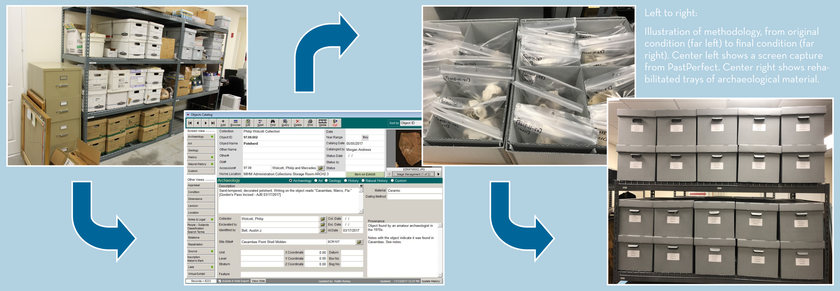
Rosemarie Fusco and Katie Romey sorting shell tools. Austin Bell and Morgan Andrews dry-screening materials. Morgan Andrews making contextual attributions.

Left to right (bottom):

Austin Bell gathers materials after wet-screening. Morgan Andrews and Austin Bell collecting float samples with a geological sieve.

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 rehabilitate materials
- Begin rehabilitation work on representative samples from collections to ensure procedures are accurate and applicable
- Customize procedural documents to each accession to ensure consistency in the final product
- Perform dry and wet-screening of 19.4 cubic feet of unprocessed archaeological materials on-site at the Marco Island Historical Museum
- For field-screened but unsorted materials (8CR107), used nested 1/4" and 1/8" wire mesh screens to process, sort, and bag by type (faunal bone, ceramic, shell, and stone).
  - Note and bag diagnostic artifacts, such as decorated ceramics or modified shell, or ecofacts, such as otoliths and shark vertebrae, separately.
- For unprocessed soil samples (8CR107), float-screen the samples using geologic sieves of 4mm, 2mm, 1mm, and 0.5mm in mesh size, followed by wet-screening non-botanical materials through 1/2", 1/4", 1/8", and 1/16" wire mesh screens.
  - Record sample volumes before "floating" botanical remains to surface by adding water to 5-gallon buckets
  - Pour potential botanical remains off into a series of nested geological sieves
  - Collect potential botanical remains from each sieve using breathable muslin cloth and rubber bands and dry indoors for several days prior to transferring into new archival housing (polyethylene bags within acid-free trays and boxes)
  - Place any observed seeds or large charcoal fragments in glass vials, with acid-free tissue for support, within polyethylene bags
  - Dump remaining samples (after flotation) into nested wire mesh screens and wash with a garden hose, removing surrounding soil
  - Gather washed materials using large fragments of window screen and rubber bands (separated by screen size) and allow to dry indoors for several days prior to transferring into new archival housing (polyethylene bags within acid-free trays and boxes)
  - Note and bag diagnostic artifacts, such as decorated ceramics or modified shell, or ecofacts, such as otoliths and shark vertebrae, separately
- Assign catalog number to materials
- Label materials using either B-72 acryloid and Permalife paper or artifact tags
  - For lots (many materials grouped under one catalog number), use Sharpies on polyethylene bag exteriors and pencil-written insert tags
- Create object record in PastPerfect, tying back to accession record
- Record provenience information from original bag into PastPerfect database
- Preliminarily Identify materials by type, species, etc. (when possible)
- Add contextual attributions and observations not found on original bag (for example, new IDs, site numbers, dates, weights, research attributions, etc.) to object record in brackets to distinguish from original field info
- Transcribe information from original field bag cleanly onto new polyethylene bag with Sharpie (6 x 6" bag is most commonly used size and fits best into interior trays, but bag size depends on sample size), along with any relevant attributions in brackets
  - Order: Catalog Number, Site Number, Site Name, Locational Info. (hierarchical), Site Provenience Info. (hierarchical), Date(s), Excavator(s), Material Type(s), Identification(s), Count/Weight
- Transfer contents of original bag into new bag
- Photograph contents during transfer for inclusion in database
- Cut out and keep original field bag information, folding it and placing it in a 2.5" x 3" polyethylene insert bag
- Create 2 x 2.5" insert labels with field bag information in pencil, insert into 2.5 x 3" polyethylene bags, seal and insert into new bag with materials
- Insert completed bag into interior tray, in order by catalog number
- Insert completed interior tray into storage carton (two per storage carton)
- Label completed storage carton with foil-back printed label
- Repeat for each bag, sample, artifact, etc.



Left to right:

Illustration of methodology, from original condition (far left) to final condition (far right). Center left shows a screen capture from PastPerfect. Center right shows rehabilitated trays of archaeological material.

Results

Per its 2016 grant application, the MIHS possessed an estimated 83 cubic feet of archaeological materials in varying states of preservation, as well as approximately 1,500 associated photographs and 350 associated photographic negatives. In the 2016 grant application, the MIHS estimated that all 83 cubic feet of the archaeological materials would be successfully rehoused within the 166.7 cubic feet of designated space and within the designated project timeframe (January 1, 2017 thru July 31, 2018).

By July 31, 2018, the MIHS had successfully rehabilitated and rehoused the entirety of its archaeological holdings, as projected in its 2016 grant application. Of the 160 acid-free storage cartons ordered, 127 (79.4%) were used to rehouse archaeological materials, occupying 132.4 cubic feet of storage space. The conservative estimate of a 2:1 footprint expansion for rehabilitated materials proved closer to 3:2, leaving an additional 34.3 cubic feet and 33 storage cartons for any additional archaeological acquisitions in the future.

Additionally, all associated photographs and photographic negatives were removed from their inadequate storage and properly rehoused in NEH-funded archival photo/negative sleeves and albums by July 31, 2017. The subsequent cataloging and rehousing allowed for a thorough accounting of the 1,010 field photographs and 398 negatives (previously estimated at 1,500 and 350 respectively). An additional 302 photographs and 96 negatives, included in the 2016 grant application narrative estimate, were determined to be associated with an accession as object condition photos, but not appropriate for inclusion in the permanent collection.

Conclusions

- Complete rehabilitation and rehousing 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 general public
- Increase in accountability and professionalism toward collections care at the MIHS
- Stronger relationships between the MIHS and Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU), the University of Florida (UF), the Florida Museum of Natural History (FLMNH), the Collier County Museum (CCM), 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
- Positive media attention and public relations for the MIHS

Left to right:

Austin Bell demonstrating the project to local high school students. Morgan Andrews and Katie Romey sharing updates about the project at Calusa Heritage Day. Casey Wooster labeling a shell tool. Casey Wooster photographing pottery.

Recommendations

In the late 19th Century, archaeological sites represented in the MIHS collections were extensively explored by eminent anthropologists such as Frank Hamilton Cushing, Clarence B. Moore, and Aleš Hrdlička. Voluminous material remains from these sites still exist in major museum collections across the United States. However, in the century that has elapsed since these initial explorations of these sites, most have largely been destroyed by modern development. Thus, the more recently collected materials from the same sites at the MIHS offer unique potential for comparative studies.

Digitization, although not a required outcome of the project, was integrated into the MIHS procedural documents and occurred simultaneously as the materials were rehoused. In January 2018, the MIHS launched an online digital collections database, hosted by PastPerfect Online, that enables users to browse materials including many of those rehabilitated during this project.

The MIHS hopes that by disseminating the results of this project at the Florida Anthropological Society conference and others, it might increase academic awareness of the MIHS collections as a potential resource for archaeologists and other researchers to study, particularly for incorporation into a student thesis or dissertation. The MIHS is also now better prepared to incorporate its archaeological collections into larger statewide or nationwide digital repository initiatives, should they arise.

The Collections

The MIHS archaeological collection includes approximately 132.4 cubic feet of materials, in addition to 1,010 photographs and 398 negatives that derive from excavations conducted largely over the past quarter century. A total of 24 unique accessions were included in the scope of this project, as well as various artifacts discovered during the project that were previously unassociated with an accession number. Many of these materials were donated to the MIHS by cultural resource management firms after archaeological surveys on and around Marco Island, most conducted between 2004 and 2014. Others are small private collections that were donated by local landowners. Many of the materials hold international significance due to their direct association with well-known Florida archaeological sites such as Key Marco, Caxambas Point Shell Midden, Horr's Island Archaic Village, and Goodland Point. The most well-represented sites in the collection are Key Marco and Caxambas. The artifacts span nearly 6,000 years in age, ranging generally from 4000 B.C. to A.D. 1950.

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