

**Fort Center**  
An Archaeological Site  
in the Lake Okeechobee Basin

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with contributions by

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### Fragments of gold

Some tiny gold objects, apparently found together, may have come from a single composite ornament. The pieces are thin and are square or rectangular in shape. The largest are about  $\frac{1}{8}$  inch in maximum dimension.

### Beads

Since a number of society members presumably had beads from other sites in their private collections, there is more doubt about the associations of the beads than about most of the Mound B historic materials.

A few beads, such as the wooden, melon-shaped ones, are unique. Tiny shell beads, about the size and shape of white wampum from the eastern seaboard, were found in strings on cords of fine, untwisted fiber. We found a short string on an eroded dump pile left behind by the society. There is no copper stain, which makes it difficult to account for the preservation of the fiber. Lack of deep copper staining makes one wonder also about the wooden beads.

About 25 glass beads were examined; the exact number of the glass seed beads is difficult to ascertain because they have become fused. Other beads of shell, metal, or wood were found. Beads are listed in table 5.2.

### Miscellaneous

The only other artifact included in the materials looted from Mound B is a quartz crystal plummet. It is similar to one recovered from the charnel pond.

### Summary

Unfortunately, most collections comparable to the historic materials that were taken from the top of Mound B have also been dug up by pot hunters and are found in private collections and local museums. The top of almost every Belle Glade culture house or ceremonial mound has been pitted in the search for treasure, and an unfortunate amount has been found. One recent episode that almost produced criminal charges resulted in the information that the person had had three pairs of the symbol badges at one time.

Such looting has not produced records of associations, and even locations are dubious. One exception is the collection from the Good-

Table 5.2. Beads

Description	Number	Size
Glass		
Large chevron	1	
Large twisted chevron	1	
Large tubular		$\frac{1}{8}$ – $\frac{3}{16}$ inch
Blue	2	thick; $\frac{1}{4}$ –1
Green	1	inch long
Large spherical		
Blue	2	
Green	2	
Clear	2	
Large ovoid		$\frac{1}{2}$ – $\frac{3}{4}$ inch in
Green	1	diameter; 1
Clear	1	inch long
Seed		
Green, blue, and white	12+	
Other		
Shell, seed	4 strings; 10–20 per string	
Silver, round and oval	4	
Gold, rolled from thin sheet	2	
Wood, melon, dumbbell-shaped, some with slight copper stain	3–4 each	$\frac{3}{8}$ – $\frac{1}{2}$ inch in diameter

now mound (Griffin and Smith 1948), north of Lake Okeechobee on the Kissimmee River, a site characterized by Belle Glade pottery. In the collection is a symbol badge like the three from Fort Center, although smaller and thinner. Also associated with burials were some beads similar to those from Fort Center and one or two similar metal ornaments.

Well to the north and west of Fort Center, from the Thomas Mound near Tampa Bay (Bullen 1952: fig. 4), the WPA excavated collections that include a silver symbol badge and a silver plate with a large central boss like the Fort Center specimen (fig. 5.1, C). There are also beads and other historic objects. A silver disc and odd ornaments from the Picnic Mound (Bullen 1952: fig. 22) are similar to Fort Center specimens, as is the gold disc with central button from the Buck Island Mound (Bullen 1952: fig. 24).

great deal of it in the preceding, we may assume that it continued to be grown and used in Period III. But we do not know where—possibly on high natural levee areas and old earthworks.

#### Period IV

Period IV is marked by a number of features. Changes in ceramics that provide, through seriation, our time scale can be characterized in this period as the presence of a small amount of sand-tempered plain pottery and a large amount of Belle Glade Plain ware. By this time, both types, though drab and utilitarian, were technically excellent. Most pottery specimens are hard and ring when struck; surfaces are uniform and rims neatly finished. The firing technique used to produce hard pottery also produced light gray, even nearly white or light tan, inner and outer surfaces. A series of new rim forms became popular, particularly expanded flat and comma-shaped varieties.

The same number of families—one or two at a time—lived on the site. A new housing mode seems to have been introduced: Small, well-made house mounds were built out in the open savannah. With them appeared a new form of earthwork, another introduction, I think, from South America's long linear earthworks used for corn agriculture. We do have maize pollen from the linear earthwork abutting Mound 1 and from the small linear earthwork abutting on Mound 8. The samples are, I think, unequivocal, coming as they did from long-buried surfaces.

The historic artifacts associated with a few burials in the top of Mound B and a few more artifacts in the midden on the University of Florida Mound document that Period IV is well in the historic period. A single radiocarbon date from the stylistically contemporary late occupation of Mound 3 provides corroboration.

After the characterless Period III, Fort Center and, perhaps specifically, Mound B were once more a focus for authority of some sort. The objects buried with the few people on Mound B, characteristic of this time in southern Florida, seem to be symbols or badges of rank. Since Mound B is the only large mound available for reuse in many miles, the people who were buried may not necessarily have come from Fort Center, and certainly they functioned as parts of a much larger social system than the one existing on the site.

There is no doubt, I think, that Fort Center was a part of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Calusa empire, described in some part by Fontaneda (1945), whose description has been expanded and

explained by Goggin and Sturtevant (1964). The historic objects from the site, in form and style, seem to be part of the distribution of such objects that coincides with area of the "empire." This is particularly true of the metal badges with engraved spiders or jaguars. The distribution of the twenty-three badges known to date in South Florida coincides with the area of Calusa political overlordship as described. But there is certainly a major concentration inland of the gold and silver objects, particularly the symbols. The three from Fort Center are the largest and heaviest known, suggesting the importance of the inland region. I see no reason to believe that the Calusa, apparently a small but highly organized society from the Caloosahatchee estuary, ever came inland to Fort Center or anywhere else for ceremonies, as has been suggested.

Until more work has been done at the major earthwork sites, with good temporal controls, such suggestions can have no validity. Certainly at Fort Center the major earthworks are pre-Calusa and probably had a 5-foot stand of palmettos on them by A.D. 1500.

Fontaneda stated that there were only a few people in a few small villages around Lake Okeechobee. One of them may have been the one at Fort Center. He said that the inhabitants had a kind of bread made out of roots, which they could not get when the water was high. He does not mention corn at all, but would he have recognized it if he had seen it?

I have ended with a question. We are still in the stage where a little research produces as many questions as it answers. For my part, I have found each new set of questions even more fascinating than the old ones. But I hope indeed that answers, and questions, will continue, not just jobs and "reports" filed with agencies that happen to have money.