

**WHAT HAVE WE HERE?:  
THE REDISCOVERY OF NELSON'S MOUND 259**

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**ABSTRACT**

In 1954, R.K. Beardsley defined the type component for a late Augustine settlement pattern known as the Fernandez Facies. Beardsley based his definition of the facies on artifacts and features discovered during excavations of a shell mound located east of Pinole on property owned by C. B. Fernandez. Known as the Fernandez Mound, this shell mound has long been confused with the location of Nelson's shell mound #259 (CA-CCO-259). Recent archival and field research conducted by William Self Associates demonstrates that Nelson's mound 259 and the Fernandez Mound were two different mounds, separated by nearly two miles, and that it was the Fernandez Mound, not Nelson's mound 259, that had been bulldozed and sold for topsoil in the 1960s. The mound described by Nelson and numbered as 259 is, in fact, substantially intact. This paper describes the research conducted to verify the location of both mounds, which included the use of Nelson's and Heizer's original photographs.

In November, 1995 archaeologists from William Self Associates of Orinda, California conducted a pedestrian archaeological survey along a portion of the current two-lane undivided section of Route 4 between Interstate 80 and Cummings Skyway in Hercules, Contra Costa County. The survey and accompanying literature and record search were conducted in compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act on behalf of a project that is intended to improve operations and safety along Route 4, alleviate existing and projected traffic congestion, and close an existing gap in the regional freeway network.

One previously known site was identified within the Area of Potential Effect (APE) during the literature and record search. Five other sites, one of which is CA-CCO-259, were identified within a half mile radius of the APE. Nels Nelson recorded shellmound number 259 in 1907. When subsequently incorporated into the national trinomial system, the mound was assigned the trinomial CA-CCO-259. In reviewing the records pertaining to these sites, it became apparent that a discrepancy exists between the location of CCO-259 and that of Nelson's mound 259.

Nelson's notes describing the site and its location are as follows:

Situated in Rodeo Creek Valley, 1/4 mile east of the Santa Fe Railway - *nearest Luzon station* [emphasis added].

The site is over 2 mi. up the creek, or inland, and, according to the map, about 150 feet above sea level. The mound lies at the foot of a high hill, some 200 yds south of the present creek channel. . . . A small spring occurs however on the flat close to the northwest base of the mound by two large weeping willows. Immediately to the east is an open side canyon which forks a short distance back in the hills. On the mound itself, which is barren of anything but weeds, stands an old house and barn.

This mound is the largest thus far seen, the only possible one-time exception being the Sausalito and Ellis Landing structures. Its diameters are about 350 x 400 feet. . . . a recent excavation measuring 90 x 210 ft. has been made on the front (north) side of the pile, giving in places a nearly perpendicular wall 12-14 ft. high (Nelson 1907).

The mound as observed by Nelson was composed of broken clam, oyster, and mussel shells, burned tule, charcoal and ash beds, bird and deer bones. The radius of a human infant was also recovered. Nelson excavated a single burial

from the mound in 1910 (Davis 1960:12), but apparently conducted no further research there. In 1935, amateur archaeologist L.J. Barker removed ten burials and cremations with associated grave goods from a prehistoric shellmound in the vicinity (Davis 1960:12). It is not clear whether this was Nelson's mound 259 or another, unrecorded mound located 2 miles to the east of mound 259. However, given the large quantity of material he collected, it is unlikely that Barker was working on mound 259, upon which stood a barn and ranch house (Prince 1996).

Three years later, R.F. Heizer of the University of California excavated several cremations and burials from a prehistoric shellmound (Davis 1960; Moratto 1984:230) that may have been the same as that excavated by Barker, but it was not the mound recorded by Nelson as number 259. The site Heizer excavated lay on property owned by C.B. Fernandez that is situated nearly 4.5 miles from the bay, 2.5 miles further east than the mound recorded by Nelson. The property has been owned by the Fernandez family since it was first settled by Bernardo Fernandez, a sailing master who purchased the land in 1854 (Davis 1960:12).

As with Nelson's mound 259, Heizer's mound was near a creek and adjacent to a forking canyon, but it was nearly 2 miles east of the "Luzon Station" referred to by Nelson. In the catalog of artifacts from Heizer's excavation, the site location is described as being from the Fernandez Mound, located 3.9 miles east of Pinole on Rodeo Creek at an elevation of 225 ft. This is nearly two miles east of the location described by Nelson and 75 feet higher in elevation. Nowhere in Heizer's notes or catalog is the mound referred to as CCO-259. The artifacts from Heizer's 1938 excavations are recorded as being from the "Fernandez Md. Contra Costa Co." In 1954, on the basis of the artifacts and features recovered from the mound on the Fernandez property, R.K. Beardsley defined the upper component of the mound as the type component for what he called the "Fernandez Facies," which, according to Moratto, is the best example of a Phase 2, "Late Augustine Pattern" settlement (Moratto 1984:232).

Investigations of the Fernandez Mound were again conducted by Perryman in 1958 and Davis in 1959, although the excavations were through basal deposits, since the mound itself had been sold and hauled away for use as topsoil in 1957 (Davis 1960; Moratto 1984). Sometime after

Heizer's work on the Fernandez Mound, a pencil notation was made in the UC Berkeley artifact catalog for the Fernandez Mound, indicating the artifacts were from CCO-259. A similar notation was made on the UC Berkeley Archaeological Research Facility's Carquinez Quad topo map that had correctly depicted Nelson's mound #259 as he had plotted it. An arrow pointing east has been penciled in on this map, and "#259" marked on the map about 2.5 miles to the east of Nelson's intended location. The later Benicia Quad (which superseded the Carquinez Quad) has #259 marked only at the eastern (incorrect) location (Prince 1996). Reports from subsequent excavations and surveys have perpetuated this error (Davis 1960; Holman 1983, 1990a & b), referring to the Fernandez Mound as CCO-259, the trinomial assigned to the mound recorded by Nelson near Luzon.

In March and April 1996, archaeologists from William Self Associates reviewed Nelson's original notes and the reports filed by Heizer and Davis in an effort to resolve this discrepancy. In addition, ca. 1907 photos of the mound recorded by Nelson and ca. 1950-1960 photos of the site subsequently referred to as the Fernandez mound were used to demonstrate that Nelson's mound #259 and the Fernandez Mound are two different sites. In collaboration with Mr. Gene Prince of U.C. Berkeley's Hearst Museum of Anthropology, a transparency of Nelson's 1907 photo of mound #259 was placed on the focusing screen of a 35mm camera equipped with zoom lens. A view through the camera lens then produced a view through the transparency. The historic photo depicted the mound, its vertical face as described by Nelson, and the barn and house that sat on top of it. The position from which the photo had been taken was relocated and, with the variable focal length provided by the zoom lens, a view through the camera superimposed the 1907 view of the mound onto the modern landscape (Prince 1988). The historic view of the silhouette and contour of the surrounding foothills, the configuration of a substantial portion of the original mound, and the location, orientation, and size of the barn, the house, and several mature oak trees matched those features as they exist today. The open-sided barn pictured in the 1907 photo has been altered (and possibly rebuilt) through the application of wood siding, but its size, location, roof line, and configuration are identical to those depicted in the historic photo. The house has been rebuilt but apparently rests on the same foundation as the structure in the 1907 photo.

Photographs of Heizer's 1938 excavation at the Fernandez Mound were used in the same manner at the erroneously recorded location of CCO-259, the Fernandez Mound, located beneath the maintenance building at today's Franklin Canyon Golf Course. Although the mound is gone, the modern-day topographic contours are an identical match with those depicted in the historic photos and with the topography recorded by Heizer in his maps.

It is clear from both primary and field research that CCO-259 and the Fernandez Mound are two different sites separated by nearly two miles. The Fernandez Mound was located on what is today Franklin Canyon Golf Course. Nelson's mound #259 lies beneath the historic and modern structures of today's Claeys Ranch property south of Hwy 4, approximately 1/4 mile southeast of the railroad tracks nearest Luzon. Independent discovery of the Claeys Ranch mound was made by an archaeological consultant conducting a survey for a proposed land development project in

1995 (Holman 1995), the results of which were not made available to the Northwest Information Center until mid-1996. Subsurface testing of the mound area (Holman 1995) led to delineation of a boundary for the site and a trinomial (CA-CCO-698) has been issued for the site by the NWIC.

According to historic precedent, the trinomials assigned to Nelson's shellmounds have followed his numbering system, hence mound 259 was numbered CA-CCO-259. The confusion between Nelson's mound 259 and the location of the Fernandez Mound has resulted in a sizable volume of data and interpretation being attributed to CA-CCO-259, when in fact they should have been attributed to a trinomial assigned to the Fernandez Mound. In view of the complexity that would be involved in correcting this error, the NWIC has elected to assign the trinomial CA-CCO-259 to the location of the Fernandez Mound (at Franklin Canyon Golf Course), and has issued a new trinomial (CA-CCO-698) to the location of Nelson's mound 259 (at Claeys Ranch).

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