Two Ancient Springs in North Port, Sarasota County

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Heritage Tourism and Archaeology

Ten years ago I participated in a session at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association that investigated the intersection of tourism and archaeology. That session turned into an edited volume called *Marketing Heritage: Archaeology and the Consumption of the Past*. A decade ago the trajectory toward archaeological sites and artifacts being available for tourists, consumers, and marketing was still in flux; not anymore. Heritage tourism is a major draw for communities, and archaeology plays a central role in recovering material remains for display, interpreting history through things and places, and offering the promise of discovery. The central concern focused on the implications of heritage tourism for the archaeological record and archaeological investigations. So it has been interesting to watch the dynamics for Warm Mineral Springs and Little Salt Spring in southern Sarasota County and especially the discussion of how the Warm Mineral Springs property can contribute to economic development.

Both springs are in North Port, the largest city in Sarasota County. North Port incorporated in 1959 and has attracted many residents but little attention. Yet within its municipal boundaries, the two springs are two of the most important archaeological sites in North America. Little Salt Spring and Warm Mineral Springs are both known to the scholarly
archaeological community and they have much in common geologically and historically but, while the two springs are about five miles apart, they seem to inhabit different worlds.

There is nearly 14,000 years of documented history at Little Salt Spring, and the reasonable expectation that Warm Mineral Springs contains a similar deep antiquity. Coincidentally at the end of June 2013, the University of Miami closed the research facility at Little Salt Spring and Cypress Landings closed the doors to the spa at Warm Mineral Springs. So 2013 might prove to be the most important year in the history of both springs.

_Little Salt Spring_

Little Salt Spring is a beautiful circle. The spring pool is 250 feet in diameter and has a run on the south side that flows to Big Slough, a tributary to the Myakka River. The bottom of the pool forms a funnel. The concentration of dissolved minerals in an anaerobic environment with a warm temperature leads to the preservation of bone and wooden artifacts – unusual for the ancient past represented by the site.

The history of the archaeology at the site came from a discovery by a diver. William Royal explored the springs of Sarasota County in the 1950s. A colorful character, he wrote an autobiography titled _The Man who Rode Sharks_, where he describes the recovery of ancient
remains at the springs. Attracting media attention, his extraction of human remains led Carl Clausen, an underwater archaeologist with the state Bureau of Historic Sites and Properties, to the site. In the 1970s, Clausen recovered human and other skeletal remains from a ledge under the surface. Wilburn Cockrell confirmed the archaeological significance of the site. From 1980 to 2013, Professor John Gifford of the University of Miami focused on developing methodologies for underwater excavations; he established the archaeology for the site along with Steve Koski, who has been a fantastic ambassador for its history. Their findings are remarkable: organic remains that expand our view of the Paleo-Indian and Archaic peoples of Florida, reconstruction of the ancient environment, and scientific stewardship of the site. Since 1979, Little Salt Spring has been on the National Register of Historic Places.

**Warm Mineral Springs**

Warm Mineral Springs was placed on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places in 1977.

![Warm Mineral Springs](image)

Until June 2013, the pond, 236 feet in diameter, was used for bathing. Shaped like an hourglass, the bottom is 230 feet below the surface. There is a cone at the bottom, from collapse of the roof and sides of the sinkhole. Similar to Little Salt Spring, the ancient remains were first documented by William Royal, who was followed by Wilburn Cockrell. The organic remains
include very ancient human burials. The low oxygen content of the water and plentiful minerals led to marketing of the spring as a “fountain of youth.” Cypress Springs, the commercial establishment that ran the spa until 2013, advertised the health benefits of the spring and brought thousands to take to its waters. The spa protected the archaeological remains by encouraging visitors to bathe right by the shoreline.

The Politics

In December 2010, at the height of the Great Recession with a housing crisis that hit Sarasota County particularly hard, the elected officials of the Sarasota County Commission and of the North Port City Commission jointly purchased the foreclosed property of Warm Mineral Springs. The complex included a restaurant, a gift shop, a large parking lot, restrooms with showers, yoga rooms, landscaped lawns, and beach chairs, among other amenities. An editorial in the Sarasota Herald-Tribune celebrated the decision (December 16, 2010), and has sustained reporting on the ownership issues for the site. The management model included protection of the archaeological record and ecology while allowing an eco-tourism business that could be an engine of economic growth. But in late 2012, city elections in North Port brought new voices to the table. The negotiations between county and city led to a stalemate, with the operations of the spa closing at the end of June 2013.

At the same time, a similar closure occurred at Little Salt Spring. The University of Miami ended research operations and Professor Gifford retired in summer 2013. The University, which had supported a fundraising campaign during 2010-12, is deciding to sell the property to Sarasota County. There are no discussions of joint ownership for the property that contained the spring, the 1970s tomato farm trailers used by the archaeological team, and a small dock.
Two Trajectories

I have watched with interest the different expectations for each spring. One is a preserve and the mechanism for preservation is slowly working through the county governmental structure; the other is meant to be an engine for ecotourism, with much newspaper attention given to each debate on the city and county commissions. Any visitor can notice the contrast between the two places. The failure of a scheme to create a visitor center at Little Salt Spring may turn out to be a long-term benefit as the undeveloped property offers flexibility for the foreseeable future while ownership of Warm Mineral Springs grapples with the legacy of “fountain of youth” advertising, Sarasota School of Architecture buildings turning fifty years of age, and a 1970s cyclorama depicting a fantasy display of Ponce de Leon battling Indians as well as the preservation of the archaeological record within the spring. Future excavations at Little Salt Spring would need county approval; for Warm Mineral Springs, any archaeology would have to negotiate with tourists swimming in an Archaic-period burial pond.

The important lesson for those committed to protecting the archaeological record and historic sites for the future is the necessity of considering the embodied experience of visiting places, gaining community support for representations and associated activities at sites, and working toward sustainable relations with auxiliary organizations and especially civic groups. As the world continues to get smaller and globalization ties processes and peoples together more closely, and information flows more readily, the past faces an uncertain future. But the contrast between Warm Mineral Springs and Little Salt Spring offers a useful comparison for professionals and the interested public.
The Future of the Springs

Little Salt Spring and Warm Mineral Springs are unusual in that their archaeological records are underwater, making excavations challenging. The archaeological significance of the two springs is well documented, with both invoked in standard archaeological textbooks for their evidence of some of the earliest inhabitants of the Americas. There are a handful of scholarly publications on Warm Mineral Springs, with more on Little Salt Spring due to the sustained efforts of the University of Miami researchers. But the relationship between the archaeological evidence found in the separate springs has not received sustained attention, and the lifeworlds of the PaleoIndian and Archaic period peoples have been left mostly in the shadows. The springs are important places for archaeology and for the heritage of West Central Florida and interesting for understanding both the deep history of North America and the politics of the past.

Surprisingly, as I observed in the 2004 discussion of marketing heritage, places that fail to attract attention are easier to protect and sustain than those that have active tourist components. Any new endeavor at Warm Mineral Springs, with its facilities and tradition for so many communities, will require negotiations among various interests. The rationale for public ownership of the places bifurcates into economic activity via consumable goods and services or preservation as educational resources for local residents and visitors drawn to natural beauty and archaeological insights. With visitation comes heritage tourism or ecotourism, with resulting commodification of the places and their attractions. So, the trajectories of the two springs, seemingly, will meet up at some point in the near future, for the first time since ancient peoples used them.

Warm Mineral Springs and Little Salt Spring deserve continuing attention for there are going to be important lessons for archaeologists in terms of conservation and for the public as
economic development and preserving the past for the future intersect more and more. Historic preservation in Florida and across the USA will get more complicated as interest in tourism, heritage, and new sources of economic development arises, as the two springs in North Port are demonstrating. Sarasota residents supporting preservation at these springs may be able to create a model for preservation across the USA as the challenges of competing interests continue to increase in complexity.