

Excavations at the Arch Creek Site

(8Da23) Dade County, Florida

Performed for the

Florida Division of Recreation and Parks

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Division of Archives, History and Records Management

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Introduction

In March, 1974, the State of Florida's Division of Recreation and Parks requested that the Division of Archives, History and Records Management undertake historical and archaeological research of the State-owned Arch Creek site in Dade County, Florida, in order to develop interpretive approaches for a proposed museum at that site.

As part of the FDAHRM's archaeological study, a two week excavation beginning June 20, 1975, was made at the site. Recovered data were to be used to construct an interpretation of the site's prehistory as well as provide material for museum displays. Subsequent to the excavation period, an additional two weeks were allotted for an analysis and interpretation of the data. This relatively short amount of time for analysis was not sufficient to do a comprehensive study of the recovered data, but it was enough to classify the artifacts, complete a preliminary sorting of shell remains from one pit, and reconstruct some aspects of subsistence and resource exploitation by the site's inhabitants.

The Arch Creek site (8Da23) is a prehistoric midden which is situated on the northeast bank of Arch Creek (Plate 1) (SW $\frac{1}{4}$, SW $\frac{1}{4}$, Section 21 and NE $\frac{1}{4}$, NW $\frac{1}{4}$, Section 28, T52S, R42E) (Fig. 2). The creek drains from the northwest from what was formerly saw grass glades into Biscayne Bay, a distance of about three miles. The site is located within a hammock about one mile west of

Plate 1
1928 view of Arch Creek looking east, village site on left bank

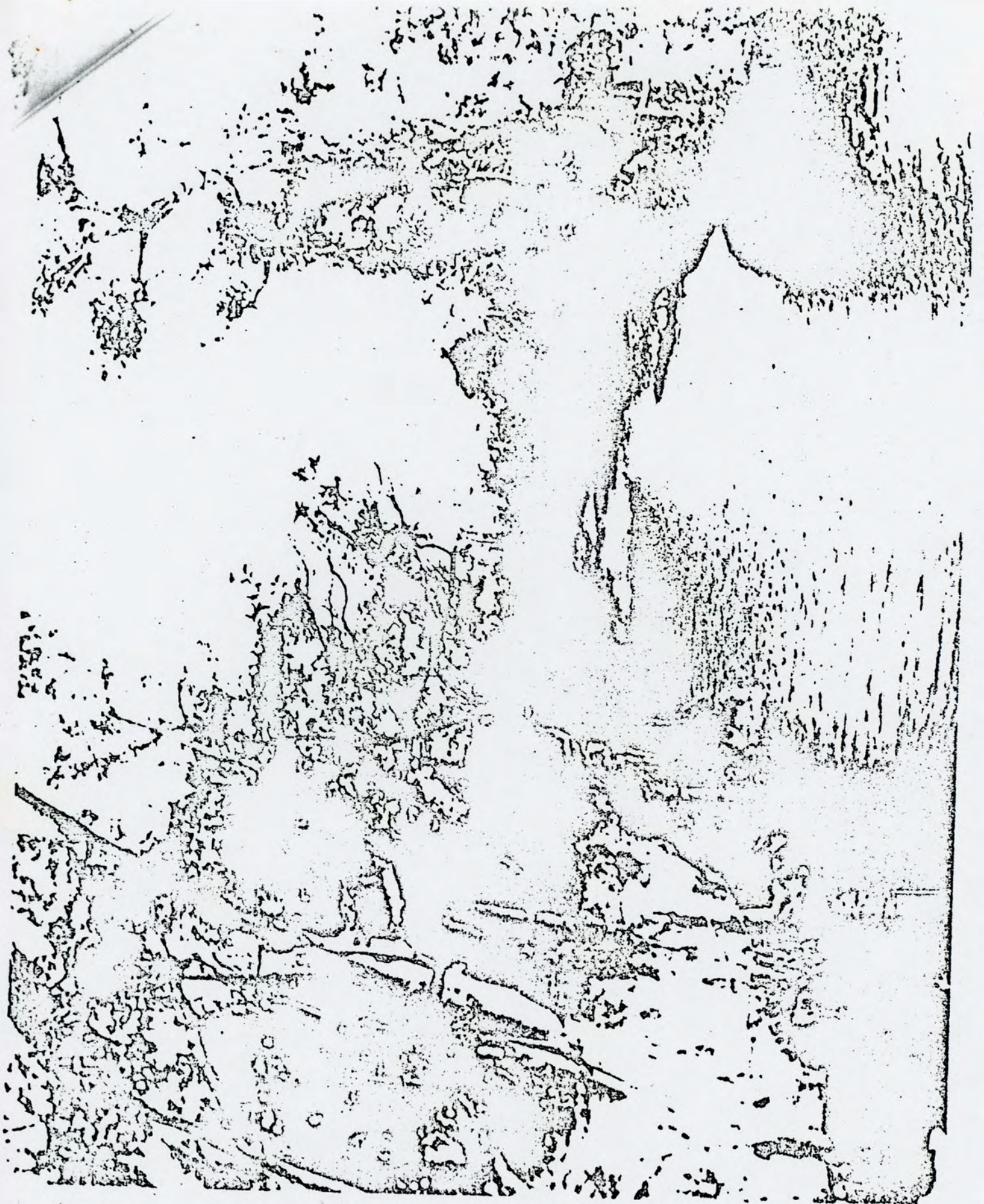


Plate 1

Biscayne Bay and is separated from the bay by a half-mile wide zone of mangrove swamp (now partially filled) which formerly rimmed most of the coast along Biscayne Bay.

Presently, Biscayne Boulevard bounds the eastern side of the site and the Florida East Coast railroad approximates the western boundary of the midden. The midden area encompasses about 5 acres and extends about 300 meters along the creek and approximately 200 meters inland. The site's present elevation ranges from 2.5 to about 4.5 meters about sea level, with about 3 meters being average. The site is divided into northern and southern sections by NE 135th, St.; the northern section being owned by the State of Florida and being the area subject to excavation. The southern Gluckstern parcel is a 3.5 acre tract that continues from the road to the bank of the creek.

A focal point of the hammock and of historic period activity at the site was the limestone arch that formed a natural bridge across the stream. The arch was used as part of the "Capron Trail", a military road that extended between Ft. Dallas and Ft. Lauderdale during the Second Seminole War. Before its collapse in 1973, the arch was situated near the western boundary of the midden.

The Arch Creek site was first recorded by John Goggin in 1952 (Florida Master Site File). He described the site as "destroyed". The destruction he referred to was the extensive disturbances of the site surface caused by the construction of the Sea Breeze Trailer Park in the 1930's. Disturbances

consisted of some surface clearing and the construction of roads and several concrete block structures on top of the site. Portions of the site were again bulldozed in 1956, and afterwards, Mr. Dan Laxson, an amateur archaeologist and resident of Dade County, excavated a total of 8 test pits there (Laxson 1957: 1-10). These pits were confined to the east side of a fence line. The site of that fence extends from 135th St. to about 30 meters north of the street. Laxson reported that considerable disturbances were evident at the site: "...material had recently been pushed north from the creek banks and had also been scattered south in the course of constructing the trailer court on the ridge. The result was a confusing admixture of modern and ancient artifacts on and near the surface" (1957: 2).

In 1967, Arthur Marler, who at that time was a student member of the Broward County Archaeological Society, excavated a total of 9 pits north of 135th St. The exact dimensions of these pits are not indicated in his manuscript, but an accompanying map indicated the pits were very close to those of Laxson (N.D.: 1-19).

In 1972, the Arch Creek tract was scheduled for development by the Chrysler Corporation, and in response to this, salvage excavations were made by a joint group of members from the Broward County Archaeological Society and the Miami-West India Archaeological Society of Dade County over a 60 day period. A total of 8 pits were excavated, most of them to the north of the area where Laxson did his work.

In 1973, a strong public reaction to the impending destruction of the site and its surrounding hammock resulted in the purchase of a major portion of it by the State of Florida, with the aim of developing the tract as a public park.

Culture Area

The Arch Creek site is one of approximately 500 prehistoric Indian sites recorded in southeastern Florida. This part of Florida was defined by Goggin as the Tekesta sub-area of the Glades Area (1948: 102), a cultural area defined by the "exploitation of the food resources of the tropical coastal waters, with secondary dependence on game and some use of wild plant foods" (Goggin 1949: 121). The naming of the Tekesta sub-area after an historic tribe is, as Griffin (1974: 342) notes, unfortunate because of the confusion it causes regarding the relationship between the historic tribe and its geographic boundaries, and prehistoric tribes and boundaries within the same area. A more suitable name for the sub-area would be the Miami sub-area, or some other nomenclature reflecting only the geography of the area.

The sub-area is perhaps best distinguished archaeologically by the high frequency of occurrence of certain decorated pottery types. Specifically, these include Ft. Drum Incised, Ft. Drum Punctate, Miami Incised, Dade Incised, Key Largo Incised, and Surfside Incised (Goggin and Sommer 1949, Goggin 1950, Goggin 1951). Also, the occurrence of certain trade pottery, such as St. Johns ware and Belle Glade Plain (particularly during the late Glades II and the Glades III time (periods) is distinctive.

The geographic boundaries of the Tekesta sub-area were defined by Goggin as including "the Florida Keys, the Everglades and east coast, south of a line drawn from Deerfield due west to the Hendry County line. The western boundary runs south of this last point along the Collier County and Dade County lines to about 10 miles south of the Tamiami Trail, then westward to the Gulf, coming out at the mouth of Lostman's River" (1948: 102). Goggin later revised this western boundary eastward to the Shark River area (Goggin and Sturtevant 1964: Fig. 1), but Griffin would see this boundary being closer to Flamingo (1974: 342). Both the northern and western boundaries undoubtedly fluctuated in their locations at different times in the Glades period, as suggested by the occurrence of Belle Glade type earthworks as far south as the New River. These suggest the strong influences from the Belle Glade Area, or a more southern boundary for the Belle Glade Area during the Glades III period.

There are four basic site types that occur within the Tekesta sub-area. The first type is sand mounds which are oval, dome shaped, and generally range in height from 3' to 15' above the surrounding terrain. The sand mounds appear to be most common close to the coast, but are reported in the everglades as far as 15 miles west of the coast. These mounds were used for burial interment and generally occur within a short distance of a village site.

A second type of site is the rock mound. These are mounds of piled limestone rocks and boulders, intermixed with soil.

First reported by Douglass (1885: 144-146) along the Miami River, they are also known in the Florida Keys, and at least one has been reported in the Everglades of western Broward County (8Bd25). There are no data available to indicate the function or chronology of these sites, though the size and format of the only known, still existing rock mound (8Mo25) in Key Largo suggests a temple platform and a date of circa AD 1200 or later.

The third type of site is the earthwork. Sand earthworks similar to those within the Belle Glade area occur as far south as Broward County. They consist of sand mounds with long ridges extending out from them; some of these ridges are as much as several hundred feet in length. Some earthworks are simply causeways between mounds, but the function of the larger mound-ridge complexes is unknown, although William Sears (1971: 323-329) believes that at least those at the Ft. Center site were used as raised fields for maize agriculture. An additional class of earthwork is the ridges of limestone rock that were observed by the author at 8Mo25, and reported elsewhere in the Keys by several residents there. The function of these "rockworks" is unknown.

The fourth type of site, the midden, is a habitation area. Middens are characterized by black organic soil resulting from the decomposition of aboriginal garbage and other organic refuse, intermixed with food remains in the form of animal bones, shells, charred plant remains, and artifacts such as pottery sherds, broken and discarded tools, and aboriginal hearth remains. These middens are of two classes, the black dirt middens which occur

in hammocks throughout the sub-area, and the larger shell middens that occur along the coastal estuaries and on the bay side of many of the Florida Keys.

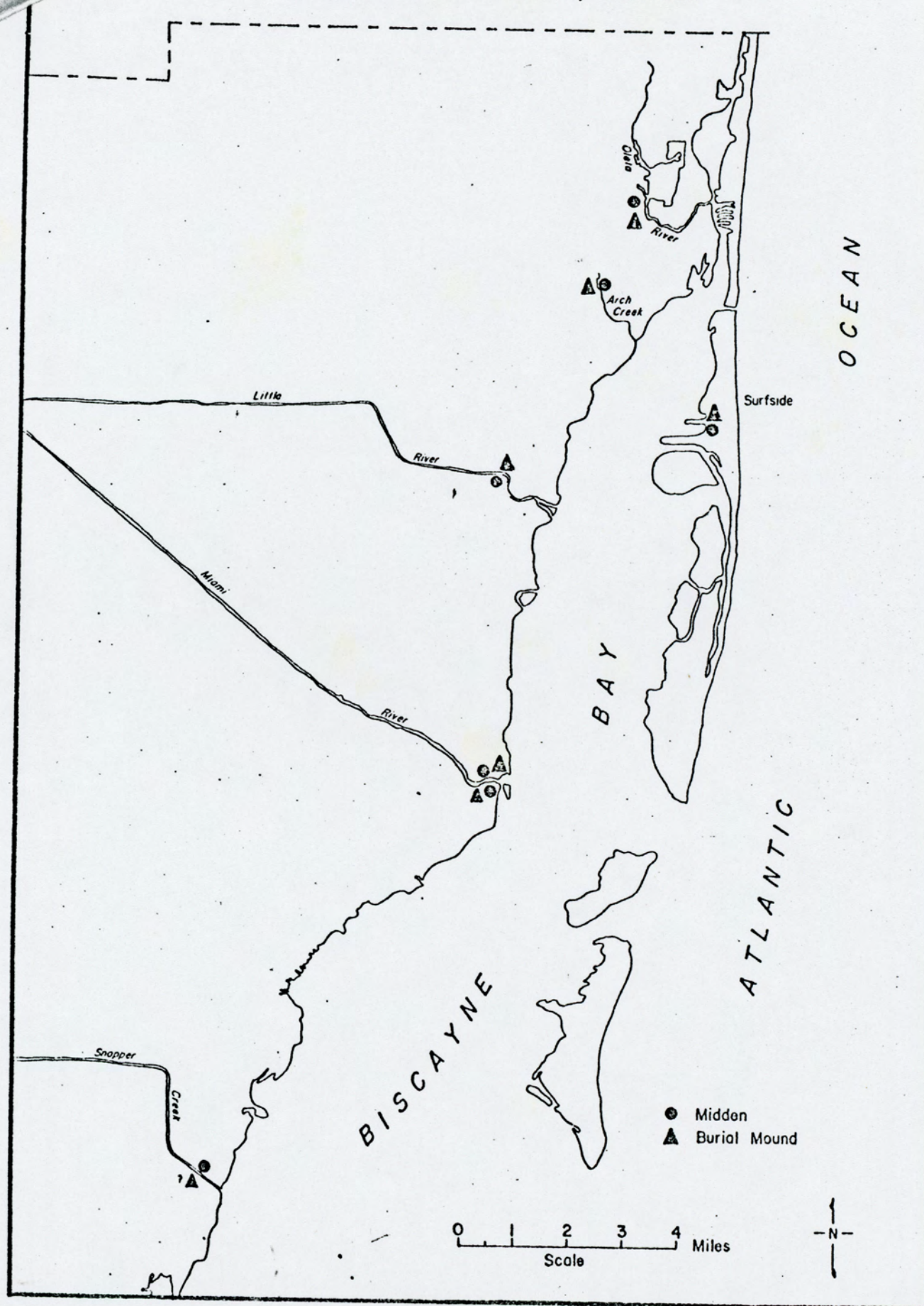
The Arch Creek site is a shell midden and is one of six of the larger midden complexes that are reported along Dade County's estuaries. Specifically, these other middens ranging from north to south are along the Oleta River (8Da25), Little River (8Da97), Miami River (8Dal1, 8Dal2, 8Dal3), and Snapper Creek (8Da9) (Fig. 1). All of these sites have had at least minimal excavations by both professional and amateur archaeologists (Goggin 1950, Laxson 1959, Laxson' 1968). To date, Goggin's work at Snapper Creek (1950: 40-64) and at Upper Matecumbe Key (Goggin and Somner: 1949) provides the best analysis and interpretation of the material culture that is typical of the Arch Creek site and of shell middens within the Tekesta sub-area.

Methods of Site Investigation

Two baselines were extended across the site, and stakes were set along these lines at ten meter intervals. From these a grid system was laid out over the site, and a manual auger was used to remove soil samples at various points within the grid in an effort to determine the boundaries of the midden and the extent of modern disturbances.

The results of augering, as well as of simple observation of the site surface and excavation indicated that there had been extensive surface disturbances. Concrete slabs from the abandoned trailer part were encountered throughout the site with most of

DISTRIBUTION OF ESTUARINE PREHISTORICAL
SITES IN DADE COUNTY, FLORIDA



the park's concrete block structural remains clustered about 30 meters north of 135th St. in the southwest corner of the park. In addition, concrete slabs for trailer pads, asphalt roads for access to the different trailer lots, crushed rock, and a pipe line were encountered during augering and excavations in other portions of the site. Undoubtedly, some land clearing and bulldozing had been done on the site in preparation for the trailer park construction, but observations of soil elevations around the root systems of some of the older oak trees suggested that disturbances from such activity had not been severe, and that at worst no more than 10-20 cm of top soil had been altered or removed; probably in most places across the park area considerably less top soil had been removed.

The most acute disturbances to the site are in the vicinity of 135th St., where the construction of the street included the physical removal of midden deposits. In addition, the 135th St. road right-of-way that traverses the site has been bulldozed and in many places the topsoil removed down to the limestone bedrock. Possibly, at least a meter of soil was removed from some of these areas. Other areas of disturbance are those portions of the site (Fig. 2) that have been subjected to previous excavation by amateur archaeologists and pothunters, as discussed in the Introduction. This is an area of the midden just north of 135th St. about halfway between Biscayne Boulevard and a point 20 to 40 meters north of 135th St.

The highest site elevation is 4.5 meters and is confined to a small oval rise about 10 meters in diameter, located about

halfway between Arch Creek and Biscayne Boulevard and about 15 meters north of 135th St. The shape of this rise is probably due to soil removed from an area south of the rise. Dominated by a large ficus tree, this rise represents the deepest concentration of midden presently within the site. However, the rise has been so thoroughly potholed that there were no undisturbed portions large enough to permit the placement of a test pit during the present investigation.

It was determined that only a small portion of the midden within the park boundaries has remained relatively undisturbed. The main tract of undisturbed midden is approximately 40 meters by 25 meters and is located about 40 meters north of 135th St. and about 60 meters west of Biscayne Boulevard. It was within this area that eight two meter pits were excavated. Four of these were within the midden, and four were in an adjacent area north of the midden. A ninth pit was excavated north and west of this area, but was north of the major midden deposition.

No surface collections were made anywhere within the park boundary because of the extent of surface disturbances. However, a surface collection of decorated pottery and shell was made along the creek within the Gluckstern tract.

The test pits were excavated in 20 cm arbitrary levels. Wall profiles throughout the midden exhibited a general uniformity in soil zones. The uppermost zone was a dark grey humic layer which varied from 10 cm to 15 cm in depth. Mixed within this zone was a considerable amount of 20th century material, particularly rusted nails and broken glass. Most of

Time limitations prevented the completion of excavating level 2 of test unit S13/E70 and of level 3 of unit S8/E65. The data also suffered from the loss or theft of the entire artifact collection from unit N40/E2.

Column samples, one half meter square were excavated from each pit at 10 cm levels. All of these samples were subjected to dry screening and water separation processes. However, there was insufficient time and funds to allow for a complete analysis of the bone, shell, and plant remains recovered from these samples.

Attempts were made to locate additional site components outside the State property. These were in the Enchanted Forest Park west of Arch Creek, owned by the City of North Miami, and on the land opposite the city park north of the creek. The reason for this search was an 1899 account by Florence Miller of a possible burial mound located west of the arch.

A short distance west of the bridge was an elevation, into which we dug. We found skeletons buried on a level in a circle, heads in feet out. An apparently perfect skull would crumble when exposed to air. There were shells on the skeletons, flat shells arranged as a necklace would be, a large one on the breast and smaller ones towards the neck. Each shell had two holes, as for a cord or string, but whatever held them was gone.

(Undated typescript in collection of South Florida Historical Society, Miami, Florida)

Surface observation and augering failed to recover any cultural remains in these areas. Undoubtedly, this burial mound has been destroyed.