

## THE INCOMPARABLE MOUND SITE AT PETLENUC IN SAN FRANCISCO

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*This talk will focus on the efforts to save what remains of the ancient native shellmound site in the scenic sandy cliffs of San Francisco overlooking the Pacific Ocean, in part of the Golden State National Recreation area. Located on a large sand dune, the site is suffering from severe erosion due to human contact and the pounding of the sea 50 to 100 feet below. The site is variously referred to as CA-SFR-5 and Point Lobos Archaeological District, a National Register property listed in 1976. The US Park Service stabilized the neighboring SFR-21 in 1980 and SFR-5 will soon join it according to park officials.*

If you have never gone to see this mound site, you should do so. It is incomparable in beauty. But first you must pledge not to harm it, to pick up the trash around it, and generally tread gently while you are there. Visitors have trampled through, ridden their bicycles through the sand dune, and some even have dug in it when they can, all to the detriment of the archaeological site. We, my site steward partner, Perry Matlock and I, visit this site regularly as part of the SCA Site Stewardship Program. We pick up trash, fix the fencing, chase away vandals, and fill out site steward forms for Leo Barker, the official archaeologist in-charge of this site.

Recently, thanks to the advanced training held at the Presidio Trust, Leo Barker met with us. We passed on the National Register documentation on this Point Lobos Archaeological District which Perry has been watching since 1978. Perry's care of this site has helped to preserve it. This site is one of the things that makes San Francisco one of the most beautiful cities in the world.

But before going on, perhaps not everybody knows what is a shellmound. And there is a good reason that not everybody knows what a shellmound is. The reason is because for decades, the locations of the bay shellmounds were the best kept secrets by archaeologists. And perhaps for good reason. Prior to the development of anthropology as an academic discipline in the 1910s, these sites were considered garbage piles made by subhumans and available for scavenging. Local residents would scoop up piles of ancient bones and artifacts, dirt and ash, without thinking about it. Skulls were particularly prized. At the West Berkeley Shellmound, the property owner

sold off much of the shellmound by the truckload for chicken feed, fertilizer, and road and tennis court pavement. No questions were asked about the origin of this debris pile.

The advent of anthropology about 1909 shifted attention to these sites. Still much like scavenging, anthropologists went through the sites as time permitted, weighing, measuring, cataloging and listing all of the contents found by item, use, size and shape. Little thought was given to the people who created these mounds or to the meaning of the mound sites themselves. Even some years later in 1950, anthropology students were sent to dig at the West Berkeley Mound, and they found a rich assemblage of artifacts and 92 human burials which they exhumed and took to the department for curation. To this day, these remains are waiting for their return to the Ohlone people, ancestors to these shellmound people.

In a paper that I read here yesterday entitled "*Archaeology and the Conflict of Visions: Radical Preservation and The Search for Common Ground*," Jack D. Elliott Jr., Mississippi State Historical Archaeologist, makes the case that this focus on empiricism, on the observable data, on the assemblage, overlooks the intangible, the historical, the spiritual sense of awe, beauty, and mystery that such sites evoke.

In 1910, Nels Nelson surveyed the various mounds around San Francisco Bay and found over 420 mound sites between Monterey and Vallejo. At this time, Nelson had few insights about these sites or how to argue for their preservation. The early anthropologists were very good at collecting items from the sites and

listing them in a way that became useful in later research. However, city planners, realtors, and businessmen, favored complete removal of these mounds and soon by 1924, anthropologists were overseeing the bulldozing of one these once magnificent site at Emeryville. Little did they know that: (1) eight to thirty feet of the extant original mound remained subterranean, and (2) that the site was much bigger than ever suspected. Sally Morgan of URS Woodward Clyde has shown it to be five mound sites spread out over a 19 acre area. Some researchers have concluded that this site was strictly for the burial of people while others believe there was and would be more daily living activities taking place atop these mounds.

Only in recent times have scientists learned these are ancient Holocene post-Ice Age habitation sites of varying periods. According to the 1997 radiocarbon dating by UC geologist B. Lynn Ingram, the earliest dated site at West Berkeley was occupied from 3700 B.C. to A.D. 800. It was abandoned during the Medieval Dry Period. The sites at Sutro Baths although once thought to be from the Late Horizon Period are now considered nearly as old as the West Berkeley site. What such dating information does not consider is the historic nature of these mound sites and their importance to the cultural/spiritual life of their inhabitants. The cultural/spiritual aspects of the inhabitants are all too often discarded as unidentifiable based upon the empirical data. However, much is lost by this aversion to storytelling. Much is gained by viewing the West Berkeley mound as part of the history of the local tidelands, mud flats, and an unique ecosystem that supported people living in the area over 1000 years before the first pyramid was built in Egypt.

Furthermore, Dr. Ed Luby, anthropologist with San Francisco State University, suggests in his article, *"The Dead Must Be Fed"* that people cooked, ate, brought up their children, conducted ceremonies and buried their dead on these mound sites. This is disputed by Dr. Alan Leventhal, anthropologist at San Jose State University, who believes the mounds were strictly for the burial of dead warrior elite. This theory does seem accurate for the South Bay area where Leventhal studied.

Luby though goes on to postulate that there were no chiefs, but perhaps now and then there was an important tribal member whom he calls the aggrandizer who travels out of the tribe's area to visit the neighbors during ceremonial mortuary feasts. His role is to incur indebtedness and make connections

with individual tribal members. Luby makes suggestions that border on the realm of myth, including the notion that the amount of mortuary feasting has a direct connection with the amount of harvest in the coming season. This type of analysis reflects discursive thought as well as empirical analysis and falls within the realm of Radical Preservation as put forth by Jack D. Elliott, Jr., in which all aspects of significance are examined without restriction to empiricism. Elliott calls for major reform in determining significance by the cultural resource management community.

The conclusion is that fortunately, the SFR-5 mound sites lies within a public park and what little is left has been saved. But its future depends upon public education and the best efforts of native descendants, preservationists, history buffs, and public agencies, teachers and neighbors. A panel of experts including Native monitors have come up with a plan to cover the mound with netting, gravel, dirt and wildflowers. However, until sufficient funding is in-place, Perry and I will continue to monitor this site and to help oversee the condition of this site and to help guarantee its protection for future generations. Our only hope is that the covering and fencing of the site, in an effort to preserve the sandy cliff, does not harm the beauty, awe, and mystery of this historic region.

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