

6-1-1994

Indian Mounds You Can Visit: 165 Aboriginal Sites of West Coast Florida by I. Mac Perry

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Recommended Citation

White, Nancy Marie (1994) "*Indian Mounds You Can Visit: 165 Aboriginal Sites of West Coast Florida*" by I. Mac Perry," *Tampa Bay History*. Vol. 16 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/tampabayhistory/vol16/iss1/7>

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BOOK REVIEWS

Indian Mounds You Can Visit: 165 Aboriginal Sites of West Coast Florida. By I. Mac Perry. St. Petersburg, Florida. 1993. Great Outdoors Publishing Company. 318 pp. Illustrations. Bibliography. Index. Paper - \$12.95.

Florida spends more on historic preservation than other states, perhaps because there is relatively more left due to its more recent development, and perhaps also because preservation is good for tourism. Though original native inhabitants were here for 10,000 years, their remains are seldom apparent compared with more recent historic attractions. Only a few hundred prehistoric mounds, canals, causeways, and settlements are left of the hundreds of thousands that once existed. Florida Indian temples, graveyards, and residences were not stone pyramids but constructions of earth, wood, wattle, and daub, which easily decayed and eroded away. Other than stone tools, pottery, artifacts, and bones, mostly perishable materials usually disappeared fast in the acidic soils and wet climate. The most visible remains are Indian mounds, many composed of alkaline shell which helps preserve organic remains. Mac Perry's book is a welcome addition to public archaeology in Florida because it catalogues for the interested resident and tourist alike the many mounds still standing along the west coast from Cedar Key southward.

This book is, however, much more than just a list of places and exhibits. It presents archaeology for the lay reader in fascinating but never tedious detail, describing how scientists record, investigate, analyze, and reconstruct the past. Respectfully mourning the extinct native peoples, Perry brings out well the conservation message, urging visitors to see, imagine, and enjoy, but not to dig or endanger the evidence, nor trespass, nor disturb the natural environment. He notes how often both shell and sand mounds have been mined for construction fill (most Florida roads were built using Indian midden soils).

This is also the colorful story of a personal quest to visit each site. Here Perry's gentle humor emerges as he guides his boat or his van (named "Buttermilk") past garage sales down some lonesome forested road or climbs up some thickly vegetated, snake- and bug-infested slope, or drives into some heavily populated area to find modern buildings where a mound once stood. His interest was first aroused when he moved into a St. Petersburg house that sits atop the remains of a mound; his extensive background in plant and animal species provides additional attractive detail at each site. The book has photos and drawings of sites, artifacts, and reconstructions of what settlements, buildings, and everyday life might have looked like. Several boxes describe minutiae such as archaeological terms, Florida's law against disturbing aboriginal graves, conquistadors' explorations, and the famous Native American black drink. For history buffs there are descriptions and photos of nineteenth-century excavations, notes on the last few centuries' use of several locales, historic buildings, and early non-Indian pioneers.

Another notable aspect of this work is the author's fanciful (but reasonable) interpretation of different times in the past (from early hunting to the moment of Spanish arrival) by means of short dramatic narratives with "tan, nearly naked, tattooed" characters engaged in getting food, making medicine, and other aspects of Indian life. Unlike a dry scientific report, the popular approach, while not new, is still rare in archaeology. It conveys the excitement of the past by



The Shaw's Point shell midden in Manatee County was bulldozed for road fill.

Photograph from *Indian Mounds You Can Visit*.

fleshing out the detail with real people making and using those artifacts and mounds. Since most excavation in Florida is done with public funds, the public should expect more of this kind of enjoyable reporting about research. Perry has set a good example for professionals.

Well written and edited, the book is inexpensive and attractive, with a beautiful cover painting of the temple mounds, plaza and town that once stood on the shore at Tampa Bay. There are few typographical errors, and the only thing missing is a good overall map. Forced to be picky, I could criticize the author's reconstructions of native life as lived mostly by male actors (the women are usually described as being off to the side gathering shellfish with the kids). I could also ask why he stopped at the Suwannee River and the west coast when Florida has so much more. The book is an intriguing travel guide, educational tool, and captivating story. I hope it can be updated as needed and followed by similar treatments of the rest of the state. It is a valuable contribution to the quest for knowledge of vanished human cultures and the movement to preserve what is left of their evidence as it is rapidly being bulldozed away.

Nancy Marie White