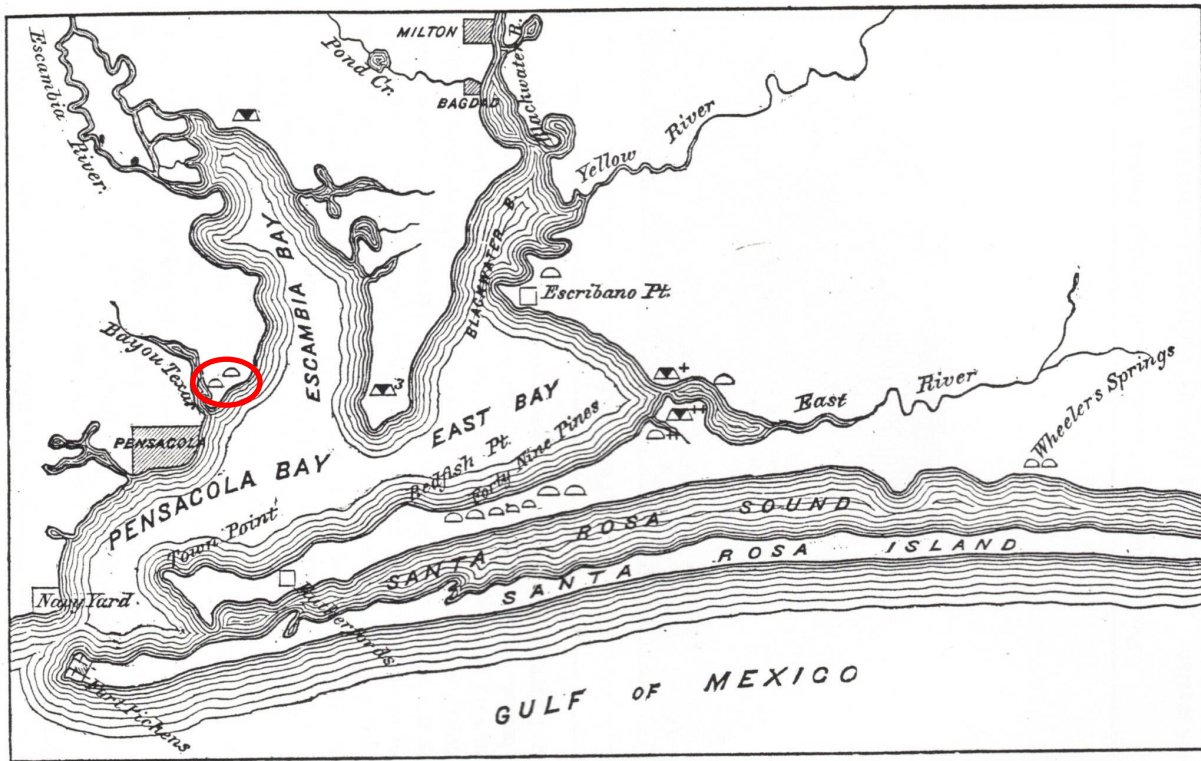


The Native Burial Mounds on Emanuel Point, Florida: The Alleged Location of the 1559 Don Tristan de Luna Settlement

***by: Caleb Curren, CAI
July, 2021***

For thousands of years Native cultures of the eastern portion of the current United States buried their dead in earthen mounds. When the first Spanish explorers came to the current southeastern United States in the 1500s the Natives were still burying their dead, particularly their leaders, in earthen mounds. Spanish and Native artifacts have been excavated in mounds in the Southeast dating to the 1500s. The particular Native village and two burial mounds which are the subject of this article are located on Pensacola Bay at the East Pensacola Heights Site (8Es1).

The history of the discovery and investigations of the site will be reviewed. The current excavations by the University of West Florida (UWF) are here critiqued with an emphasis on their lack of attention to the Native village and burial mounds, their overemphasis on Spanish artifacts found on the site, and their unproven claim that the site is the location of the Luna Colony of 1559.



Native mounds in the Pensacola Bay area recorded by S.T. Walker in 1883 of the Smithsonian Institution indicating two Native burial mounds at the East Pensacola Heights Site (8Es1)(Walker 1885). Burial mounds are differentiated from pyramidal mounds by different symbols on the map. The University of West Florida downplays the Native occupation of 8Es1 despite the Smithsonian research in 1883 and 1947 as well as the work by CAI and even UWF in the late 20th-Century

The East Pensacola Heights Site (8Es1)

There is no question that this site is a Native village location occupied periodically over thousands of years up until the time of the original Spanish expeditions into the region during the 1500s. The Smithsonian Institution recorded two burial mounds at the site in 1883. Some time between 1883 and the 1940s according to Smithsonian researchers the mounds disappeared, likely flattened and spread over a large area during residential development of the time. It is reasonable that the contents of the mounds including 16th Century Spanish artifacts were scattered over a large area when the mounds were leveled for residential housing construction.

The Smithsonian Institution reported on the Native site based on fieldwork by S.T. Walker in 1883 (Walker 1885). According to Ripley P. Bullen, himself a pioneer of Florida archeology writing in 1951 said that, *“Walker’s work was considerably ahead of that of his period. His descriptions were accurate, his conclusions sound...”* (Bullen 1951). A current archeologist, Jeffrey Mitchem, has published articles on S.T. Walker that also speak well of the reliability of Walker as a researcher (Mitchem 2000, 2008). There is no doubt that Walker observed Native burial mounds at the East Pensacola Heights Site.

Another pioneer of Florida archeology, Gordon R. Willey of the Bureau of American Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution, returned to the site in the 1940s. Willey reported that S.T. Walker *“shows two sand burial mounds, but in 1940, during the Columbia University-National Park Service survey, no evidence of the mounds remained. Along the top of a steep, eroding cliff above Escambia Bay black midden stain can be observed for a depth of 10 to 30 centimeters below the humus. This occupation extends along the cliff for some 200 meters”* (Willey 1949). Willey identified pottery from the site dating from the Weeden Island period through the Ft. Walton period. That indicates that the East Pensacola Site was occupied by Native peoples for some 2000 years including the period of the 1559 Luna Expedition.

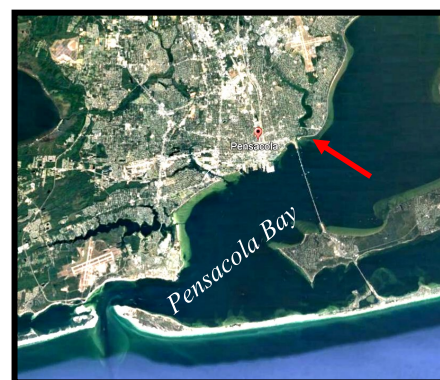
The question remains of what happened to the two burial mounds on the site? A clue to the answer of this question might be a statement of an elderly life-long resident of Pensacola. One of our research team interviewed her and asked about the disappearance of the two mounds. *“Oh they wanted to put a neighborhood there and no one would live there if they knew it was an Indian burial ground. They would be too afraid of it being haunted. It was very hush hush. If they wanted to build something they would just plough down the Indian stuff.”* (personal communication, July 2021).

Spanish artifacts from the 1500s were found at the site by a local Pensacola history buff in 2015 and reported by the University of West Florida as the definite location of the Tristan de Luna Colony of 1559. However, some of the artifacts likely came from the scattering of the contents of the flattened and scattered burial mounds reported by S.T. Walker.

The Luna Colony claim of the University of West Florida was premature. Those initial Spanish artifacts could have come from a number of Spanish expeditions of the 1500s. Now in 2021, seven years after the UWF claim, the requisite archeological features necessary to prove the Luna Colony location have still not been found (Spanish burials, structures, firehearths, and numerous refuse pits).

The University of West Florida is downplaying the presence of the long-term Native village at the site. UWF has currently gone so far as to suggest that the Native pottery was brought there by the Spanish on their return from expeditions to southwest Alabama. That is not logical. The Luna Expedition was fully equipped with many supplies including metal cooking vessels.

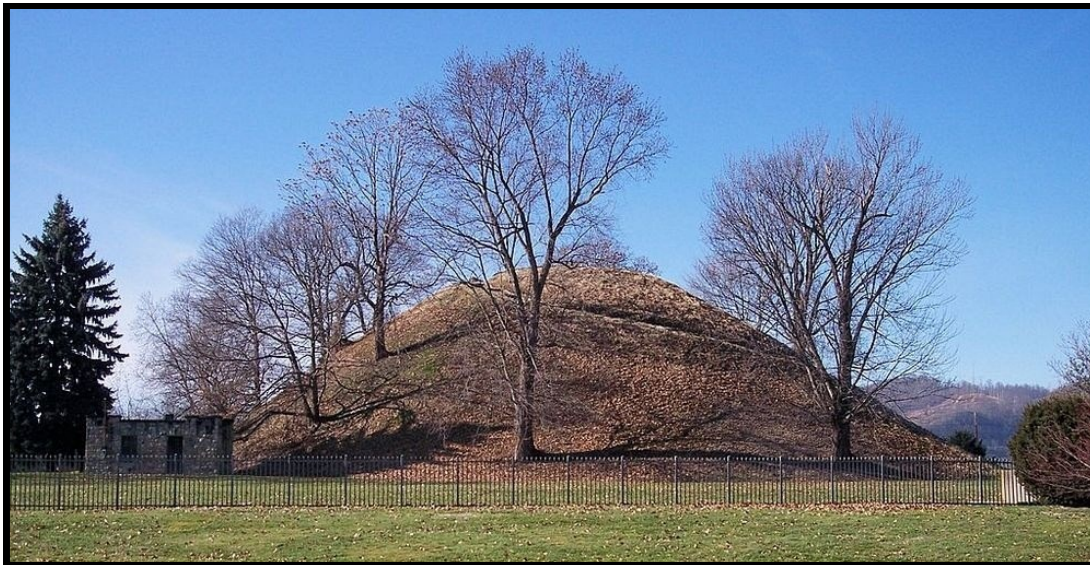
It is egregious that the University of West Florida in 7 years has not produced a technical report concerning their extensive excavations at the East Pensacola Heights Site and in 15 years has not produced a detailed technical report for their underwater excavations on the Spanish shipwrecks adjacent to the terrestrial site.



The University of West Florida conducted research at the East Pensacola Heights Site in 1989 and was forthcoming in reporting that *“A large Mississippian component occurs at the East Pensacola Heights Site, covering approximately ... 25 acres at the southeastern tip of the peninsula... Sand mounds observed by Walker in 1883 were not seen during this survey, and they likely have been removed”* (Bense et al. 1989).

Ironically, 32 years after these conclusions, the University of West Florida does not refer to the Native burial mounds on the site. They are also claiming that they have defined the Luna Colony area on the site at about 25 acres, similar to the acreage that UWF defined as a “large Mississippian component” in 1989. It is disrespectful to Native cultures of the period to deemphasize the Native presence on the site while focusing on the Spanish artifacts on the site. It is possible that the Spanish artifacts recovered by UWF were brought to the site by Native people through trade and shipwreck salvage just off their village.

The University of West Florida needs to produce objective, detailed technical reports of their terrestrial excavations at the East Pensacola Heights Site as well as the three shipwrecks adjacent to the site so professionals can then evaluate the UWF assumptions and conclusions.



An example of a Native burial mound in the eastern United States. We do not know the size or diameter of the two burial mounds reported by the Smithsonian Institution in the 1880s at the East Pensacola Heights Site (8Es1), however, we know that they did exist based on the Smithsonian document. The burial mounds could have been larger or smaller than the mound in this photograph.

Related Research Works

- Bense, Judith A. , Debra Joy, Virginia Parks, Janet R. Lloyd, G. Norman Simons and Alice F. Harris
1989 *The Pensacola Archaeology Survey*. Pensacola Archaeological Society. Publication Number 2.
- Bullen, Ripley P.
1951 *S.T. Walker, an Early Florida Archeologist*. The Florida Anthropologist, November 1951.
- Curren, Caleb
1994 *The Search for Santa Maria, a 1559 Spanish Colony on the Northern Florida Coast*.
Pensacola Archeology Lab.
- Mitchem, Jeffrey M.
2008 *New information on Nineteenth-Century Archaeologist S.T. Walker*. Paper presented at the 60th Annual Meeting of the Florida Anthropological Society. Tampa.

2000 *Sylvanus T. Walker's Adventures in Florida*. Paper presented at the 52th Annual Meeting, Florida Anthropological Society, Ft. Meyers.
- Walker, S.T.
1885 *Mounds and Shell Heaps on the West Coast of Florida*. Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institution for 1883.
- Willey, Gordon R.
1949 *Archaeology of the Florida Gulf Coast*. Smithsonian Institution Collections, vol. 13, Washington, D.C.