

Miami Underground

Dade County's Archeological Success Story

Miami-Dade County has been portrayed by the broad brush of the media as an area that is riddled with crime and corruption and void of deep historic roots. Incorporated in 1896, the city of some 1.5 million souls has experienced dramatic demographic changes and has been passed like a baton from Anglo to Cuban-Hispanic political power in the last 20 years. There is little hint on the surface of this testy city of an archeological and prehistoric heritage that dates back 10,000 years, or of a commitment to the preservation of the community's heritage.

In fact, the area has a pre-history that began with the late Paleo-Indian Period as indicated by the Cutler Fossil Site. There are also hundreds of other Native American sites that range from the Archaic Period to the Formative Period of the Tequesta, as well as Seminoles and Miccosukee sites of the 18th century. Historic occupations are reflected by 16th- and 18th-century Spanish missions and forts, English military and surveyor camps of the late-18th century, Bahamian settlers, and even villages of Black Seminoles who fled American troops during the early-19th century.

The county's current archeological program had no academic precedent since no state college existed in the region until the 1960s, and state and private colleges developed no local archeological curriculum. Investigations were largely conducted by avocational archeologists who were rarely concerned with preservation issues, and when there were concerns, they were generally powerless to affect development.

The county preserved its first archeological site in 1926, when a developer used a burial mound as a central green space of Sherwood Forest, an English style development of the boom period. Other sites were less fortunate and were destroyed or covered with fill during the past century.

The current preservation program grew out of a three-year survey grant by Florida's Division of Historic Resources in 1978–1980. That study

was largely focused on the built environment, but during its last year the state insisted that an archeological survey be included. That single-year study resulted in the hiring of a consultant archeologist and the documentation of over 100 archeological sites in urban Dade County. The consultant archeologist also participated in the drafting of a historic preservation ordinance.

The Miami-Dade Historic Preservation Division (Division) was created in 1981 as a result of county historic preservation ordinance 81.13. This ordinance also created a Historic Preservation Board (Board) with 13 members, each appointed by a county commissioner. The current staff includes a director, secretary, historian, architectural historian, and archeologist (the current director is also an archeologist).

Miami-Dade County is Florida's first county to implement an archeological ordinance and to fully implement a countywide archeological program. Under the ordinance, the preservation requirements are triggered by the county's permitting process that covers regulated actions such as building, grading, and wetlands construction. A proposed project is evaluated against information on the location of both known archeological sites and areas with high archeological probability. The Board is charged with designating archeological sites as historic properties if they meet criteria of eligibility; this determination can be made without owner consent and affords archeological sites full consideration under the law.

Two types of archeological designations are possible: sites and zones. An archeological site designation is of a single discrete location. The ordinance allows the Board to approve or to deny a Certificate of Appropriateness required for any work that would adversely impact a designated site. An archeological zone is a much more liberal type of designation that allows for the designation of an open-ended area of property encompassing one or more recorded sites and/or an area that has a high potential for containing unrecorded sites. This type of designation allows zone boundaries to be determined based on a site predictive model. This means that if there is

a pending preservation emergency, an archeological site can be protected without having to determine its exact boundaries by systematic sub-surface testing.

Proposed development, excavations, or impacts within an archeological zone require another type of approval called a Certificate to Dig, which can be issued by either the Board or the Division. In an apparent concession to property owners, the ordinance requires that all Certificates to Dig must be approved. However, approval can be made with conditions set by the Historic Preservation Division and these conditions often include requirements for Phase I surveys, excavations, as well as other types of mitigation, and sometimes, preservation of all or parts of the site. The archeological zone designation offers by way of legal breathing room tremendous leverage to preserve archeological sites that would have been difficult to preserve under a single site designation. In some cases, the mere fact that a designation is pending is sufficient to bring developers to the bargaining table and often results in the preservation of a site or comprehensive mitigation

Since the inception of the program in 1981, over 35 archeological sites have been designated and protected, and at least 30 sites have been subjected to archeological testing and monitoring because of ongoing development. Since the program began no known significant site in the county has been destroyed without mitigation. Perhaps it is even more surprising considering Miami's pro-development climate that no county actions regarding archeological designations or required archeological actions or preservation have resulted in a court action by the property owner. In fact, only one appeal has been filed by a property owner to the County Commission, which the Commission denied.

Interestingly, compliance with the archeological element of the county ordinance is generally easiest with developers and private property owners, and more difficult with other governmental agencies, particularly other county departments, which often use techniques of avoidance or bureaucracy to circumvent historic preservation requirements. For instance, county and municipal agencies issue permits for tree removal from archeological sites or zones without notifying the Division. Other interagency issues that have arisen include the creation of wetland banks in what are generally considered natural preservation areas where archeological sites are inherently protected. The creation of wetland banks in South Florida includes the scraping away of natural soils to reach current water levels. These actions result in the destruction or intense damage to the sites. Other challenging issues include the clean up of polluted sites where obvious health concerns supersede historic preservation issues. In the case of a polluted boat yard on the Miami River, a significant prehistoric and historic site was destroyed without the benefit of prior testing with only some safe-distance monitoring affected.

Despite these problems, the Miami-Dade County archeological preservation program works because it is based on an ordinance that allows for flexibility and balance between preservation interests and private property rights. Linking preservation to permitting gives the county control over actions that may affect the archeological record while oversight by the Board and review by the Division provide the political, administrative, and technical tools necessary to make the program a success.

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