

Ancient America – Boca Raton – 1953-1958



Esmond G. Barnhill purchased twenty-four acres that contained Indian mounds and turned the property into a tourist attraction called *Ancient America*. Photo courtesy of the *Boca Raton Historical Society*.

Although the most famous Boca Raton tourist attraction was Africa USA, Boca Raton did have another attraction. Ancient America, which was open from 1953 until 1958, featured displays of Native American culture and artifacts. Why build an attraction about Native Americans in the middle of Boca Raton? The answer lies in the special location that the attraction occupied. The 24 acre site was indeed an important Native Florida Indian burial mound and village. It is estimated that the site was occupied from 1,000-2,000 years ago by the Tequesta Indians. Three different Indian tribes occupied ancient Palm Beach County - the Tequesta, the Jeagas and the Ais. None of these tribes exist today as they died of disease brought by the Spaniards or were forced into slavery.

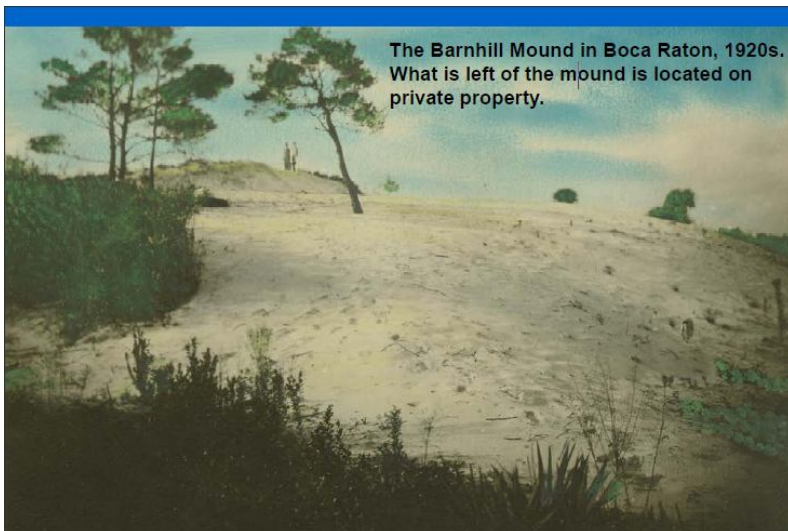
The founder of Ancient America, E.G. Barnhill, was a famous early Florida photographer. Born in 1894 in South Carolina, Barnhill is famous for his hand-colored photographs and paintings of the old Florida landscape. He was also interested in Native American culture and collected artifacts throughout the nation.

His Boca Raton attraction was one of many that he ran that dealt with Native American artifacts. The Boca Raton attraction featured a tour of the large Indian burial mound, which was tunneled through. Inside the tunnel, windows were set into the soil to allow the visitor to peer into the burial sites. He also had many items from the Spanish conquest of Florida including ship cannons and anchors.



1958 Excavation of the Barnhill Mound

The attraction never proved to be popular as traffic to Miami was rerouted from U.S. 1 when Florida's Turnpike opened. The land was sold and was undeveloped until the 1980's. The Palm Beach County Commission considered purchasing the property as a historic site, but it was sold to developers who built the Boca Marina Yacht Club development. A portion of the Barnhill mound is visible from the front entrance.



A famous E.G. Barnhill hand colored photograph

Famous Treasure Hunter Art McKee* and son Mick visit Ancient America in 1954



***Historical Note:** Arthur McKee Jr. , known as Art "Silver Bar" McKee, was a noted Florida treasure diver for many years and is often referred to as "the father of modern treasure diving." Sometimes called "The Treasure Hunter's Treasure Hunter," McKee pioneered salvage work on historic shipwrecks in the days before scuba diving became popular.

Source: www.africa-usa.com/ancientamerica

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