

## An Early County Treasure

by Patricia Miller-Shaivitz, PhD.

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How wonderful that the Historical Society of Palm Beach County is the repository for a priceless artifact; a shell gorget in the apparent form of a mask. Gorget refers to a piece of armor or an ornament worn around the neck; often as a sign of rank. This shell gorget was generously donated by Mr. A. Roswell Harrington as a gift to the people of Palm Beach County. The gorget and other artifacts were found by Mr. Harrington's father, A. Roswell, Sr., during the construction of a railroad bridge near Canal Point during the 1920s.

Located in western Palm Beach County, Canal Point is the juncture where the Palm Beach Canal meets Lake Okeechobee. The area consists of approximately 1,000 square acres and is primarily an agricultural community. Archaeologically, the area where this object was found is known as the Lake Okeechobee Basin in the study of pre-Columbian Florida.

Major cultural features of the Lake Okeechobee Basin area were large earthworks. Some of the distinctive structures included mounds, artificial ponds, ditches, and canals. Nearby archaeological site, Big Mound City - excavated during the 1940s, contained

a large earthen mound and may be considered part of the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex. This designation, sometimes known as the Southern Cult, describes a set of cultural practices that occurred regionally from approximately AD 1000 to 1600.

This shell pendant measures 7 x 7.5 inches with three drilled holes that appear to be two eyes and a nose. The concave surface is smooth, while the convex side is rough with apparent natural shell markings; the outer edges are irregular and incised. The surface lacks modification beyond shaping and drilling, and therefore it would be classified as a basic gorget. Basic shell gorgets are considerably rarer than those with such stylistic features as incised effigy designs.

Previously documented such pendants were made from conch shells found along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. Techniques of manufacturing included cutting, grooving, drilling and abrading to achieve the final product. Usually each shell was drilled with two suspension holes for the attachment of a thong for wearing around the neck with the concave surface displayed. Sometimes a third-middle

hole was drilled to attach additional ornaments. Styles of artifacts change over time including those of shell gorgets. By the end of the seventeenth century the documented use of shell gorgets waned in favor of European trade objects made from metal.

A primary goal of archaeology is to analyze artifacts to in order to reconstruct life ways of prehistoric people. Our concepts of art rarely convey the meaning that objects played in the lives of Florida's earliest inhabitants. Donations of such artifacts as this shell gorget to the Historical Society's collections help to create future research opportunities as we strive for a more complete picture of the people who inhabited the peninsula.

The gorget is currently on display at the Richard and Pat Johnson Palm Beach County History Museum.

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