

# **A MODEL FOR EVALUATING ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE SIGNIFICANCE IN CITIES: A CASE STUDY FROM TAMPA, FLORIDA**

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Despite a long established tradition of compliance archaeology in urban Florida settings, urban archaeology as a distinctive subfield within Florida archaeology has not developed into a productive means of inquiry into this aspect of Florida's recent past. Many archaeological projects in urban environments have not taken the emergence of city life that might have uniquely Floridian characteristics as their primary focus of investigation and have instead targeted more conventional concerns for the prehistoric archaeological record as it lies buried beneath modern city streets. Transportation archaeology, in particular, has not yielded significant new insights into the urban phenomenon, despite major mitigation projects associated with interstate highway construction in Tampa and other Florida cities that have had as their ultimate objective the evaluation of urban archaeological resources for significance according to National Register criteria. Few, if any, truly urban sites have received positive significance evaluations in the nearly forty-year history of compliance archaeology in Florida. Why is this the case? Given that very productive archaeology has been conducted in other U.S. cities in deposits dating to the same periods as those encountered in Florida, the shortcoming is not intrinsic to the archaeological record. That leaves only one alternative: the practice of archaeology itself.

The biggest problem in urban archaeology in Florida is the failure to connect research questions and themes with the appropriate methodology for extracting answers from the archaeological record. Simply put, urban archaeology in Florida is characterized by inadequate research design. It is in the research design that research problems residing within the larger discipline of anthropological archaeology are linked to the relevant means for their investigation. This failure is not the result of lack of technical skill or the inability to understand that urban archaeology is also informed by the historical record. Knowing how to excavate a precise and tidy 50 cm x 50 cm test unit is not enough. Nor is it enough to know that Sanborn Insurance maps can be used as historical documents.

Recognizing that urban archaeological deposits contain the material residue of human behavior is the first step in conducting productive archaeological investigations. The next step is figuring out what scale of behavior is represented—the individual or behavior in the aggregate at any one time, or behavior as repeated through time—and then figuring out what scale of archaeological investigation is appropriate for the deposits under investigation. This process can be understood as forming a “deposit model” and should guide any subsequent pattern of archaeological testing. In a larger sense, this process is situated within the archaeological concern for middle range theory, or how the archaeological record reflects the behaviors that it is predicted to reflect. Integrity clearly becomes an issue here, therefore the process of forming a deposit model is integral for the significance evaluation process. Without a deposit model, the archaeologist simply won't know why he is digging here rather than there or what to do with the things that he finds.

As an element of the research design, the deposit model links the historical and archaeological records. Failing to make this linkage early in the research phase will render the archaeological project simply an exercise in excavation technique. Unfortunately, this step rarely has been given proper consideration, even in projects where extensive historical research was conducted and the subsequent archaeological work was technically competent.

In Florida, the main concern is with developing a framework for postcolonial urban contexts, specifically from the beginning of the Territorial Period (1821) forward. Since many of the features associated with the emergence of the modern American city were not in place in Florida until after the Civil War, the focus can be shifted to years beginning in the 1870s or 1880s. This is when issues of work and labor, ethnicity and immigration, and health

and sanitation, among others, become inescapably crucial to the archaeological research design. The field sites chosen for this study were selected for their ability to contribute to an investigative model for examining social historical processes in archaeological deposits dating to the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

## **OBJECTIVES**

The objectives of this study are to provide the theoretical and methodological elements of an urban archaeological research design. Rather than prescribe a single way of doing archaeology in the city, the goal is to provide the basic building blocks from which innovative approaches to specific problems and circumstances can be crafted. Specific goals of this project included the following:

- develop appropriate methodology for effective, efficient urban archaeological research associated with transportation projects
- develop a model of significance evaluation in urban archaeological contexts to improve and enhance the mandated evaluation process
- test methodology and significance models through archaeological fieldwork in a pilot study focused on urban Tampa, Florida

## **FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS**

The following are among the findings and conclusions drawn from this project:

- We must recognize that the urban archeological record is unique in its expression of both complex human cultural phenomena and the effects of intense modification of the archaeological resource. There is much specialized historical material that is essential both to research design and interpretation of results. In addition, urban archaeology takes places in a complex and sometimes conflictive environment of living humans, many of whom have some stake in the archaeological record. Together, this means that urban archaeology requires a team approach, integrating the skills and expertise of historians, historical archaeologists, and anthropologists. All of these people should be aware of and have connections to the historical preservation community. All urban archaeology is public archaeology, and all public archaeology is applied anthropology.
- Archaeologists should shift their focus away from “sites” as typically defined in prehistoric archaeology to “deposits” as spatially defined evidence of historical-behavioral events within the larger context of the city.
- The significance evaluation process is directed at deposits rather than sites, and it is used to prioritize treatments and recovery plans within project constraints of time and money. A significance evaluation process focused on deposits and occurring as the result of a well conceived research design will result in the discovery and excavation of significant archaeological remains as defined in standard Section 106 terms.
- A “compressed phase” survey and data recovery process of evaluation can be both efficient and very effective for targeting archaeological deposits with the potential to contain significant information, especially if coupled with rapid assessment techniques. The goal is to target significant deposits as early in the investigations as possible, and to move toward an evaluation of these deposits. For many reasons, time is usually not a luxury in urban archaeology.
- Archaeological remains as recent as 50 years old can meet the criteria of significance if the relevant questions are being asked.
- A city block can be an effective sampling unit in addressing many urban archaeological research questions. A close interval subsurface testing program, with intervals set at 20 feet, for example, can be

an effective means to sample deposit variability and guide the placement of excavation units. Systematic posthole close-interval testing provides a rapid and efficient means for sampling urban deposits.

- The collaborative development of a citywide archaeological research design would be a good investment of effort for all parties involved. This process would also be a good way to bring all stakeholders to the table.
- Compliance archaeology done in conjunction with Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) transportation projects can complement FDOT's overall objective of preserving the quality of life in communities and make a major contribution to archaeological method and theory.

## **BENEFITS**

This project was designed to critique, revise, and recommend more efficient and effective archaeological practices that are dependent upon the expenditure of public funds while at the same time identifying means for greater public engagement with the goals and objectives of archaeological research.

All planning projections indicate that Florida's growth will expand at unprecedented rates over the next twenty years. The public will demand transportation improvements and FDOT will be expected to respond. Likewise, the public will demand that impacts to cultural resources be addressed and that significant cultural resources not be sacrificed without appropriate and meaningful mitigation. Recognizing the challenge that lies ahead, FDOT and the Central Environmental Management Office used this research project to address the need for improved, proactive cultural resource planning in urban environments. This report is one response to the challenge and, hopefully, will help shape future studies of Florida's urban past.

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