

Digging up history: Archaeologists pinpoint age of buried Calusa canal in Naples

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NAPLES - A part of Naples' past, buried for nearly a century, is beginning to reveal some of its mysteries to a team of history sleuths.

For the first time, archaeologists announced Wednesday that they have carbon-dated wood and soil samples to more closely pinpoint the age of a canal that once ran for almost a mile through present-day Old Naples to connect the Gulf of Mexico and Naples Bay.

"It's starting to bring a piece of our history alive again," said Judy Bishop, executive director of the Naples Backyard History Old Naples Museum.

The oldest part of the sample dated to A.D. 1670, but because the sample was taken from 1 1/2 feet above the bottom of the canal, experts estimate the canal could have been dug between A.D. 1200 and A.D. 1400, archaeologists said.

That estimate puts the canal's origin in an era when Calusa Indians ruled the region and seems to dispel nagging doubts about who achieved the engineering feat. Some scholars had credited Europeans, possibly pirates.

Archaeologists hope to return this fall to collect six to 10 more samples from the canal to solidify what is now only a best guess about the canal's age, said Bob Carr, executive director of the nonprofit Archaeological and Historical Conservancy, based in Davie.

"I don't think one date puts anything to rest," Carr said.

He said the canal is similar to four others that have been discovered across South Florida, the only place outside of Mexico where such canals have been found.

One thing surprised Carr about the Old Naples canal: Its relatively recent vintage. Others in Florida have dated to A.D. 200, Carr said.

The Old Naples canal's existence has been known since the 19th century. A survey documented it in 1874, and it appeared on early plat maps of Naples.

Because the canal was filled in the 1920s, present-day Neapolitans have only a tenuous connection to that part of Naples past.

The canal could become a more visible part of the Old Naples landscape with a proposal that the city of Naples create a kind of history trail by marking the canal's path.

The canal runs along a generally diagonal line that starts on the beach between Ninth and 10th Avenue South and ends in Naples Bay south of the City Dock.

It was a modern-day water line project that gave archaeologists their first glimpse of the long-buried canal, Carr said.

They followed backhoes for months until they got to the spot at 10th Avenue South and Gulf Shore Boulevard where maps showed the canal would be unearthed.

When workers began digging up black organic sediment instead of sand, they knew they had hit what had once been a body of water. The base of the canal at that spot was 12 feet wide. Earlier reports show the top of the canal was as wide as 40 feet, Carr said.

With just 20 minutes to work before crews would refill the hole, archaeological technician Scott Faulkner climbed into the trench to collect a soil and wood sample.

The job comes with a historical footnote: Faulkner's grandfather, Naples pioneer James Ernest Carroll Sr. did the work to fill the canal in the first place, history buffs said.