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Fort Center: An Archaeological Site in the Lake Okeechobee Basin
by William H. Sears

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BOOK REVIEWS

Fort Center: An Archaeological Site in the Lake Okeechobee Basin. By William H. Sears. Gainesville, 1982. University Presses of Florida. Illustrations. Pp. xi, 212. Cloth.

Fort Center (the name of a 19th century Seminole War fort which once existed nearby) is the local name given to a fascinating prehistoric site stretching about a mile along Fisheating Creek to the west of Lake Okeechobee. The site, excavated by the author William H. Sears and others over a span of six years (1966-1971), produced interesting evidence of habitation in four basic periods from about 1000-800 B.C. to approximately A.D. 1700. The people who lived here interacted with a complex environment, the wet savannah, made up of three distinct ecological subsystems. They made their homes near the creek on low mounds elevated above the marshy plain and supplemented their hunting, gathering and foraging with a productive system of agriculture. Their fields, drained by circular ditches in the first period and later raised on linear earthworks, seem to have produced maize or corn.

Undoubtedly the most interesting phase at Fort Center is Period II (c. A.D. 200 to c. 600-800) when a ceremonial center functioned at the site. This complex consisted of an artificially excavated pond in which stood a charnel platform decorated with large carved wooden birds and beasts (many of which were recovered and preserved by the excavation). Adjacent to the pond was a low mound where bodies were prepared for placement on the platform, and an associated habitation mound. A low earth wall, attached to each side of the habitation mound, surrounded the other elements of the complex. Sears believes the small community constituted a single social class of sacred status and that it produced the lime needed in the preparation of dried corn for consumption. He further concludes that Fort Center was merely one of a number of ceremonial centers which stretched into the midwestern states that permit one to trace the religious-ritual spread of the introduction of a corn economy from Mesoamerica and northern South America.

It is beyond dispute that Fort Center is an important, significant site and that Sears has conducted a competent and thorough investigation of it. One might have hoped, however, for a more clear and useful final report than is presented in Sears' book. The chief failure of the book is that it attempts to reach both a professional and general audience. As a result, many details important for the specialist are omitted, yet the book is still too specific and scientific for the general reader to enjoy.

The specialist expects a final report to present illustrations and profiles of the pottery recovered, for on this critical evidence rests the entire structure of the site's relative chronology; none are included. When illustrations are included, the relative sizes of the objects appearing side-by-side are deceptive - a ten inch piece looks as large as a 20 inch piece. Scales should have been included for each illustration, or all represented at the same relative scale. This comment applies to each class of object represented. Line drawings and profiles should also have been given for the pipes that were found. And for the sake of consistency, Karl T. Steinen (who contributed the chapter on the nonceramic artifacts) should have given his measurements in inches rather than millimeters.

Similar criticisms can be raised concerning the copious maps and plans presented in the book. These should be an aid to the reader's understanding of the text, and generally they are. Some, however, are more of a hinderance than an aid. North arrows are frequently omitted, exact locations of profile drawings should have been noted on the specific site plans, and two profiles give no elevations. An overall map of South Florida showing the Lake Okeechobee Basin and the exact location of Fort Center would have been a welcome addition, as well as a complete listing of the maps, plans and illustrations appearing in the text.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the book for the general reader is its organization. Sears has tried to present the data recovered from the site before discussing its implications. Although this is a laudable theory of organization, in *Fort Center* it merely serves to confuse the reader. Many technical terms and discussions are taken for granted in the earlier chapters (e.g. the Calusa Indian empire, the Hopewell phenomenon, Period designations at Fort Center, and the deposit definitions used in the tables) and are not explained in simple terms until the later chapters. A rigorous system of cross-references would have been helpful, although a total reorganization of the chapters in the following sequence would be preferable: 1, 2, 9, 10, 3, 4, 6, 5, 7, 8, 11. Fewer questions are left unanswered if the reader follows the above order.

Despite all these shortcomings, Fort Center, the site, remains a significant and important excavation that raises interesting questions concerning Florida's prehistoric population. As the only substantial report of this fascinating site, Fort Center is invaluable. It is a shame, however, that the book was targeted at two different audiences, and this, unfortunately, has diminished its value for either one.

William M. Murray

The Log of H.M.S. Mentor, 1780-1781. Ed. James A. Servies. Introduction by Robert R. Rea. Gainesville, Florida. 1982. University Presses of Florida. Maps. Glossary. Pp. viii, 207. Cloth.

The major part of this book is the text of the personal log of Captain Robert Deans, R.N., commanding H.M.S. *Mentor*, during the brief service of that ship in the Royal Navy from March, 1780, to May, 1781. The text is copied from the original in the library of the University of West Florida and has been edited to modernize archaic symbols and phrases and to indicate differences between the captain's personal log and the official log submitted to the Admiralty. *Mentor* was a former privateer hastily purchased and commissioned at the height of the Revolutionary War to bolster England's weak naval forces in the Gulf of Mexico against America's ally, Spain. Following commissioning she was stationed at Pensacola to prey on Spanish shipping in the Gulf while protecting the scant British commerce. In 1781, when a superior Spanish force under the able leadership of Governor Bernardo Galvez laid siege to Pensacola, *Mentor* became an important element in the futile defenses of that city. Therein lies the principal interest of this volume for students of Florida history or the American Revolution. The log gives a fresh, if somewhat stark, account of the running battle between the British and the Spanish for control of the Gulf from the viewpoint of the British navy. It gives a day to day account of the battle for Pensacola in somewhat more detail than is usually found in naval logs. Perhaps this is because Deans, knowing that his light ships would be ineffective against the heavier Spanish fleet,