

Marsh Creek – Ancient Stratigraphy at a Windmiller site

April 10, 2010

On Saturday, April 10, 2010 State Park Senior Archaeologist, Rick Fitzgerald, an expert in prehistoric archaeology and part of the NSF-funded team that has been studying the area led a group of 18 SAS members on a tour of the Marsh Creek Windmiller site in Contra Costa County near Brentwood. This site along a major creek that flowed into the delta in earlier times, which is on State Park land not yet open to the public, contains stratified series of archaeological deposits dating **7000 to 3000 years old**. The site profile is visible from down-cutting by the creek. A short hike up a creek bed offered a splendid viewing of items in the bank of the creek that were associated with an ancient village.

The archaeological resources on Marsh Creek at and around the old John Marsh Home are some of the most unique and important within the California State Park system. Research has indicated that the first inhabitants occupied the area by at least 7000 years ago. These people and culture are virtually unknown yet they resided on the property for about 15 centuries. It is unclear what happened to these people. They either left on their own or were forced to move away by a changing environment. Either way the Marsh lands were abandoned by about 5300 years ago.

By around 4000 years ago the Windmiller culture makes its first appearance at Marsh Creek. The Windmiller people represent one of the most sophisticated and advanced prehistoric cultures of aboriginal California. They were accomplished artisans who made finely rendered ornamental and ceremonial artifacts out of alabaster, marble, diorite, steatite, shell and slate. They lived on acorns, fish and hunting game.

The Marsh property was their home for about a thousand years (4000-3000 years before present), in what appears to be a large community, currently the largest known. They lived in the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys with their heartland being the Delta Region. Windmiller culture may have also occupied portions of the Sierra foothills to the east and apparently were a powerful influence on the Berkeley cultures to the west based on the presence of their stylized artifacts found through the Bay Area. The Windmiller occupation eventually gave way to what is called the Meganos people who carried on the Windmiller culture until about 1000 years ago. Evidence of these people also exists at the Marsh property.



Marsh Creek with dam and John Marsh House site Rick Fitzgerald at Marsh Creek Windmiller site



Rick Fitzgerald on site Rick Fitzgerald pointing at artifacts Rick Fitzgerald at dam



John Foster with SAS tour group View of John Marsh House in ruins