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THE TAMPA BAY AREA
FROM THE ABORIGINES TO THE SPANISH

By Charles W. Arnade

The history of the extended Tampa Bay area, ranging from Citrus County through Sarasota County and including the inland counties of Sumter, Polk, Hardee, DeSoto, and possibly Highland, has not been completely told or even well summarized. Maybe it cannot yet be written because much primary research still remains to be done. Furthermore, the amount of misinformation, including unsubstantiated legends, is great and continues to be repeated in spite of new historical evidence. This is aggravated by the presence in the area of a great number of retirees who, in their search for a hobby, take to amateur anthropology, archaeology, history, and even geology. Amateurs can be most helpful if they know the guidelines and techniques of professionals. A prime example of a first-rate historical production by a nonacademic is Frank Laumer's *Massacre!* about the Seminole War in today's Sumter County. However, we have innumerable publications by amateurs - usually printed by vanity presses - which add nothing to better knowledge of our past, but rather detract from efforts to further good history. The emergence of the legend of Jose Gaspar can be traced to one publication lacking elementary features of professionalism. It even contains fabricated data.

Conceivably, one of the reasons for trumped-up information is frustration over the emptiness of human history in the Florida peninsula, especially west central Florida. Institutionalized history does not really start in the Tampa Bay area until the early nineteenth century, many years after the beginning of the American period. From prehistoric times until the Seminole War in the 1830s, this area had hardly any population and no continuity, which is a criterion for the presence of civilization. From the Mesozoic and early Tertiary periods until the nineteenth century, it was a realm of nature rather than man. Although *Homo sapiens* arrived in the area about 10,000 years ago, their numbers were small until recently. The total population of the greater Tampa Bay area at any time was, for example, far less than today's student body at the University of South Florida. In the absence of adequate data, it would not be unrealistic to guess that at any given period before 1800, there were less than two thousand people in the area.

While study of the pre-Columbian periods and the early Spanish occupation was begun seriously in this century, it did not achieve momentum until after World War II and now has entered a phase of intense research, adding new data every year. The main reason is the development of underwater archaeology with better diving equipment and techniques. It must be recalled that Florida was under water in certain periods and that Florida's inhabitants in the peninsula were always near water. Also, the establishment since World War II of anthropology departments at the state universities in Florida, with dynamic research-oriented professors, and the ever ambitious Florida State Museum at the University of Florida, has stimulated the gathering of much new data about prehistory. To these must be added recent research in the geological period, coming also from the state universities. An example is the excellent book edited by University of Florida Professor David Webb entitled *Pleistocene Mammals of Florida*, a necessity for understanding the prehistory of Florida. Finally, the publications of the University Presses of Florida, located in Gainesville, have given greater attention to Florida material in the last two decades.
Despite all the new data, we still lack concise knowledge. Basically, we have not altered much of our historical knowledge, and some of the main questions still remain unanswered. We have a greater variety of information and more details, but we have no single discovery that has radically changed our view of the past. For example, we still do not know precisely when the first inhabitants came to the peninsula or to the Tampa Bay area. We still lack better geographical boundaries for the various areas inhabited by the different aboriginal groups of the peninsula. In addition, we do not know the exact relationships of the various groups or tribes which we generally divide linguistically. Furthermore, these linguistic classifications are controversial. It is doubtful that we can specify the density of early inhabitants of the peninsula. We can say only that the population of peninsular Florida was very sparse.

It is time to accept the fact that this sparse occupation by human beings continued through the first centuries of European presence in Florida. The Spanish and English failed to occupy west central Florida permanently. The aborigines’ population declined, and the Seminoles did not arrive until almost the nineteenth century. Transients came to and through the area, but we need more data for generalizations. Clarification of the early history of west central Florida, with its majestic bay, remains a challenge.

When did Florida's central gulf coast emerge; when did *Homo sapiens* first appear in this region? The answer is probably in the Pleistocene period when present Florida was shaped. Sometime in Holocene Florida, human beings made their appearance. From the Paleozoic (100 million years ago) to the Holocene (postglacial, beginning 25,000 years ago), Florida was first covered by water. It surfaced as a land mass much larger than today, only to submerge again partially before sections of it emerged again to give it today's shape. This left a large continental shelf, narrow on the east coast and wide on the west coast. What is now Tampa Bay was at one time deep in the interior of a much larger peninsula. The changing size of the land did not matter to man because he was probably not there. However, there were animals which were different from those of today. They were the prehistoric fauna, including the Pleistocene mammals. Some of these animals still existed in Florida when the peninsula arrived at its present shape and when man arrived in Florida. Prehistoric animals overlapped for only a short period with *Homo sapiens* in the Florida peninsula. This is conclusive. The prehistoric animals, including larger mammals, became extinct less than 10,000 years ago. Since man hunted them, he must have been here at least 10,000 years ago. Professor Webb's study has identified a few prehistoric fauna sites in Citrus, Sumter, Pinellas, Manatee, Sarasota, Hardee, and Highland Counties. Was man on these sites?

When the Spanish arrived in Florida, followed soon after by the French, they recorded that Florida had about 25,000 aborigines. This is repeated in most of the popular texts of Florida history, but it is not a fixed number. It is simply a "scientific guess." Many claim that the Florida population at the time of the conquest was less than the estimated 25,000. What was the population of the Tampa Bay area? Probably not less than 1,000, but hardly more than 2,000.

We know little of the earliest inhabitants who hunted the big animals, and we might never know enough to satisfy our curiosity. Killing these animals provided most of their necessities, such as food, clothing, materials for shelter, and bones for their tools. Their spears had
distinctive stone points, which have been located with the bones of the extinct animals. Known as Suwanee points, they have been found in the twelve-county area.\(^7\)

The earliest cultural tradition of prehistoric man in Florida, starting about 8,000 to 7,000 B.C. (some claim 12,000 B.C.), is called "Paleo-Indian" and is followed by the "Archaic" tradition, which ends about 700 to 800 A.D. However, cultural traditions do not coincide with archaeological divisions. While Professor Goggin's cultural tradition reaches to 700 A.D., Professor Bullen's archaeological Archaic division ended in 2,000 B.C., followed by other periods in the Tampa gulf coast area: Deptford, Swift Creek, Weedon Island I and Weedon Island II, which reach to about 800 A.D.\(^8\) This is confusing to many and is of importance solely for detailed technical discussions. What matters to the historian is the fact that the life of the people at the end of the Archaic, be it 2,000 B.C. or 700 A.D., was not radically different from that of the big animal hunters. Prehistoric man, Paleo-Indian or Archaic, was basically nomadic - hunting, gathering, and fishing. Eventually, however, fishing or gathering shellfish became more important than hunting for meat. This produced some change in their life-style. The native became more sedentary or semi-nomadic. This transformation occurred sometime in the cultural Archaic period, and the new way of life continued through the arrival of the Europeans. As the aborigines became more sedentary they did cultivate the soil. They also improved their pottery.

The Archaic tradition was slowly becoming semi-sedentary from as early as 7,000 B.C. Where man was located in central Florida cannot be defined exactly, but he existed in the twelve-county region. He had a primitive culture. Goggin concluded that his backwardness is evidenced by the absence of "a cult dedicated to the dead." Wyman, writing in 1875, claimed that Archaic man even practiced "non-ceremonial cannibalism."\(^9\) We still do not know if this is true. Pottery at the beginning of the Archaic period was absent. It appeared in the archaeological preceramic period, surely by 5,000 B.C., and was undecorated.

Most of the available evidence of the Paleo-Indian and early Archaic cultural traditions is not in the twelve-county area, but rather on the east coast and in the St. John's basin. The Tampa Bay region is only marginal to these cultural traditions, but this conclusion may change as archaeological research increases over the next decade. Hunting and especially fishing were easier in the eastern part with more lakes and lagoons which are abundant in shellfish.

Some confusion exists about cultural and archaeological traditions or periods since there is little agreement among archaeologists, anthropologists, linguists, and historians. This is especially true for the expanded Tampa Bay area. Archaeological periods are more clear-cut and defined in time, but not in area. The twelve-county area includes several archaeological regions. In Willey's classical study of 1949, these are all in the area called Florida gulf coast that goes from Escambia County to Charlotte Harbor.\(^10\) Florida archaeologists have subdivided this area. They are well defined on the coast, but Piper and Piper tell us that inland boundaries are "ill defined."\(^11\) The one called Manatee (southern Hillsborough, Manatee, Sarasota, some of Hardee, and De Soto Counties) has some good finds of prehistoric people. The same is true for the Glades and Kissimme areas (part of Highland, Hardee, and De Soto Counties). Of more importance is the region called Central Gulf (Pinellas, part of Hillsborough, Pasco, Hernando, Citrus, part of Sumter, and Polk). Here in the transitional ceramic archaeological time period, which ended about the time of Christ, the Tampa-St. Petersburg area and Pasco County are two
of six major centers in Florida for transitional period pottery. There is evidence of improved pottery not only from "chalky" to "fiber-tempered," but also to some "elementary decorations." The Tampa site had "sand tempered pottery." The Pasco find had "inturned rims" and "linear punctuations."\textsuperscript{12}

Archaeology has not provided necessary cultural data. We still know little about the population. This might be due, as Harry and Jacquelyn Piper say, to "a lack of scientifically controlled excavations and systematically conducted surveys, coupled with a paucity of reported and published data" in the past. To them, "Cultural /temporal periods are defined primarily upon the basis of differences in the artifact assemblages." We are "lacking a clear comprehension of the dynamics of cultural change in these regions." This means that what is provided is a "series of static time units."\textsuperscript{13}

There is more clarity from about 850 A.D. to the arrival of the Spanish. This time span has two defined archaeological traditions (Weedon Island II and Safety Harbor). Bullen claimed that pottery, burial mounds, and points all improved. The Tampa Bay area brought good results for the modern-day professional archaeologist investigating this period. There was a more sedentary life and natives lived in semi-permanent structures in what archaeologists call a "midden area" (a midden is a pile of shellfish refuse). There was a type of central plaza that was clean of refuse and which was next to a ceremonial mound that was flattopped. This population cluster also had burial mounds. People still mainly fished, gathered mostly shellfish, and did some hunting, but there was not much cultivation. They had not embraced the agricultural revolution which had made its appearance in northwest Florida by the time of the European discovery in the sixteenth century. This type of life-style continued until the arrival of the Spaniards.\textsuperscript{14}

Indian mounds were the most visible remains left by the early inhabitants of the Tampa Bay area. This one in St. Petersburg, shown in a 1895 photograph, was subsequently destroyed as were most others. Photograph courtesy of University of South Florida Library.
In 1513, continuous recorded history began for Florida, when Juan Ponce de Leon arrived on the east and then on the west coast. He probably did not go further north than Charlotte Harbor. Most scholars assume that previous to 1513, some Europeans had reached Florida and we possess reliable circumstantial evidence. It is doubtful that these men reached the Tampa Bay area. From Ponce de Leon's arrival on the lower gulf coast through the various Spanish landings in the first decades of the sixteenth century, nearly all attempts to integrate the natives into Christian ways of life failed. The Tampa Bay area was the favorite spot of early Spanish penetration. This period of history and Indian contacts is better known than other periods in prehistory or colonial times, but it also has been the source of large amounts of misinformation.

The natives of Florida at the time of the discovery are divided into several groups, and the greater Tampa Bay area was within the jurisdiction of the Timucuans. The southwestern Calusas are often said to have been occupants of the Tampa area. This is now considered erroneous, but unfortunately is still repeated. Probably the original mistake of assigning Tampa Bay to the Calusas goes back to Hernando de Escalante Fontaneda's memoirs of 1575, which gave the possible Calusa word Tanpa (not Tampa) - probably a Calusa village in another area - to Tampa Bay. From then on it was assumed that Tampa was Calusa territory. The late Bullen has convincingly demonstrated that on the west coast the Timucuan/Calusa border was Charlotte Harbor, rather than Tampa Bay. Recent archaeological findings show that this is correct. It is harder to define borders of these native groups in the interior of the peninsula. For example, Polk (especially the eastern part) and Highland (the southern part), Hardee and DeSoto Counties are difficult to assign to specific native areas. Goggin and Sturtevant, among Florida's foremost authorities on prehistory, even gave a question mark to the coastal area from Bradenton to Charlotte Harbor.
One might ask what these tribal differences mean. What difference is there between a Timucuan and a Calusa? There is very little except linguistically. Even here their languages have a relationship and probably come from a common origin. The best way to describe this to the layman is to compare Spanish with Italian. Cultural differences too were rather minor. Most attention is given to the Timucuans, the aborigines of our area, because we have more data, they are the largest group in terms of area and population, and we know their language. Subdivisions have been made of the Timucuans by leading anthropologists, such as the venerable Swanton. But reevaluations of these subdivisions are taking place. The Tampa Bay area is located in the Tocobaga subdivision. Ripley Bullen, in one of his last publications, said that "tocobaga is a generic term for the aboriginal people inhabiting the Florida gulf coast from Tarpon Springs to Sarasota at the time of European contact." However, he felt that new archaeological evidence tends to show that Tocobaga reached from coastal Charlotte Harbor north to the panhandle gulf coast. Still, nonarchaeologists would like a better definition of subdivisions of the Timucuans.

Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues, a French artist, participated in the ill-fated French attempt to colonize Florida. His Brevis Narratio was published in 1591 and includes his drawings that vividly portray the life of Timucuan Indians.
or even divisions among the main tribes. They are hard to come by. For example, exactly what is meant by "generic term"? The initial Spanish sources, including de Escalante Fontaneda, tell us that Tocobaga was the name of either a Timucuan village or a Timucuan chief, or both, located at Tampa Bay. It was possibly the largest village, with the most important chief, in a cluster of villages or locations. As far as we know, Tocobaga was not a dialect of the Timucuan language. Again, it is far more difficult to pinpoint subtribal identities in the interior of the peninsula in the twelve-county area. Some good Tocobaga archaeology has been located in Arcadia, less in other inland locations.21

Timucuans have been repeatedly described in easily accessible publications, but the descriptions are based mainly on French and Spanish sources derived from contacts on the upper east coast. The Tocobaga subgroup is less known, and we have confusion in the Spanish sources that did not separate the Calusas from the Tocobaga Timucuans. In a posthumous publication, Bullen has given the best summary description of the Tocobagas.22 Even after much historical and archaeological research, he admits that "information about the Tocobaga Indian[s] is meager." They lived in small villages with "a midden paralleling the shore," and they had temple and burial mounds. These structures formed a sort of plaza "kept clean of rubbish." The headman or chief lived on the plaza and presided over a village of as little as ten and hardly more than twenty houses. It is believed that the largest and perhaps main village, where Chief Tocobaga resided, was located where Safety Harbor stands today. Because positive excavations have located this village, archaeologists call this period (1350-1513) and this Timucuan subdivision the "Safety Harbor Culture," which has been found all over our twelve-county area.23 It represents a good synchronization of a cultural and an archaeological tradition coordinated with linguistic information.
Recorded Spanish contacts are adequate in number and have been thoroughly used by historians and anthropologists, but they lack the more precise information needed to define the aboriginal groups, tribes, or subgroups. Still, the Spanish records are our basic material. Some are most useful, such as the Spanish-Timucuan dictionary given us by the Franciscan priest, Francisco Pareja. Other material adds to confusion and mystery. For example, in the Tampa Bay area the De Soto expedition noted the Ocito and Mococo natives, apparently located in today's Hillsborough County. According to Swanton, we know hardly anything about them except that Mococo was either "a province or tribe at the inner end of Hillsboro Bay" whose chief had a castaway Spaniard by the name of Juan Ortiz who served as De Soto's chief translator. After this we know nothing of them. The Ocita or Ucita was apparently a tribe near the entrance of Tampa Bay in 1539, when De Soto landed in its territory. One of its principal towns was seized by the Spaniards as their headquarters, and, it is "believed that this was Terra Cea Island." Again this name vanishes. Most probably these were Timucuan villages with subchiefs, just as Tocobaga was. Having adequate archaeological data about Tocobaga, we apply this name today to historical writings. This situation shows that cultural, linguistic, archaeological, geographical, and historical definitions regarding Florida peninsular prehistory, as well as the period of the Age of Discovery, are not correlated and require much more research and coordination.

Nevertheless, the natives of this area were decentralized into subgroups or villages which acted rather independently, each under the rule of a village chief. They were semi-sedentary at the time of European contacts and lived near water, gathering shellfish for food. They also hunted for meat and gathered and grew some roots, vegetables, and fruits. Political and religious institutions were rather primitive. Contacts with Europeans were intermittent and produced no permanent relationships. Some chiefs were more friendly than others, but basically the natives rejected European dominance. Apparently, some natives had initially met European castaways. Others discovered European materials in the debris of shipwrecks. When the first official Spaniards arrived, these natives had already been subjected to elements of Western culture.

From 1513 to 1565, when the first permanent European settlement was established with the founding of St. Augustine, many attempts were made by the Spaniards and French to settle Florida. All of them failed. The Tampa Bay area was a favorite landing place for inland expeditions. The De Soto and Narvaez expeditions are well-known and have caused rather tiresome controversies about their landing spots and routes. The arguments are of little importance. It suffices to say that the whole Tampa Bay area from Sarasota to Hernando County was the target region for some of these expeditions and provided the first official and recorded contacts between natives and Spaniards. What is less known, and must be emphasized, is the abandonment of most of the peninsula, including our twelve-county area, by the Spaniards after around 1570. Tampa Bay had to be rediscovered over two hundred years later. Incidentally, the same happened with Pensacola Bay, although somewhat earlier.
The so-called, rediscovery of Tampa Bay was really an attempt at a "fullscale reconnaissance with the most modern methods" undertaken by the Spanish naval forces. It reached success with the Celi expedition of 1757, which furnished a beautiful and competent map of Tampa Bay, as well as a detailed report. Although the Celi map was indirectly known, I located it in 1965 in the Naval Museum of Madrid, and a few days later I also found the Celi report in the same depository. Interpretations of the Celi documentation were done by Professor Holmes, the late Captain Ware (a Tampa, Bay harbor pilot), and myself. Today the Celi manuscripts and map are "unquestionably a key document in Florida history" and basic for a study of Tampa Bay's past.27 The Celi expedition was preceded in 1756 by a more limited exploratory expedition from Havana, sponsored by the naval arsenal of Havana under Juan Baptist Franco, a draftsman of this shipyard.28 Later, Franco accompanied Celi. The Franco and Celi reports were very positive; Holmes calls them "glowing reports." We are not yet too sure what were the main motivating reasons for these expeditions. Sea communication from Havana to St. Augustine suffered because of bad currents, storms, and the inadequate harbor of the latter. The route to Tampa Bay proved a safer voyage. In the eighteenth century, the Spaniards still believed that there was a waterway from Tampa Bay to the upper east coast. The timber resources of Tampa were attractive and were an incentive for the Franco expedition. Elsewhere in Florida, foreign threats prompted the reoccupation of Pensacola Bay in response to the French establishment of Louisiana. Also, explorations flourished since the mid-eighteenth century was part of the scientific enlightenment, and Spain had dozens of naval expeditions all over the world (including Alaska). One of their duties was to collect scientific data.

Celi's recommendations could not be implemented as soon afterwards Florida passed into English hands. When Spain reacquired Florida in 1783, another Spanish naval expedition, led by Jose Antonio de Evia, came to Tampa Bay and then continued up the coast. The explorers ran
into a storm at Tampa Bay, where they were forced to stay for awhile. Here they encountered "Indians" who had come on a five-day trip by horse "to hunt around Tampa Bay." They had brought with them "pelttries" to exchange for "firearms," thinking that the English were still in possession of Florida.\(^{29}\) In the end, the Franco, Celi, and Evia reports were generally ignored, but their charts and maps have become important historical documents. The Celi map, beautifully adorned, is an artistic creation and constitutes one of the greatest Florida historical documents.

From De Soto to Celi is a long time, and since the area reverted to a non-European status in the interim, we really know very little of its true history. There is probably more to it than we are aware of. We do know that the bay area was used by transients, mostly from Cuba, from as early as 1600 to the Seminole War or around 1840. Cuban fishermen, among others, came to the gulf coast because it contained a bountiful supply of edible fish. The season started about early September and lasted to the end of March. During this time these men stayed in camps.\(^ {30}\) We also know now that the natives of Florida, using their canoes, traveled from the peninsula to Cuba, usually departing from the southern part of the Atlantic coast. As Cuba became settled by the Spaniards and Havana became an important town, these aborigines traveled to Havana carrying "fish, ambergris, tree barks, fruit, hides, and other goods in demand." One author even claims they carried rare birds to sell to the sailors in port, who would take them home to Spain.\(^ {31}\) It is possible, although evidence is scanty, that natives from the gulf coast also made it to Havana. Exactly who these natives were - the original aborigines or the newcomers eventually called Seminoles - is not clearly determined. We do know that for nearly 250 years there was
commerce between the lower gulf bays (mainly Charlotte Harbor and Tampa Bay) and Cuba by Cubans and Indians.  

The transient Cuban fishermen established temporary "ranchos" and apparently Tampa Bay was dotted with them in the late eighteenth century. Some of these ranchos might have become permanent with changing occupants. The Cubans traded with the natives, and we have evidence that the fishermen mated with native women. The offspring of these unions became either mestizo Cubans or Florida Indians. Negro blood from runaway slaves became part of this unusual society. One story tells of a nearly ninety-year-old fishing patriarch who ruled with an iron hand over some ranchos, most of which were occupied by his extended family. For years he did not return to Cuba, and he finished his life at Tampa Bay. Such people led a truly free life, obedient to no other authority, except when they returned to Cuba. This fascinating phase of Tampa Bay history came to an end with the Seminole War when the presence of American military authority signaled the beginning of the permanent and continuous history of the area.

From the aborigines of nearly 12,000 years ago to the Tocobaga-Timucuans, the arrival of the Spaniards, the Celi period, and the Cuban fishermen constitutes a sweeping time span which is colorful but sketchy, filled with possible misinformation. Too little research has been done, and many points remain unknown. There is room for original research to fill the gaps of the long unrecorded periods.


22 Bullen, "Tocobaga Indians."


29 Holmes "Two Spanish Expeditions," pp. 102-03.


