



From Lantern Slides to Snapchat:

THE KEY MARCO COLLECTION REDISCOVERED

BY AUSTIN J. BELL AND MEGAN C. KASSABAUM

The Penn Museum holds an exceptional collection of objects from Key Marco, Florida—rarely preserved masks, figureheads, bowls, and various other tools. Collected during its 1896 excavations led by Frank Cushing, these objects provide clues to understanding both the ceremonies and daily life of the Native people of Marco Island.

A collaboration between the Penn Museum and the Marco Island Historical Society (MIHS) has brought many of these objects back home to the Island, where they are currently displayed less than three miles from where Cushing and his team recovered them. The collaboration has also been an opportunity for MIHS Curator Austin Bell and Penn Museum Weingarten Assistant Curator for North America Megan Kassabaum to delve into further research on the objects and reflect on their remarkable history of preservation and display through time.



ABOVE: Due to its exceptional levels of preservation, Key Marco is one of very few sites where shell tools have been found intact and hafted to wood handles as originally intended. Photo Lot 2 (09675100), National Anth. Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

OPPOSITE: Shell tools in the Penn Museum's collection. The holes visible on these artifacts are related to how they were hafted to their wood handles. From top: 70-19-74, 70-19-75, 40337.

WHAT'S OLD IS NEW AGAIN

On March 4, 1896, knee-deep in a foul-smelling swamp in South Florida, anthropologist Frank Hamilton Cushing, battling heat exhaustion, voracious insects, and chronic illness, could not have been happier. The year prior at Key Marco, a small village on the north end of what is now Marco Island, local proprietor William D. Collier had uncovered some unusual objects in a “muck pit” on his property. This “muck pit” sat amidst an impressive series of shell mounds and other shell works constructed by the earlier Native American inhabitants of the island. Within months, Cushing was there to investigate in person, arriving by way of steamship, railroad, horseback, *and* schooner. His brief but promising reconnaissance in 1895 brought him back to Key Marco for the work he was now undertaking—a more thorough archaeological excavation of the site. Despite the many obstacles facing him and his crew, with weeks more work before them, Cushing still had cause to proclaim in his journal that this day was the “greatest...of my life in exploration.”

The 1896 expedition to Florida was sponsored by Dr. William Pepper, founder of the Penn Museum and University of Pennsylvania Provost, and philanthropist Phoebe Hearst, who went on to launch the University of California Museum of Anthropology (now called the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology). Widely heralded as one of the most important endeavors in the



ABOVE: Originally from the town of North East, Pennsylvania, Frank Hamilton Cushing (1857–1900) was an anthropologist with the Bureau of American Ethnology known for his pioneering work at Zuni Pueblo. SAAM-1985.66.3126_1, Smithsonian American Art Museum.

BELOW: The Key Marco site during the 1896 excavations. This photograph was taken by Wells M. Sawyer, who accompanied the expedition in order to document the archaeological process and the incredible artifacts it uncovered. PM image 140493.





The Calusa People of South Florida

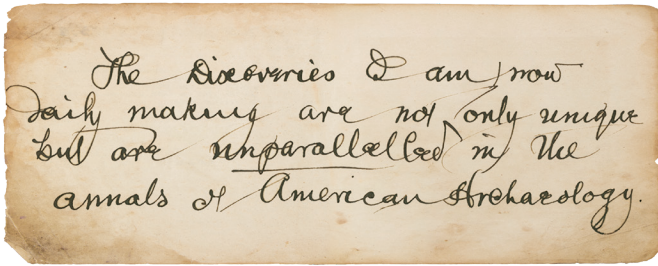
When Cushing began excavating the remarkable objects from Key Marco, he referred to the people who made them as “Key Dwellers” because they inhabited the small islands off the coast of Florida. Today, we recognize them as the ancestors of the Calusa, a powerful Native society that occupied southwest Florida when it was colonized by Spaniards in the early sixteenth century. The Calusa were fisher-gatherer-hunters who achieved exceptional levels of political complexity without depending on staple agricultural crops. Smaller inland villages paid tribute to powerful leaders living in larger coastal towns and these communities were connected by an elaborate system of artificially constructed canals. They built

and used seagoing vessels, cargo canoes, and barges to facilitate the movement of people and goods. The Calusa remained in their pre-contact territory for generations after European contact. In the late 1690s, their population was estimated at 2,000, but by 1750 many Calusa people had become victims of warfare, slavery, and diseases introduced by European colonization. Calusa society fades from the historical record in the 18th century. Because there are no recorded Calusa ethnographies or oral histories, what we know relies heavily on ethnohistorical sources such as firsthand accounts of Spanish explorers and missionaries and on archaeological collections such as those held by the Penn Museum.

history of North American archaeology, the Pepper-Hearst Expedition yielded a remarkable assemblage of artifacts. The vast array of recovered materials offers still unrivaled insight into the Native American people that lived on the southwest coast of Florida for centuries prior to its invasion from Europe. Most frequently attributed to the late precontact Calusa (1300–1513 CE) or earlier Glades (500 BCE–1300 CE) cultures, the more than 1,000 artifacts found at the site included a majority made of wood and plant fiber—materials that do not ordinarily survive in archaeological sites. An anaerobic (oxygen-free) layer of wet, peaty marl preserved the artifacts in “like new” condition for centuries, until Cushing and his crew drained the area and began their excavation.

ABOVE: “People of the Estuary.” Art by Merald Clark. Image courtesy of the Florida Museum of Natural History. **RIGHT:** Map showing the location of the Key Marco site on Marco Island on the western coast of Florida.





The Discoveries I am now daily making are not only unique but are unparalleled in the annals of American Archaeology.

In a letter written to Dr. Pepper on March 1, 1896, Cushing exclaimed, "the discoveries I am now daily making are unparalleled in the annals of American archaeology!" Florida Explorations 1894–1903, Penn Museum Archives.

Cushing knew immediately that he was on to something big at Key Marco. In a letter written to Dr. Pepper on March 1, 1896, Cushing exclaimed, "the discoveries I am now daily making are unparalleled in the annals of American archaeology!" While motivated in part by an urgent need for funding to continue the excavation, Cushing's hyperbolic language has proven increasingly prophetic with the passage of time. The priceless artifacts, which he successfully secured additional funding to obtain, are still being exhibited, studied, and talked about nearly 125 years after they were recovered.

A UNIQUE VIEW INTO FLORIDA'S PAST

Due to the site's unique preservation conditions, an astonishing variety of artifact types were recovered from Key Marco. Carved wooden masks and animal figureheads, some with paint pigments still clearly visible, were among a prized assortment of wholly unique ceremonial objects—some of which are now individually famous. More common were utilitarian objects made of wood, bone, shell, and plant fiber, such as netting, float pegs, shell and shark-tooth tool handles, wooden bowls, mortar and pestle kits, fishing tackle, and more. These objects offer a rare glimpse into the daily life of a coastal Florida maritime society based upon fishing, a fact which differentiates the Key Marco people from many other late precontact groups who relied heavily on agriculture.

While Key Marco's everyday artifacts sometimes take a backseat to their more artistic counterparts, they are equally, if not more, important to understanding life in the past. For example, based on their presence at the



These wooden tools demonstrate Key Marco's remarkable levels of preservation and give archaeologists an unusual window into the daily life of people living at the site. **LEFT:** Atlatl (40609A), float pegs (40549), and hafted tool (40418A and B). **RIGHT:** Wood vessel (40184) with mortar and pestle (40201A and B).



The highly decorated statuary, masks, and figureheads from Key Marco represent some of the better-known objects from the site. They offer a glimpse into the rich ritual and ceremonial lives of its inhabitants. **LEFT:** The Key Marco cat. NMNH-2018-03434, Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution. **RIGHT:** Sea turtle figurehead with downturned beak (40715) and wooden alligator figurehead (40718A and B).

same site, we now know that the Key Marco Cat was likely carved in-part with shark-tooth tools. Key Marco is the only site at which such tools have been found intact and hafted to wood handles as originally intended. Thus, with his excavations at the site, Cushing revealed a previously unknown medium of precontact Native American artistry and technology.

The material evidence of this woodworking industry far outnumbered the ceramics and shell tools common at other sites in the area. The presence of such materials provides a broader understanding of Florida's native peoples and serves as an important reminder of what is likely *missing* from archaeological sites across the eastern United States where organic artifacts have not been preserved. If every site had the same preservation conditions as Key Marco, we might have an entirely different, and certainly more holistic, understanding of early lifeways. While Cushing's findings sparked more than a century of archaeological exploration and discovery in Florida, and similar rates of excavation have

been undertaken throughout the southeastern United States, comparable material evidence remains scant.

THE KEY MARCO COLLECTION IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1896, the United States was little more than three decades removed from the Civil War, Grover Cleveland was president, and anthropology was still in its infancy. Institutions like the Smithsonian and the Penn Museum were focused on accumulating material culture from what they thought were "vanishing" cultures in North America. Importantly, South Florida had largely been left out of the process of western expansion, leaving its many large shell mound sites relatively undisturbed. Key Marco's discovery fortunately occurred before destruction and development in Florida dramatically altered the landscape and destroyed countless archaeological sites.

That said, anthropologists at the time ran their expeditions without the level of regard to context,



Then and Now: An Archaeologist's Toolkit

While many of the tools archaeologists use for excavation have remained remarkably consistent through time, the technologies available for documenting and communicating what they find during their excavations have changed dramatically, as they likely will again.

1896	2021
Black and white photography	Digital photography
Glass plate negative	Memory card
Watercolor painting	Adobe Photoshop
Topographical map	LIDAR scan
Mold/casting	3D Scanner/printer
Written letters via mail boat	Cell phones, email, text messaging
Funding via postal mail	Direct deposit, credit cards
Shipping crate filled with sand	Shipping crate filled with inert foam
Improvisation and guess work	Evolved standards and best practices

ABOVE: Trowel used in the field by Weingarten Assistant Curator of the American Section Dr. Megan Kassabaum.

provenience, or Indigenous rights that we recognize as important today. Moreover, the requisite knowledge and technology by which to safely collect and preserve waterlogged materials would not exist for another century. Cushing's crew fought valiantly to preserve the fragile, waterlogged materials, but were ill-equipped. Cushing, in his 1896 presentation to the American Philosophical Society, lamented that "it was distressing to feel that even by merely exposing and inspecting them, we were dooming so many of them to destruction." Despite this, he left Florida with "more than a thousand... examples...of perishable materials" from the site in what he described as "measurably good condition."

Many wooden artifacts disintegrated at the site immediately upon exposure to the air and light, and most others have gradually shrunken, warped, and generally deteriorated in museum storage over the past 12 decades. Yet, even in their deteriorated and diminished states, these artifacts still hold vast potential for archaeological researchers and are regularly re-examined by Penn Museum curators, consulting scholars, and students.

As the Key Marco artifacts silently passed into the 20th and then 21st centuries, they bore witness to evolving practices and theories in anthropology, the establishment of now-basic preservation standards in museums, and the emergence of new science and technologies. Basic advancements, such as color photography, have helped document the objects for posterity. Today, artifacts are being scanned in three dimensions and full color and advanced scientific technologies such as radiocarbon dating, isotopic analysis, X-ray fluorescence scanning, and gas chromatography are routinely utilized by archaeologists. These technologies, along with other heretofore unforeseen advancements in the field, will undoubtedly tell us more about Key Marco's past residents, so long as the objects they left behind are continually available for study.

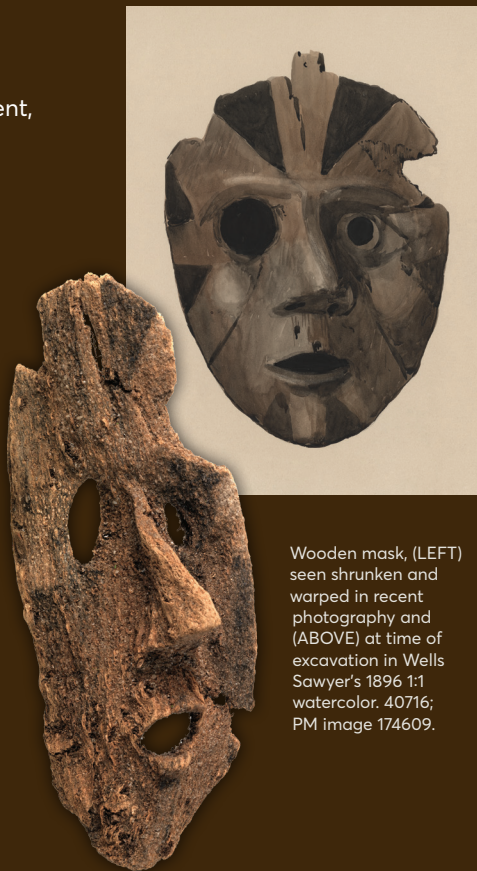
SHARING KEY MARCO WITH THE PUBLIC

No new data gleaned from these advancements would be worth gathering if the resulting information was not shared. Further scientific study ushers in new interpretations, new publications, new exhibitions, and new modes of communicating to the public. The

An Education in Preservation

When waterlogged objects are removed from their anaerobic environment, a number of changes to their composition immediately begin to take place. Water within the object evaporates, leading to the warping and twisting effects evident on many Key Marco objects. Pigments used to color the surface of the artifact fade, causing detailed decoration to be permanently lost. In 1896, color photography did not exist, but Cushing employed Wells Sawyer to produce on-site, 1:1-scale watercolors of the most elaborate and colorful objects. These paintings allow us to view the now-warped wooden objects alongside a representation of their original form and decoration. For the last five years, these archaeological and archival objects have been used in introductory-level archaeology courses taught through Penn's Department of Anthropology. Students are able to compare the appearance of the object with its associated painting, allowing them to better visualize and understand the complex topic of archaeological preservation.

More recently, an anthropology Ph.D. student in the Center for the Analysis of Archaeological Materials' Archaeobotany seminar wrote a proposal to use measurements derived from Sawyer's paintings and the shrunken and warped Key Marco masks to help archaeologists better understand the original dimensions of materials for which no such illustrations exist.



Wooden mask, (LEFT) seen shrunken and warped in recent photography and (ABOVE) at time of excavation in Wells Sawyer's 1896 1:1 watercolor. 40716; PM image 174609.

Key Marco artifacts have been displayed in a variety of exhibitions since being collected, from now-outdated “cabinets of curiosity” on the National Mall in Washington D.C., to the Smithsonian's epic *Circa 1492* quincentenary exhibition of 1992, to more recent Native American art exhibitions in various American cities. In the 1950s, some Key Marco objects were featured on the Penn Museum's *What in the World* TV program. Between 2014 and today, the collection has featured prominently in both the *Native American Voices* gallery and the *Moundbuilders: Ancient Architects of North America* exhibition.

In 2018, some of the Key Marco artifacts traveled “home” for exhibition at the Marco Island Historical Museum, a local history museum founded in 2010 and located less than three miles from where the objects were originally recovered. Allowing objects to travel from the large museums in which they have been curated to more local institutions is an increasingly common practice, particularly when extant Indigenous communities are involved. As museums continue to work to address the colonial histories and narratives in which

they are enmeshed and provide more opportunities for objects to be interpreted by both the communities that originally made them and those who inhabit those ancient landscapes today, we can expect displays and interpretations to continue to change with them.

The advent of the internet and the proliferation of social media means that the Key Marco objects are probably more well known now than at any time since their discovery. Yet, the power of the authentic artifacts to generate and hold public interest in Florida's ancient history and heritage is something that no technology could ever replicate. That power is as real today as it was in 1896. As a member of the Victorian-era societal elite and Curator for the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of American Ethnology, Cushing might gawk at the Key Marco Cat Snapchat filter made for the return of Key Marco artifacts to Marco Island in January 2019; however, that filter—and the history it presented—reached nearly 4,000 people in a new, engaging, and accessible way.

Despite vast theoretical and technological differences, what Cushing had in common with today's

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Snapchat filter of the Key Marco cat, developed for the grand reopening of the MIHS permanent exhibition. Cat art by Merald Clark. Filter by Austin Bell.



curators was an enthusiasm for the objects and a desire to share what he knew about them with the public. This is demonstrated by his track record of scholarly publications and interviews, but even more importantly, it is made clear in the various first-person accounts of his interactions with the public, who seemed to always come away from conversations with Cushing having garnered a better understanding of the site and of Florida's deep past. Unfortunately, Key Marco would be Cushing's last major project; he died prematurely in 1900 at age 42 after a career beset by controversy, illness, and his own ambition. Yet, the collections he recovered, now divided between the Penn Museum, the Florida Museum of Natural History, the National Museum of Natural History, and the National Museum of the American Indian, are still being studied, written about, exhibited, and discussed in new and interesting ways, some of which might even have blown Cushing's notoriously creative mind.

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FOR FURTHER READING:

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The Marco Island Historical Museum

On January 26, 2019, the Marco Island Historical Museum celebrated a grand re-opening of its permanent exhibition, *Paradise Found: 6,000 Years of People on Marco Island*. Central to the revamped exhibition are loans of prominent artifacts found by Cushing in 1896, including the Key Marco Cat from the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History, a rotation of 20 iconic artifacts from the Penn Museum, and three bone artifacts from the Florida Museum of Natural History.

The Marco Island Historical Museum, which opened in 2010, made major improvements to its facilities in order to accommodate the fragile objects and their many admirers. An additional 300 artifacts from Key Marco and other Marco Island sites, excavated by professional archaeologists over the last 25 years and now curated by the Marco Island Historical Society, are displayed alongside the loaned artifacts. The loans have brought extraordinary visibility and a dramatic increase in visitation to the Museum. On April 6, 2019—just over three months into the year—the museum surpassed



TOP: The Calusa exhibit at the Marco Island Historical Museum. Photo by Seamus Payne. **ABOVE:** Curator Austin Bell in the exhibition. Photo by Vandy Major.

its all-time annual visitation record of 20,684. The return of the artifacts, announced proudly on light-pole banners around Marco Island, has been a transformative event for the small museum and the community it serves.

The artifacts will be on display through April 2026. The Marco Island Historical Museum is located at 180 S. Heathwood Dr., Marco Island, FL 34145 and is open Tuesday thru Saturday, 9 am to 4 pm. Admission is free.



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