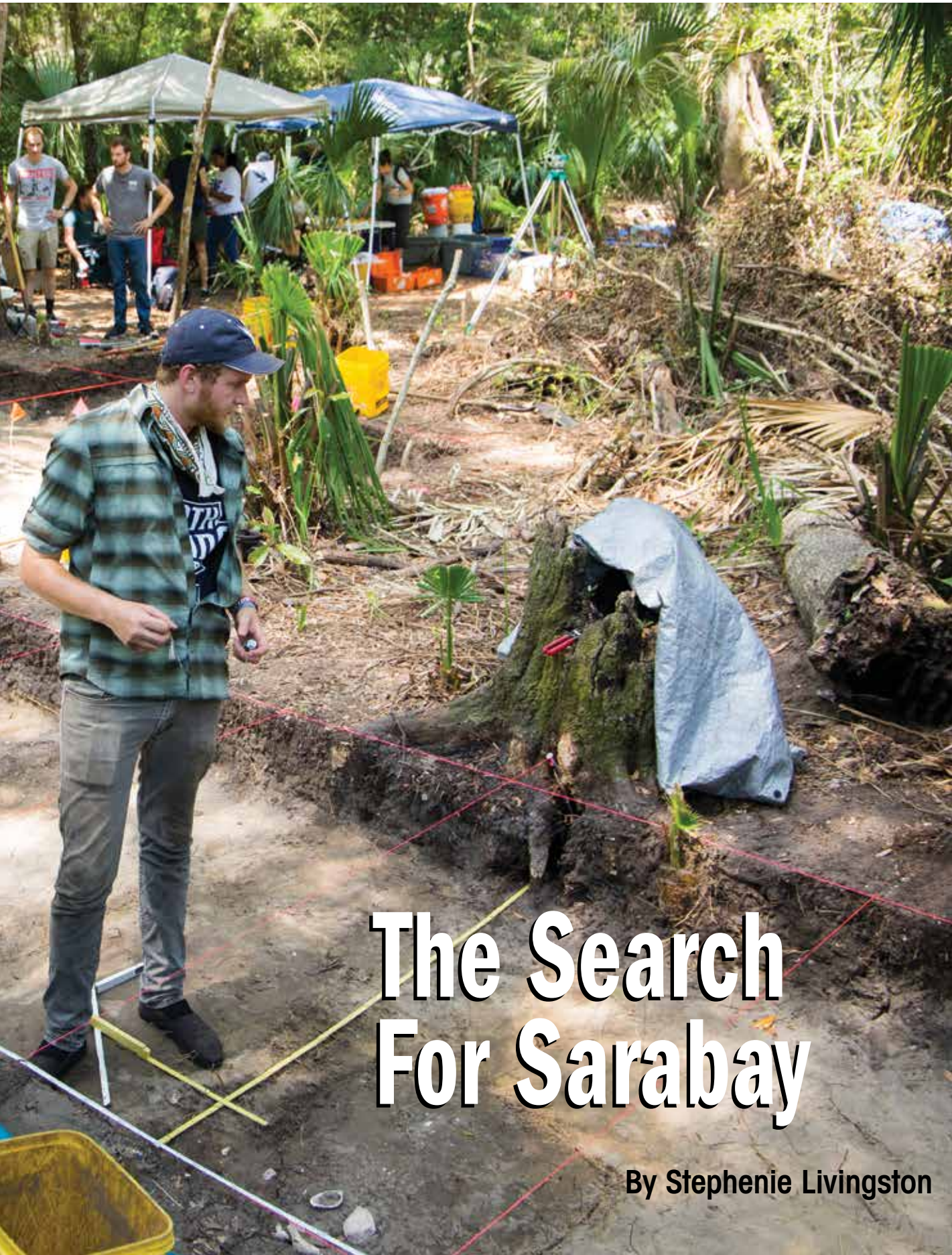


**Archaeologist Keith Ashley is searching for a Native American village that could reveal information about pre- and post-contact life in northeast Florida.**

*University of North Florida students excavate a site that is thought to be Sarabay.*



# The Search For Sarabay

By Stephenie Livingston

The sparsely populated barrier island of Big Talbot looks much like it did when Europeans first met the local Mocama-speaking Timucua people nearly 450 years ago. Keith Ashley, a University of North Florida archaeologist, parked his Toyota Tacoma pickup along a dirt road on the south end of the island before trekking deep into the forest on a muggy, hot day in June. The terrain is dense with vegetation that rises slightly above the nearby salt marshes. He walked past palmetto and water oak trees and an old plantation cemetery before arriving at an archaeological site where he is directing a field school.

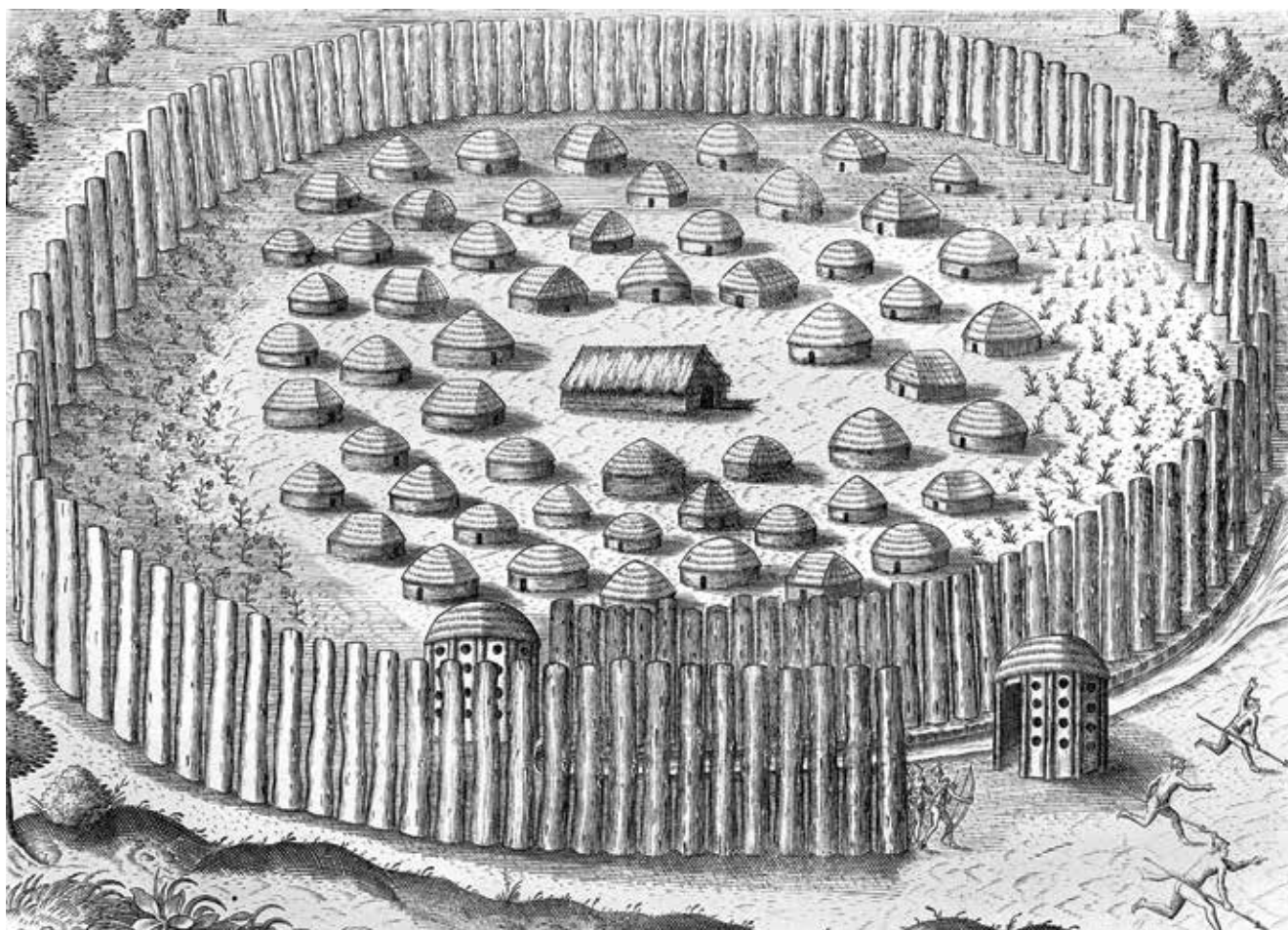
By eleven in the morning Ashley was drenched in sweat. Standing beneath a forest canopy and surrounded by students, he examined a tooth fragment recovered from this site, which he believes is Sarabay, a lost Mocama village that was mentioned in European historical documents. “And even if we are wrong, it’s definitely still another village that dates to the 1500s and early 1600s,” he said.

This field school is part of the UNF’s ongoing Mocama Archaeological Project, which focuses on the Mocama-speaking people who lived along the Atlantic coast of North Florida. The project combines archaeological and archival research in its search for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Mocama villages in order to reconstruct northeast Florida’s indigenous history before and after European contact.

Timucua is a term used today to describe all contact-era indigenous groups in northern peninsular Florida and parts of southern Georgia who shared a common language. According to the Franciscan missionary Fray Francisco Pareja, who was stationed on nearby Fort George Island in the 1600s, there were at least eleven Timucua dialects. Researchers gave the name Mocama, which translates as “the sea,” to the Timucua people who spoke the Atlantic coastal dialect and lived in what is now the Jacksonville area.

When Ashley and his colleagues began searching for Mocama villages in the late 1990s, researchers knew more about these people from historical documents than from archaeology. But that’s beginning to change. “We want to understand how they dealt with this entanglement,” he said, referring to the arrival of Europeans. “We all know what the outcome is going to be, but each group has their own history behind that ending.” The excavation on Big Talbot, a four-year project in its second season, is one of the most extensive investigations of a Timucua village in Florida.

Ashley excavated another site known as Grand Shell Ring, on the southern end of Big Talbot, that dates to around A.D. 1000. This large site, which he believes was occupied by the Timucua, was abandoned about 1250. Ashley also found evidence of small settlements that were inhabited after 1250 in other parts of the island. Rather than continuing the material



THEODOR DE BRY

*This engraving by Theodor de Bry is purported to represent a Timucua village in the mid 1560s. Its accuracy is questionable.*



**These sherds are examples of San Marcos pottery, which the Mocama began producing around 1600.**



**Prior to 1600, the Mocama favored San Pedro pottery, three examples of which are seen here.**

culture and burial practices of Grand Shell Ring, these sites resemble settlements found in southeast Georgia that were also occupied after 1250. This leads Ashley to surmise that small groups of people, possibly from Georgia, were moving around Big Talbot, and they could have established Sarabay.

After the Mocama disappeared from the region around the early 1700s due largely to contracting European diseases and colonial slave raids, Sarabay was lost. It wasn't until the

late 1960s that, after finding a piece of indigenous pottery, local avocational archaeologist William Jones suggested Sarabay was located on the southern end of Big Talbot. While doing research for the Mocama Archaeological Project in the late '90s, Ashley and his colleagues conducted 550 shovel tests across much of Big Talbot. Subsequently, they uncovered pottery—including a mostly-intact jar containing a giant Atlantic cockleshell—on the south end of the island

dating to the 1500s, a period that coincides with that of historical documents that mention Sarabay. Further excavation revealed part of a wall and trench structure. It was then that Ashley thought he might have found Sarabay.

**Due** to other commitments, including earning his Ph.D., Ashley didn't resume his excavation of this site until the fall of 2020, when he directed another UNF field school. His students social distanced and wore masks while excavating twenty-one units during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the 1800s, farmers plowed the area, disturbing the artifacts just below the surface. Nonetheless, the researchers found several thousand potsherds, modified animal bones, shell and lithic artifacts, as well as European items—all of which indicated a large village. This year they were looking for more evidence—specifically large, public structures—that would confirm Ashley's belief that they've found Sarabay.

"Looking at historic documents and maps, the closest town (to the excavation site) that has a name is Sarabay," he said. The earliest mention of Sarabay is a brief passage written in 1564 by René Laudonnière, the commander of Fort Caroline, which played an important role in France's unsuccessful attempt to colonize the area at that time. (Another of the UNF's projects involves the search for this lost fort on the nearby south banks of the St. Johns River in Jacksonville.) Laudonnière described Sarabay as resting on the arm of the St. Johns, which is where Ashley's team excavated. Other Spanish documents and maps also indicate

that Sarabay was located on Big Talbot.

While these maps appear to be accurate, Ashley is suspicious of some of the other historic documents that describe Native Americans, because they were written from the colonizers' perspectives, and are given to inaccuracies and stereotypes. "We're trying to look at it from the perspective of indigenous people who were here," he said as he ran his fingers across the smooth, glazed surface of a piece of Spanish majolica pottery found at the site. "A lot of this information is not in textbooks," Ashley said, noting that only a handful of Mocama villages have been found. "You know, it wasn't written."

This season, Ashley's team has unearthed more pottery, along with shell tools, some points, and pendants. Student Ian King held one of those pendants, which the Mocama fashioned from a whelk columella. The researchers also uncovered the bones of fish from local rivers and tidal marshes, deer hunted on the island, and at least one pig that could have been acquired via trade with the Spanish. "I didn't think we were going to see so many artifacts out here," said Kelly Melendez, another of Ashley's students. "I kind of geek out every time I find a little bone. Like is it a catfish? Is it trout?" It was previously thought that corn was introduced to northeast Florida around A.D. 1000, as it was in other parts of the Southeast, where it became a staple of the natives' diets. But Ashley's students found charred corn cobs that were radiocarbon dated to roughly 1450 - 1630, indicating that corn came late to Sarabay and that it appears to have been of marginal importance to the Mocama.



KEITH ASHLEY

*Students sort and wash the artifacts they recovered from the site at the university's laboratory.*



PAULA SHEA PHOTOGRAPHY

Keith Ashley holds a deer bone that was found by one of the students.



The European artifacts recovered from the site—pieces of an olive jar, wrought-iron nail fragments, and a brass scabbard tip, likely of Spanish origin—indicate the Mocama traded with the Europeans. Around 1600, Sarabay’s inhabitants stopped producing a style of pottery called San Pedro and switched to a style known as San Marcos. Along the Atlantic Coast from northern Florida to South Carolina, archaeologists have found San Marcos pottery that dates to the late 1500s and early 1600s. There are different, and conflicting, hypotheses as to why the San Marcos style was adopted by so many Native Americans during this time. Ashley suspects that it has to do with the imposition of the Spanish mission system, which fostered more contact between various Native groups, and that resulted in these groups producing similar ceramics.

**Researchers** base much of what they know about the design of Timucua villages on sixteenth-century engravings by Theodor de Bry, which are the earliest known images of Florida’s Native Americans. These engravings were based on paintings by Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues, who was part of the French expedition that founded Fort Caroline. In fact, all of de Bry’s numerous engravings of Native life in Florida and other parts of the Americas were based on the accounts of other European explorers, and the accuracy of many of



*A Mocama pendant fashioned from a whelk columella.*

The structure is located near the wall trench he discovered in the late '90s. The field school ended before the researchers could finish excavating the structure, but Ashley intends to return to the site next season.

Historical descriptions and archaeological evidence from other Southeastern indigenous villages place large public structures at the centers of their villages. So if the circular structure proves to be a council house, or some other large public building, it will suggest Ashley has located the center of the village. Thus far it appears the dwellings are spread out over an extensive area along the island's marshes, indicative of a sprawling settle-

PAULA SHEA PHOTOGRAPHY

his works is questionable. For example, all other historical documents state that Timucua villages had large, circular council houses, where their leaders met, and no palisades. De Bry's depiction features a large rectangular council house surrounded by tightly clustered homes, all of which were enclosed within a palisade.

"We've never found (a council house) in this area," said Ashley. But during the last week of the field school, his team unearthed several postholes that are the remnants of what appears to be a circular structure at least fifty feet in diameter. "Something that large very well could be a council house or some sort of really large public building," he said.

ment that contradicts de Bry's tightly-clustered depiction.

"It's still a little early, but that's the kind of hypothesis we're working under right now," Ashley said. Over the next two years, as he expands the excavation, he will learn more about the village's layout. But the discovery of what appears to be a public structure leaves little doubt in his mind that this is Sarabay. "I mean," Ashley observed, "the only other thing we can find is something that says, 'this is Sarabay,' and we're not going to get anything like that."

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*These San Marcos pipe bowl fragments have incised decorations.*

MICHAEL BOYLES