

## An Ancient Portrait of a Resident of Palm Beach County

In 1928, during a road construction project, a construction crew found an extraordinary wood artifact, a cypress carving of a kneeling human, on the east side of Lake Okeechobee near Pahokee, Florida. This small wooden statue is part of a pre-Columbian collection once owned by Karl Riddle (1890-1985) of West Palm Beach and is now on display at the Richard and Pat Johnson Palm Beach County History Museum. Riddle came to West Palm Beach after serving seven years as city manager of Abilene, Kansas, to work as the city manager of West Palm Beach from 1920-1923. After his twin brother Kenyon moved to the area, the brothers founded Riddle Engineering and were involved in construction projects throughout the county.

The nine-inch-high effigy, which was donated to the Historical Society of Palm Beach County in 1985, is eroded and missing its arms and half of the right side of its face. The damage may have been caused by a metal tool in association with the construction project that led to the discovery of the statue. The still discernable features of the figure are: a drilled hole for the left eye, the nose, the knot of hair at the back of the head, what appears to be a headdress or head band, a few fingers on the right leg, and a smooth lump on the left thigh where the left hand once rested. It has a long crack extending from between the legs up the right side of the body

to the right shoulder. Sometime between 1928 and 1985, when it was donated to the Historical Society, “702” was written on the damaged side of the face in black ink.

Sometime between A.D. 900-1200, an artisan of the Belle Glade Culture carved this effigy using shell and shark teeth tools. This human representation is one of about eight wooden human statues recovered by archaeologists in south Florida. Florida’s unique wet environment of anaerobic (oxygen-free) muck soil allowed wood artifacts to survive for thousands of years.

Muck is formed over thousands of years as vegetation decays in shallow water. Over time it is compacted and the oxygen “squeezed” out creating a soil that is oxygen free and suitable to preserve wooden artifacts. This allowed archaeologists to study how the ancient people of south Florida manufactured wood items. The Historical Society of Palm Beach County is fortunate to have an such important artifact as part of its collections.



Images of the Riddle effigy are courtesy Historical Society of Palm Beach County.