

Cape Canaveral's Native Americans

The earliest evidence of human habitation on Cape Canaveral dates back about 6,000 years. Descendants of these first humans, the Ais, inhabited Cape Canaveral along with the nearby islands and the mainland.



There are 95 recorded sites within the boundaries of the Cape Canaveral Space Force Station. Many of these sites are sand mounds used for burials or ceremonial purposes. There are also "middens" – refuse accumulations composed of discarded animal bones, shells and broken pottery. These middens were sometimes also used for burials.



Ais' villages consisted of several houses made of small poles stuck into the ground, bent towards each other and covered with palmetto fronds. On Cape Canaveral, they lived along the Indian River Lagoon and may have moved to the mainland for the winter months.



The Ais were hunters, gatherers, and fishers, not farmers. Their main food was the plentiful fish, supplemented with oysters, clams and snails. They also gathered coco plums, sea grapes, palm berries, and sea oats.



Beginning in 1513, Spanish exploration of Florida and slavers seeking new captives first brought the Ais in contact with Europeans. They were also exposed to Spanish missionaries and shipwrecked travelers. Few interactions could be characterized as friendly. The Ais' economy received a boost by salvaging shipwrecked European goods.



The name "Cabo Canaveral" first appeared on Spanish maps in 1564. Meaning "Cape of the Canes" or perhaps "Cape of the Cane Bearers"; it may have described the cane or reeds growing in the area and perhaps referred to the natives' use of the cane for arrows.



Men decorated their bodies with markings resembling tattoos and wore pieces of platted grass which formed a loincloth, fastened in the back with a collection of grasses resembling a horse's tail. Women wore skirts of woven moss and wore their hair long, hanging loosely. Men fastened their hair in a roll behind their head using curved pins made from bones.

By the early 1700s, the Ais had all but disappeared from Florida. Contact with Europeans had brought disease, warfare, and slavery, decimating their population. In 1763 when the rule of Florida passed from Spain to England, it is believed that the few remaining Ais left their homeland and moved to Cuba. The US Space Force conscientiously protects and preserves the heritage of Cape Canaveral's first people.