

2010 University of Florida St Johns Archaeological Field School:

Silver Glen Run, Lake and Marion counties, Florida

by Kenneth E. Sassaman

The freshwater shell deposits along Silver Glen Run in Lake and Marion counties, Florida has been the summer venue of the University of Florida's St. Johns Archaeological Field School since 2007. When Jeffries Wyman visited the area in the early 1870s, he observed a massive, U-shaped accumulation of shell where Silver Glen meets the southwest corner of Lake George, along with an "amphitheater" of shell encircling the spring boil 600 m to the west. Both deposits were commercially mined in the early twentieth century, but subsurface aspects of both have survived, and a series of related shell-bearing sites remain largely unmolested. Collectively, the mounds, ridges, shell middens, and feature assemblages of Silver Glen Run entail a remarkable record of ancient human experiences spanning 6000 to 4000 years ago (Figure 8). Field school efforts aim to document the social

and ecological circumstances attending the deposition of shell, notably the series of cultural transformations coincident with changes in the purpose, timing, and magnitude of deposition. The results of prior field schools—including a five-year stint on and around Hontoon Island—provide compelling, albeit controversial, evidence that many of the shell deposits along the St. Johns were emplaced for purposes other than refuse disposal. Asa Randall's 2010 UF dissertation makes this case for our Hontoon Island observations, and current Ph.D. students Zackary Gilmore and Jason O'Donoghue are expanding this line of research with diverse sets of data from Silver Glen Run.

Efforts to document post-mining remnants of the U-shaped deposit Wyman observed at the mouth of the run got a boost this year through the generosity of FPAN's Richard Estabrook. Ground penetrating radar (GPR) was deployed by field school students under Rich's supervision to locate the edge of the southern shell ridge, and to search for evidence of features beneath the shell. Our observations on Mount Taylor shell ridges dating ca. 7000-5000 years ago show that shell

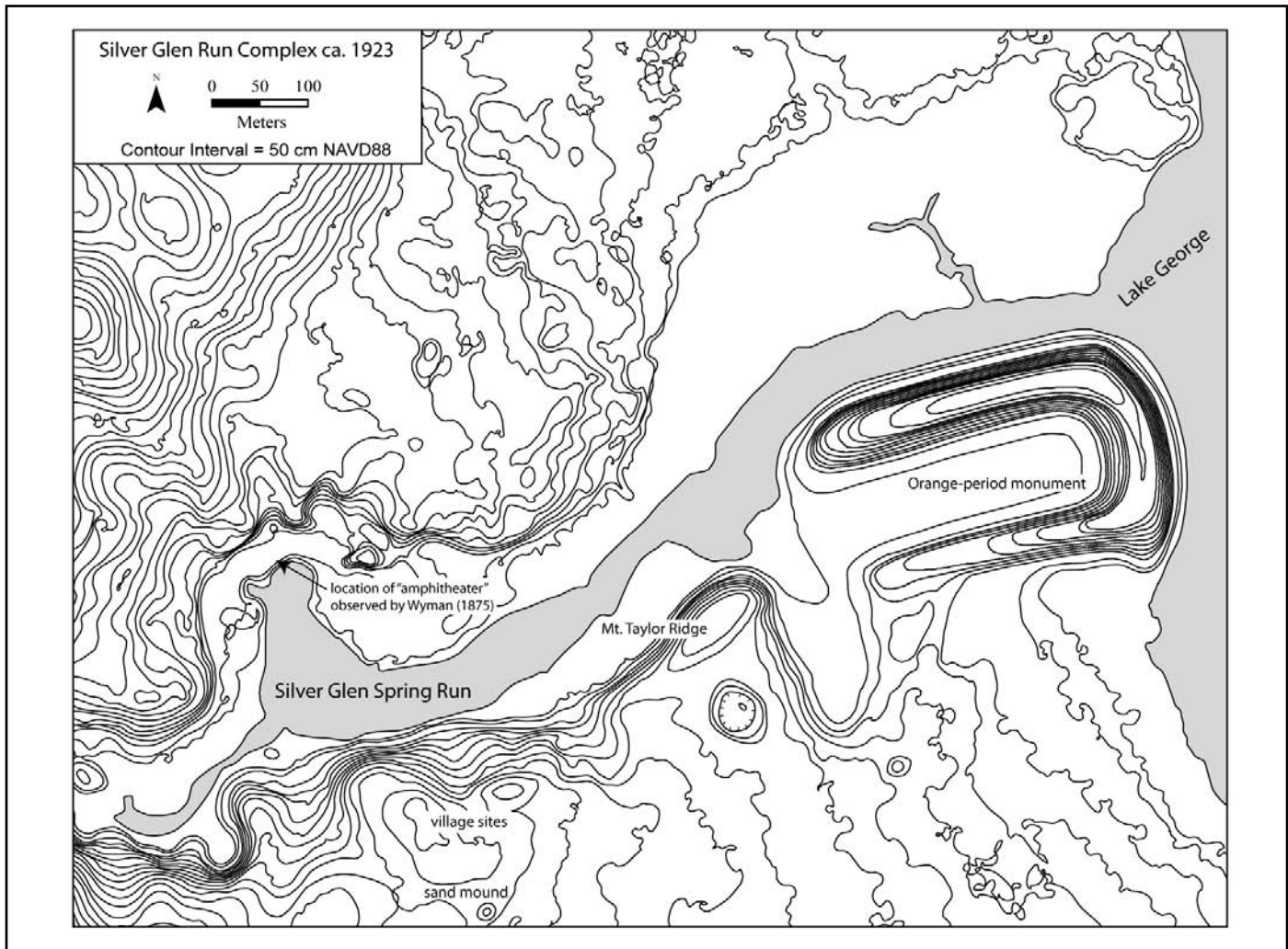


Figure 8. Partially reconstructed topography along Silver Glen Run (8LA1) as it would have been witnessed by Jeffries Wyman in the 1870s, illustrating the arrangement of an Orange period U-shaped mound, a Mount Taylor period shell ridge, and associated sites. Excluded from this reconstructed landscape is the pre-mining configuration of the "amphitheater" Wyman observed encircling the spring basin (figure courtesy of Asa R. Randall).

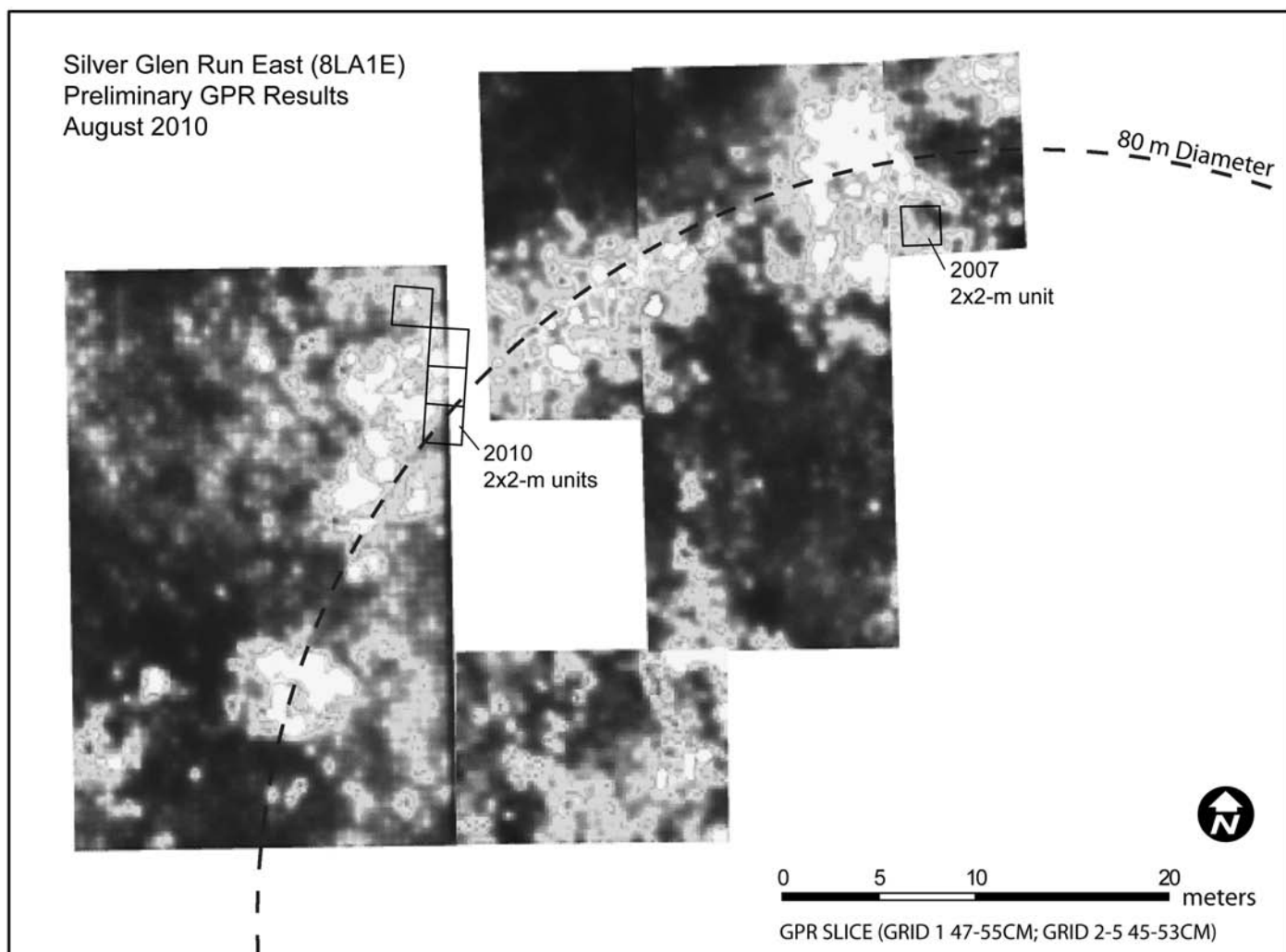


Figure 9. Preliminary GPR results of the South Ridge locus of 8LA1-East, courtesy Rich Estabrook and FPAN. This “time slice” reflects reflectance levels roughly 45-55 cm below the surface. The lightest shades of gray signify highest reflectance, which one-meter-interval coring showed to correlate best with density and compaction of subsurface shell. An overall arc of high-density shell with a projected diameter of ~80 m provided some hope for a circular compound of houses, but subsurface testing to date remains inconclusive (figure courtesy of Rich Estabrook and Asa R. Randall).

was sometimes emplaced over abandoned villages, leading us to expect house floors and related features beneath any shell that appears to be deliberately emplaced. However, the deposit at the mouth of Silver Glen apparently dates to the Orange period, roughly 4000 years ago, and its U-shaped configuration bears greater resemblance to shell rings of the coast than it does Mt. Taylor ridges. Given the Orange-period proclivity for circular living, we were thus excited to receive GPR results that indicated an arc or ring of subsurface features. A composite of five survey blocks showed an arcuate array of subsurface anomalies with a projected diameter of about 80 m (Figure 9). A program of coring and limited test excavation to groundtruth the GPR results provided little evidence for house floors, hearths, and pits, and suggested instead that shell was emplaced along the south ridge over an assemblage of nondomestic features.

A second major focus of the 2010 field school was continued testing at a shell-bearing site on the south margin of Silver Glen Run. Integral to the dissertation research of

Zack Gilmore, 8LA1-West Locus B contains a well preserved midden and feature assemblage spanning the late Mt. Taylor and Orange periods. Initial testing in 2007 revealed complex stratigraphy consisting of stacked, buried surfaces, emplaced shell, and large, deep pits. Block excavation in 2009 showed that shellfish steaming pits up to one meter wide and 1.5 m deep were dug during the Orange period, which proved to be divisible into early and late components, the latter signified by the Tick Island variety of decorated fiber-tempered pottery. Block excavation this past year expanded on this feature assemblage and also revealed deeply buried Mt. Taylor deposits rich in vertebrate fauna and occasional shell, bone, and stone tools (Figure 10). Zack is investigating the idea that mass processing of freshwater clams in the Orange-period pits was driven by activities taking place at the U-shaped monument to the east. The shift from Mt. Taylor to Orange-period use of Locus B suggests a rupture in the continuity of local communities, perhaps the influx of coastal communities with early pottery and a tradition of circular settlements.

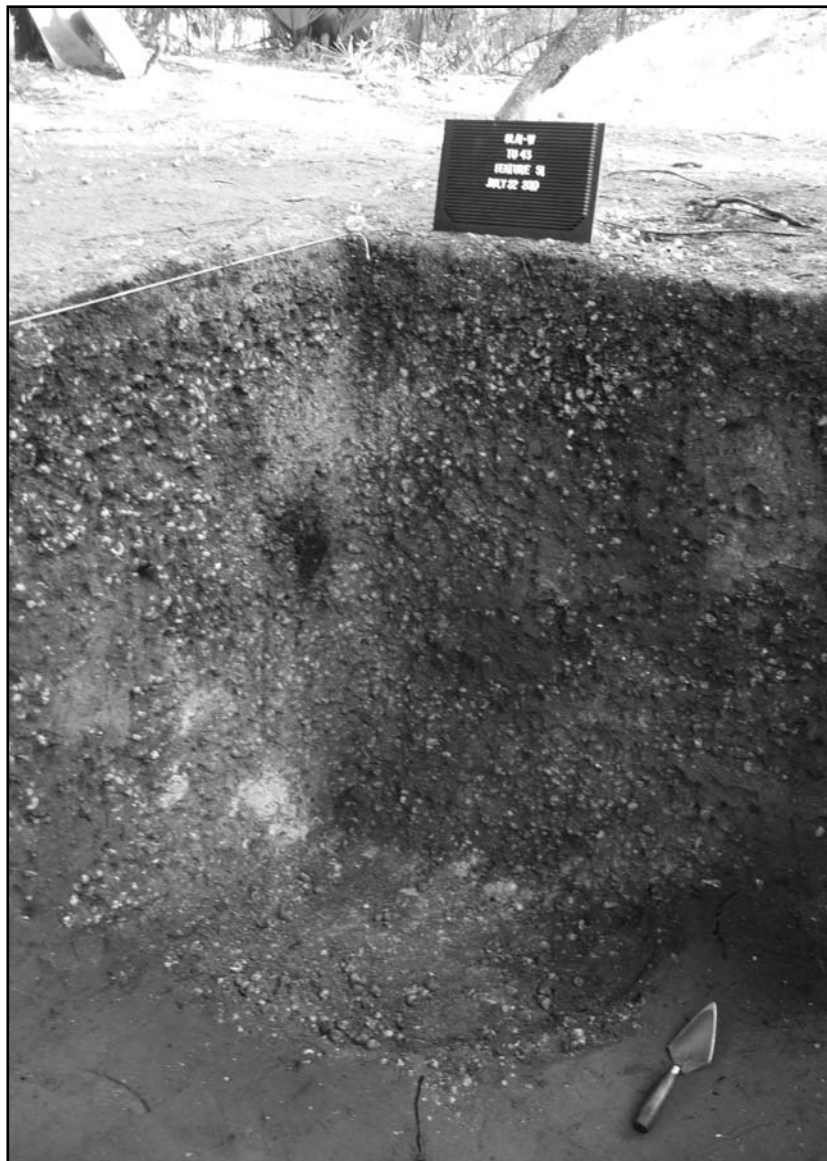


Figure 10. One of many large pit features attributed to the Orange period at Locus B, Silver Glen Run (8LA1-West) (photo by the author).

Zack is conducting petrographic analysis of Orange pottery from Locus B and the U-shaped deposit to explore possible nonlocal origins.

A third project of the 2010 field school was made possible by plans of the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) to improve the public use facilities of Silver Glen Spring. The “amphitheater” of shell surrounding the spring was mined long before the site was incorporated into the Ocala National Forest. Still, portions of this deposit and associated sites remain in place and required assessment before improvements are made to the parking lot, bath facilities, and access trail to the spring. In partnership with USFS, Asa Randall, Jason O’Donoughue, and field school students conducted shovel testing in areas targeted for renovation. Limited but pervasive subsurface deposits were encountered in locations upslope from the spring, while remnants of the mined deposits were encountered in the approximately 75 m encircling the spring. The partnership with USFS continues beyond field school to allow for some

additional testing in locations of support facilities and to profile the mining escarpment to document the intact, basal component of the “amphitheater,” which by all accounts appears to be Mt. Taylor in age. The St. Johns Archaeological Field School will return to the shores of Silver Glen Run in 2011 to continue testing of the U-shaped monument and Locus B, and to initiate testing of a St. Johns II period village on a ridge nose overlooking the spring boil. Two sand mounds in the vicinity of this ridge nose village attest to the enduring cultural significance of this locale to native peoples over five millennia. Despite the devastation brought by commercial mining to these and similar sites in northeast Florida, field school efforts underscore the unquestionable significance that even badly impacted sites have to furthering our admittedly sketchy knowledge about cultural variation and change in the St. Johns region. Our thanks to the U.S. Forest Service and our field school hosts, the Juniper Club of Louisville, Kentucky, for making all this possible.