

SPANISH CONTACTS WITH THE AIS
(INDIAN RIVER) COUNTRY*

by CHARLES D. HIGGS

The narratives of the early explorers and the Spanish archives of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are replete with references concerning shipwrecks in the Bahama channel. This passage which gave to Florida its strategic importance, offered a course with more favoring winds and a safer route for the homeward-bound treasure fleets from Mexico, but was in itself distinctly hazardous. Ships and even whole fleets were too often wrecked all along the "Banda del Sur", or South Coast, from St. Augustine to the lower keys. The majority of these disasters occurred along that bight of the shore, south of Cape Canaveral, where, (as Bishop Calderon wrote in 1675) the reefs extend six leagues out to sea.

In the chronicles of the period this region was referred to as the *Ays Coast*, or as the *Land or Province of Ays*, so called from the name of the Indian tribe inhabiting it, hence the name of the estuary running its entire length which we know as the Indian River.

* Read at the Archeology session of the annual meeting of the Florida Historical Society, March 6, 1942.

Indebtedness is gratefully acknowledged to Mr. Albert Manucy and the National Park Service for the use of the microfilm copies of the Spanish records of the North Carolina Historical Commission, to Mr. Watt Marchman and the Florida Historical Society, Mrs. E. W. Lawson and the St. Augustine Historical Society, Miss Emily L. Wilson, and others.

1. "The Province of Ays, as designated by the Spanish, embraced the entire Indian River Country, from Canaveral south to the St. Lucie Inlet. The capital town of the district, near the Indian River Inlet, was sometimes called St. Augustin de Ais, from the abortive missionary attempt made there." (Swanton: *Early History of the Creek Indians and their Neighbors* B. A. E. 73, p. 333).

Romans gives the meaning of the word *Ais* as *Deer*, nearly that of the *Chaicta Issi*, for the Spaniards also spell the

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Although the abundance of the precious metals which the first Spanish and French colonists found among the Indians of the coast was to lure the avaricious Spaniard on across a continent in a vain quest for their source, yet the early contemporaneous writers tell us that these shipwrecks were responsible for the gold and silver in the Indians' possession. Says Laudonniere :

"... the greatest part of these riches, washed, as they sayd, out of Spanish shippes, which were comonly cast away in this [the Bahama] strait"²

and Fontanedo :

"The king of Ais and the King of Jeaga are poor Indians as regards the earth, for there are no lands of silver or of gold where they are, and to say it at once, they are rich only by the sea from the vessels which have been lost well laden with those metals", and again, "I desire to speak of the riches found by the Indians of Ais, which perhaps were to be as much as a million of dollars, or over, in bars of silver, in gold and in jewelry made at the hands of Mexican Indians which the passengers were carrying with them."³

name IS Hence, *Ja is: 7 ais*". (*Memoir Fontanedo*, ed. Buckingham Smith, translator's note 32). Buckingham Smith's linguistics have been questioned of late, and this Chacta ascription for the name of the river and tribe seems to be somewhat far fetched. A closer connection might be found in the Timuquan root word for mother, which is *Issa*, (Fr. Pareja's catechism terminology, which may be found in Swanton, p. 363). Hence, if adapted from the Timuquan with which the Spaniards were conversant, the great Indian River estuary may have been considered by its people as the *Mother River*, a connotation similar to that of the Mississippi - *Father of Waters* idea.

2. Traffiques & Discoveries of Laudonniere, in Hakluyt. *Voyages* . . . ed. 1600, III, p. 338.

3. Memoir of Fontanedo, ed. Buckingham Smith pp. 21-24.

John Sparks, the chronicler of Hawkins's voyage tells that :

"Golde and siluer they want not, for the Frenchmens first coming thither they had the same offered to them for little or nothing * * * and how they came of this golde and siluer the Frenchmen knew not as yet, but by gesse, who hauing trauelled to the Southwest of the cape [Canaveral] hauing found the same dangerous by means of sundry banks, as we also have the same, and there finding masts which were the wrecks of Spaniards coming from Mexico, judged they had gotten treasure by them."⁴

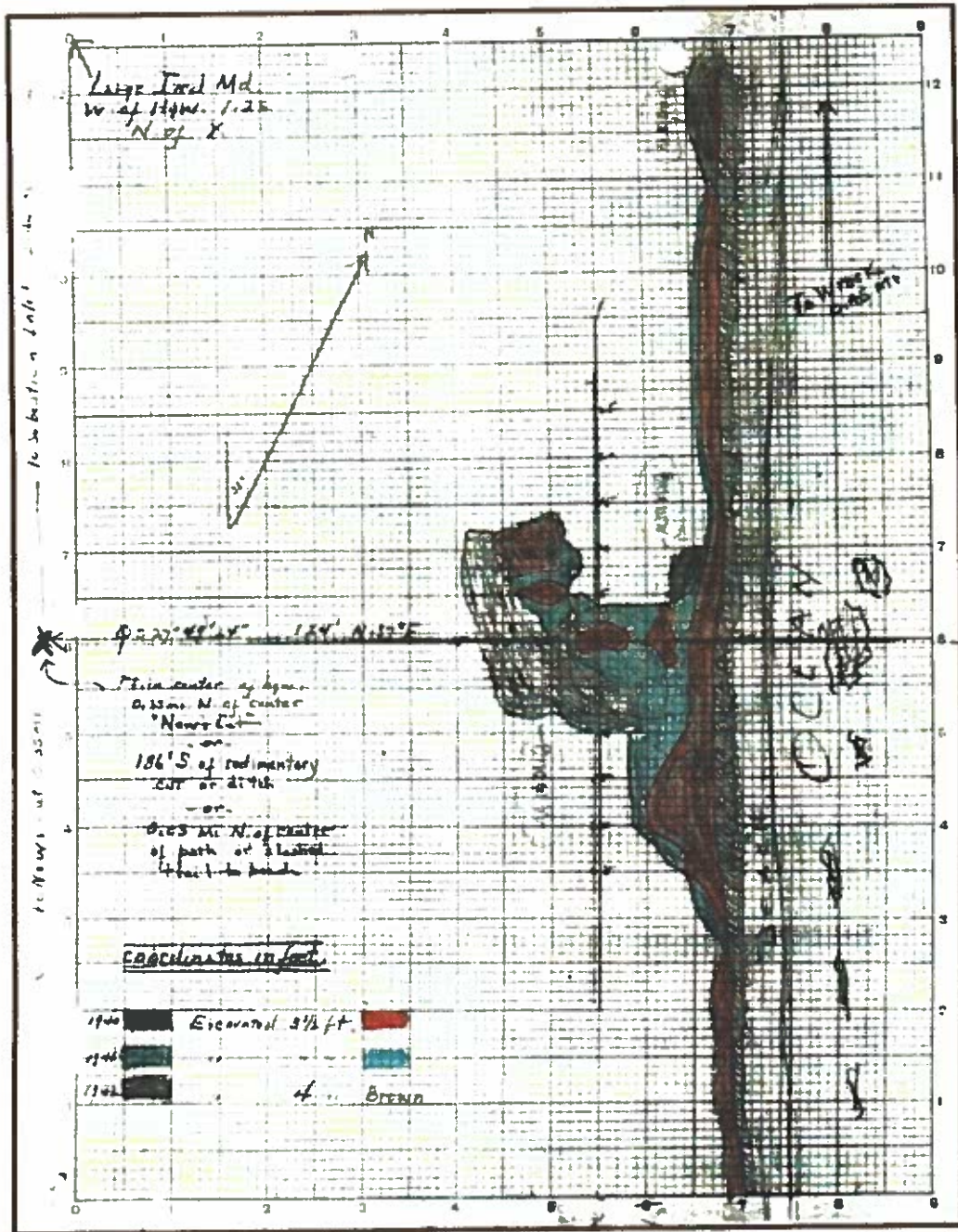
The murderous wrecking and salvaging operations of this tribe (who also were reputed to have been cannibalistic) became such a major racket that, as sorely needed supply ships repeatedly failed to arrive at the Presidio, punitive steps had to be taken. Then, too, the enemies of Spain at first the French, and later privateering Dutch and English - were wont to deal with these Indians and use their inlets as bases from which to harrass her fleets. Thus a very serious problem was presented to the colonial administration, and initiating with Menendez himself, there were various attempts to cajole, pacify and convert the recalcitrant Ais Indians.⁵ The adelantado established a fortified mission among them which languished for some seven

4. Hakluyt: *Voyages* . . . ed. 1600, III, 615-616.

5. Menendez: "Informacion dada por el Adelantado pero Menendez de Aviles sobre los danos y muertes que hacian los Indios de la costa de la Florida" A.G.I. 2 5 4/12, 3-20-1. (In Jeanette Thurber Connor, *Colonial Records of Spanish Florida* vol. 1).

Mendez de Canco: "Cartas del Gob. Canco a su Magd.", A.G.I. 54-5 9, 54-5 14. (In Lowery Ms. Coll.)

Pedro de Ybarra: "Tanto de las diligencias que hicier (on) para atraer a la oucendencia de su Magd. las Prouys de Sorruque y Aiz de la banda del Sur destas provincias." Ano de 1605" A.G.I. 54 5 9 No. 61 (In Lowery MS. Coll. and F.S.H.S. photostat).



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wholly lost.⁹ Even the location of its principal town and the seat of the Spanish endeavors there have been unknown to this day. True, from our present-day point of view, the role played by Ais in our historical concept is of so little import that none has bothered to give it location. However, should our late findings prove to be what we surmise, even if they should not indicate a greater significance for it than history has been aware, they should be of some archeological interest.

It is hoped that, in the light of the material recently uncovered and briefly outlined herein further research into archives hitherto unavallable may disclose, as these findings would seem to indicate, that more was accomplished and more happened at Ais than the archival coverage to the present has revealed.

Down in the Indian River country, several miles below Cape Canaveral there lies, half buried in the shifting sands a sizable portion of a wrecked ship. This for some years has been ballyhooed as that of a Spanish galleon, although its construction would render such belief very dubious.¹⁰ It is my conviction that this particular hulk has no connection whatsoever with the findings detailed in this report. It may, however, be quite pertinent to these findings that in placid weather other wrecks may

⁹ For the most comprehensive description and ethnology of these coastal tribes see Swanton: *Early History of the Creek Indians and their Neighbors*, B.A.E. 73. This contains a compendium from original source material such as Fontanedo Sparks, Jonathan Dickinson, and LeMoynes drawings.

¹⁰ The obvious seasonal growth rings evident in both ribs and planking of this wreck would suggest our own northern woods rather than those of continuous growth as would be used in the Spanish and Spanish-Indies ship construction. Dr. John C. Gifford, the eminent tropical forestry expert of Miami, who examined specimens from this wreck, expressed a similar opinion. This notwithstanding, local legend has even ascribed this wreck to the fleet of the Adelantado himself, with all the customary association of treasure.

be discerned among the adjacent reefs and shallows. Several cannon have been retrieved along the beach, and under favorable conditions of weather and tides beach-combers and treasure-hunters have picked up various articles of naval equipment and other relics undoubtedly of the Spanish colonial period. While the writer has been informed that brass culverins, which from the description, might be Spanish, have been removed, all the cannon which he has personally seen are of a later period, though the fact that the trunnions are below the mid-line would roughly place them as pre-1800.

With curiosity aroused by the knowledge of these findings, the writer was led to investigate the bluff behind and along the beach and the immediate surroundings for some clue to the historical background. At a distance of 0.4 miles south from the wreck mentioned quantities of bones-animal and some human, were observed in the escarpment of the wind and tidal-eroded bluff backing the beach, which at this point reaches a height of twelve to fourteen feet. A little poking around revealed iron spikes, clay-pipes, and a peculiar assortment of pottery sherds. A closer scrutiny of this escarpment showed an unbelievable abundance of such remains for a distance of over 500 feet. Later these findings have proven equally prolific through to the Indian River, a distance of some 800 feet at this point. A correlation of their distribution with the rate of erosion and sea-encroachment would clearly indicate that the site was formerly centered more conspicuously on the river than on the ocean-beach.

In general all this material lies at a depth of from two and one-half to three and one-half feet, in a more or less perceptible stratum of charcoal impregnated beach sand. Owing to the aeolian quality of this sand any attempt at definite stratification

proved rather disappointing. A few test holes were sunk at a little distance back from the bluff and were found to be increasingly fertile in European artifacts. A point which seemed to be the center of the station (both geometrically and for concentration of material) was designated as *zero*, the whole was plotted in a grid, and the items as far as possible inscribed with the locations of their finding. This procedure has proven rather purposeless as there is every evidence that the site has been disturbed and scattered by storms prior to its burial in the drifting sands. It does tend to show, however, that there is a definite classification grouping of the material.

Always working with the hope that a competent archeological survey might ascertain the historical value of these findings, it has been the aim to disturb the site as little as possible, and our endeavors mainly have been confined to sifting out the detritus left by treasure and souvenir hunters. Since the finding of relics here has now become common knowledge perhaps much of the station's archeological value has been and is being destroyed, and, inevitably, key findings dispersed.

Along with the usual run of items found at Spanish colonial sites, the prevalence here of several varieties of Chinese porcelain fragments from the same period has proven most enigmatical. These, have not shown up, we believe, in the workings of the St. Augustine Restoration.¹¹

¹¹ In attempting a rationalization for the presence of the Chinese wares we might suggest that the period involved was concurrent with the China mania in Europe, following the introduction of tea and the exotic porcelains for its service. China was of great value, and doubtless many treasure ships from the Philippines carried it in cargo. This was packed overland from Acapulco and transhipped at Vera Cruz into home bound fleets, vessels from which might later be wrecked in the Bahama Channel.

At Drake Bay, in California, porcelains of this same period have recently been found by the University of California in Indian mounds whose builders had contacted the Spanish explorers in 1595.

Bearing in mind the before outlined historical background of this immediate coast, we should naturally ascribe much of this material to wreckage, and at first it seemed that Indian accumulated salvage would entirely account for the group assortment. The elevation above sea level (10 to 12 feet) would preclude the idea of mere flotsam and jetsam. However, when the evidences of some sort of construction and the many bones of European domestic animals were encountered, the notion that there must have been some sort of established settlement there becomes more insistent. The building materials found are bricks of red clay, shell mortar and plaster, (some of the latter with seeming, mural painting) decorative and roofing tile, and wooden stakes.

At the center of the station there is a considerable area of tabby floor at a depth of three and one-half feet. Beneath this floor is found an occasional sherd of incised or stamped Indian pottery. The choicest of the Spanish remains lie above and scattered around at a higher level ; while still higher, about a foot below the surface, there is an abundance of the cruder, undecorated, recent Indian pottery. Scattered over a distance of 320 feet along the bluff there are four other deposits rich in brick and mortar fragments. It is only in the vicinity of the floor in the center of the station that the largest assortment of European articles are found, particularly the finer Spanish pottery and Chinese porcelain fragments. Throughout the whole area in places where the china occurs most abundantly and in general where the brick and mortar are concentrated, Indian pottery and midden refuse does not appear to any noticeable extent. On the other hand, adjoining and fringing this concentration of European

material one finds quantities of Indian remains with which there is an occasional admixture of the European, notably iron, glass, trade pipes and the coarser Spanish cooking pottery.¹²

This would, of course, suggest that were there a European settlement at this station the aborigines were clustered about it, as was the usual case in such establishments. To those who have suggested that this site probably could be more easily accounted for on the basis of a later than Spanish occupation, as in the British or even American periods, it is pointed out that excepting the trade pipes of English manufacture and the Chinese porcelains, all the items of European culture are definitely Spanish.

As there are extensive shell heaps and middens throughout the vicinity from ocean to river, and found in several strata from two feet below low tide level to twelve feet above, comprising evidences of occupancy dating from the archaic down to the present, the requisites for sustaining life must have been peculiarly favorable at this point. There is also a large conical tumulus one mile north and an extended and very old kitchen midden 0.35 miles south.

The possibility of this being the site of the old Ais capital and "its abortive mission establishment"¹³ was subject for speculation. El Pueblo Grande (the big town) of Ais, however, is rather universally described as being near Indian River Inlet. While there is considerable evidence that there *have* been inlets adjacent to this site in the past, and from time to time these various inlets along the Indian River have been opening and

¹² See appended list for variety of these findings

¹³ Swanton, p. 333.

closing, and the nearby Sebastian Inlet, though now in an artificial channel, perhaps has always been more or less open, yet it is difficult to reconcile this locality with the distances given in the various accounts.¹⁴ The Indian River Inlet, as designated in colonial times was presumably that old multiple channeled opening¹⁵ opposite St. Lucie, now closed since the dredging of the United States government cut at Ft. Pierce. Although there are wide discrepancies in accounts and general vagueness in map locations, this inlet seems to best approximate that of Ais and its adjacent town. Utilizing Mexia's Derrotero both narrative¹⁶ and chart,¹⁷ as doubtless the most accurate, it is found that Ais lay 22.5 leagues south of Sorruque (or about 85 miles).¹⁸

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14. Pedro Menendez (1573) in A.G.I. 2 5-4/12, 3 20-1 (Connor):
 Canaveral to Ais 15 leagues
 Sta. Lucia to Ais 15 leagues
 Bart. de Arguelles (1599) A.G.I. 54-5-14 (Lowery):
 St. Augustine to Ais 50 leagues
 Mexia's Derrotero (1605) A.G.I. 1-1-1/19 (Lowery):
 Sorruque to Ais 22.5 leagues
 Ais Inlet to Ais 2 leagues
 Ybarra (1605) in "Tanto de las Diligencias, etc" A.G.I. 54
 5 9 (Lowery):
 Sorruque to Ais 18-20 leagues
 St. Augustine to Ais 50 leagues
 Dickinson (1696) in *God's Protecting Providence*, etc.
 Sta. Lucia to Ais "about 20 miles"
15. *Las bocas de Miguel Mora* A.G.I. 54-5-9, 54-5-14. (in Lowery)
16. Alvaro Mexia "Derrotero from St. Augustine to Ais, etc." A.G.I. 1-1-1/19 (in Lowery)
17. No. 98 in Lowery collection of maps, Library of Congress.
18. The league of Las Casas (Columbus's narrator) is used here which is 4 Italian nautical miles, or the equivalent of 3.78 of our statute miles. The land league much utilized throughout the peninsula was considerably shorter. The unknown distances as in this case, may be interpolated from the known given distances. The above valuation checks well with the established distances in the "Derrotero".

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It was two leagues or around seven and one-half miles north of the inlet.¹⁹

Now, at the place meeting these requirements, as measured today in road mileages and on hydrographic charts, there is a vast area of low mounds and middens, with one conspicuously large tumulus. I have traced over a hundred acres of this through the jungle growth. The very extent and depth of the remains show it to have been a place of considerable habitation, not only in ancient times but also rather recently. This then could have been that seat of a chief, who as Gov. Canco said, "had more Indians than any other along the coast",²⁰ and a tribe to whom the other coastal Indians were tributary. This site might well be, and in all probability is that of the "Big Town of Ais".

Although there is a questionable vestige of coquina ruins at one place in this area, no European articles have been found here. A cursory examination of the tumulus and middens, which have been greatly despoiled by bone-hunters and for material for road construction, reveals only items of Indian manufacture. It would appear, then, that while this may have been the Ais capital (at least to the discovery period) the archeologically more fruitful and more strategically located station first

¹⁹ Mexia's place names and traverses from Sorruque on South total up as follows

Sorruque to Urribia	15 leagues
Urribia to Suyagueche	2
Suyagueche to Potopotaya	3
Potopotaya Haulover to Ulumay	1
Ulumay to Banana River	2
Banana River to Saboboche	5
Through "Callejon" to Pentoaya	5
Traverse of the Grand Bay of Ais	5
Thence to small Fresh water river	1
Thence to Ais	15

22.5 leagues
or 85.05 miles

²⁰ Gov. Canco to King A.C.I. 54 5 9. (In Lowery Ms. Coll.)

described was the seat of the native wrecking operations, and hence, the locus for the colonial administration's castigatory outpost. The former (being 14 miles to the north), encompassed by dangerous shoals and with a rocky coast-line and located in the Canaveral bight with its in-sweeping down currents is the more logical place for wrecks to come ashore. The accumulated debris of the beaches today bears this out.

While, as we have mentioned, the records are all too meagre to offer any satisfactory explanation for the finding of so much material at the station, we might account for some of the Spanish colonial remains by venturing the opinion that this was the location of the Menendez garrison of some 200 men which he left on the Indian River in November 1565, while he with the remainder of his troop and his French prisoners went on to Cuba. Granting that Ais was two leagues north of Indian River Inlet, the following citations from the records would so indicate :

"The Spaniards remained four days at Ays, and Aviles went down the lagoon to look for a suitable place to settle, but failed to find one . . . Before his departure he encamped 200 of his party under Juan Velez de Medrano at a place on the lagoon and three leagues distant from Ays. . ."²¹

According to the first statement he first went down, *i. e.* south, so the latter location, where he left his men, must have been north, as is our site from Ais. And again,

"Later when the men got into trouble with the Indians, they moved 20 leagues farther down the lagoon to the neighborhood of Gilbert's Bar

21. Woodbury Lowery, *Spanish Settlements Within the Present Limits of the United States.*

and the St. Lucie River . . . and they named the place Sta. Lucia".²¹

This distance would further indicate that he was above Ais Inlet. The given distances approximate the true distances between the hypothetical sites.

And in the Barrientos account:

. . . and seeing that those Indians were warlike and fearless he removed his men to a site three leagues from there which the Indians showed him, and which was very favorable, and where were coco-plums, . . . palmettos, prickly-pears and fish. It was on the river and two days sufficed to remove the men there by sea".²²

And, again, Garcilaso de la Vega:

. . . he went by boat to reconnoiter a site which the chief told him was a good one for settlement, but it did not suit the Adelantado. Then he sailed as far as a small harbor 3 leagues from there . . . He carried his men by boat to a place which the Indians said was very favorable for fishing, palmettos, and coco-plums . . ."²³

It might be pointed out that even today the conditions mentioned regarding the availability of a food supply at this site still hold good, and adjacent is a small harbor which fulfills the description. This Menendez on his return named "Puerto del Socorro"²⁴ and to this day the fishermen along this coast call this "old Spanish Harbor", although it has been impossible to unearth any legendary source for the persistence of this association.

It is also quite possible that this too may be the site of Ponce de Leon's second landing, for according to surviving extracts from his log²⁴ he sailed

22. Barrientos, in Garcia's "Dos Antiguas Relaciones" xxvii, p.

23. ⁷⁶Garcilaso de la Vega, in Barcia: *Ensayo Cronologico*, iv, p. 91.

24. F. F. Davis: "History of Juan Ponce de Leon's Voyages to Florida", *Fla. Hist. Quarterly*, xvi, 1.

north a little way from his first anchorage in 30° 8', just missing the mouth of the St. Johns and thence turned south along the coast. *He saw no Indians, or signs of habitation.* He worked his way southward around Cape Canaveral, where the Gulf Stream was encountered. *Somewhere below Canaveral he saw Indians,* and made his second recorded landing, taking possession and erecting a cross. It was here then that he saw the first evidence of Florida's inhabitants. Now I have covered the coast-line and beaches from Cape Canaveral to Ft. Pierce Inlet, and our site is the *only* one, (so far as I have been able to discover) wherein there is any vestige of Indian or other occupation which might be visible from the sea.²⁵ All the others along this stretch of the coast are situated on wider strips of island, and located on the Indian River side, or at some distance from the ocean.

LIST OF TYPICAL ITEMS FOUND, IN THE ORDER OF THEIR FREQUENCY.*

Iron - Occurs everywhere in quantities, but with the exception of spikes and drift pins is oxidized past identification.

Glass - Mostly bottle; many with lead screw-top. Sheet or pane glass, art glass, and many pieces of unidentifiable usage.

Indian Pottery -

Spanish Crockery - Consisting of coarse cooking ware, grain, oil and water jars.

Spanish Pottery - Mostly glazed in bluish, green and brown wares.

Moorish or Moorish Influenced Spanish Pottery - Inside glazed; top part outside glazed and decorated with blue or green splotches and ears.

Spanish Mexican Pottery - Glazed inside and out, with polychrome conventionalized decoration.

Clay Trade Pipes - Many of which bear the trade mark "R. Tippet" in cartouche or lettering "R.T.", or "E.R." The former was, according to Mr. Glen R. Black of the Indiana Historical Society, an English pipe-maker of presumably early 18th. century.

25. As previously remarked, it must continually be borne in mind when viewing this site, that extensive as the remains seem to be, the picture will not be complete without a constant realization that the area was much larger and presented a far different and less bleak aspect two or three hundred years ago.

* These may be seen in the Library of the Florida Historical Society.

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Brick, Tabby, & Plaster - In large batches, as apparently the debris of fallen walls or fireplace of brick set in shell mortar. A tabby floor.

Lucky Stones - From the head of the cat fish. While primarily they are perhaps midden refuse, persisting by their hardness, they seem to have been cherished with fetish value down through all cultures. Similarly with drum's teeth, and,

Bird Stones * & *Phalanges* - Mostly deer and human are found everywhere in such quantities as to suggest either of a fetish value or preservation owing to lesser friability than the large bones.

(These last three are included in this compilation only on account of their above order of frequency. Any reason for their association with the European remains, except as midden refuse is not clear.)

*Chinese Porcelain** - Blue and white, Ming period type (late 16th and early 17th centuries) Blue and white, K'ang Hsi period types (1662-1772) Multi-colored ware, probably K'ang Hsi. Powder blue and black wares characterized by underglaze in fish designs. (looks Japanese)

Chinese Pottery - Ming period, green and blue green glaze.

Lead - Is found in all shapes and artifications. There is much of it in foil or thin sheets resembling that in which tea was formerly packed for export.

Pistol Balls - Of varying calibres; many with the risers still on.

Copper - Found in ferrules, fragments and sheets. Some of the latter are quite large and, with dove-tailed and beaten joints, have been fashioned from smaller sheets.

Bones - Human, cow, horse, deer and hog. All the native small animals. Boar's tusks. The entire human skeleton has not been found except in the beach sands, where its association with the other material is probably accidental.

Spanish Mexican Items of the 1543-1723 period.

Wood - Is rather scarce except for the ever present charcoal. The unburnt wood is mostly pine and spruce. A few driven stakes *BELOW* the artifact bearing stratum.

Beads - Green and blue glass, very small. One metal filigree.

Plaster Murals - Very fragmentary and conjectural.

Tile - A few roofing and glazed ornamental fragments.

Onyx & Alabaster Fragments - Among some of the interesting items found either singly or in scarcity are:

Ivory and Bone Dice.

Figurines - These are identical. Although the hair and head-dress is Amerind, the features are delicately Caucasian. They are hand molded as the finger prints of the maker are evident.

Cannon

Brass - Scissors, chest corner, stanchion-flange, belt buckle hinge fragment, evidently from a navigation instrument.

Gilded Finial of ecclesiastical design; may have been from a missal frame, or small shrine.

Doll's Legs - of glazed Spanish pottery.

Gold Ear Ring with empty jewel socket.

* I am indebted to the Milwaukee Public Museum for their first positive identification and confirmation of the Chinese porcelains, Spanish pottery, etc.

The map is from Jeffrey Kramer's www.treasurelore.com. Was a great site before Treasure Coast Report, etc. He had listed all the wrecks for each region of Florida, entire history of recorded hurricanes, updated accounts of treasure found in Florida, where to look (just not wrecks) and so on. He also listed this exact same report I am sending to you. These are my scans from the actual book that I possess.