

Rose Atoll Archaeology

by John Enright

Earlier this year the American Samoa Historic Preservation Office (ASHPO) was part of a joint expedition to Rose Atoll National Wildlife Refuge in cooperation with the National Park of American Samoa and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. One of the primary purposes of the trip was to conduct the first in-depth archaeological survey of Rose Island.

Officially part of Manu'a and called Muliava (end of the reef) by Manu'ans, Rose Atoll is uninhabited, waterless, and closed to the public. It consists of two low islands—Rose and Sand—totaling approximately 20 acres of land with 1600 acres of interior lagoon surrounded by a perimeter reef. It was ceded to the U.S. by the Tui Manu'a in 1904 as part of the Deed of Cession of the Manu'a Group. The atoll was declared a National Wildlife Refuge in 1973. It is the southernmost point of the United States.

The local archaeological team included ASHPO's chief archaeologist and State Historic Preservation Officer David Herdrich, Tish Peau of the National Park of American Samoa, and local archaeologist Erika Radewagen. Over a 5-day period they conducted an exhaustive survey covering 100% of Rose Island, using GPS to map and construct survey transects.

Archaeologists are detectives of the past. They search for clues to reconstruct the story of a place. In the case of Rose Atoll part of that story—the most recent in time—was already known from written historical records. Its palagi name was given to it in 1819 by the French navigator Captain Louis de Freycinet, who named it after his wife. In the 1860s a German firm attempted to establish a coconut plantation and fishing post on Rose Island, but the plan was soon abandoned. In 1920 Commander Warren Jay Terhune, Governor of American Samoa (of suicide fame), visited the atoll and erected a no-trespassing sign that identified the island as an American possession.

But what of the time before written records? The archaeological survey team not only found Governor Terhune's storm-damaged monument and a US Navy survey marker but also features that predated them. These included a stone platform that might have been the floor of the house for the Samoan family the Germans had left there to tend

their ill-fated plantation or perhaps even an earlier use. Another mysterious feature was a pair of elongated basalt stones that suggest a ceremonial function.

Volcanic basalt stones are not native to the atoll, but were the base material of traditional Samoan tools. Other basalt stones were found along the shoreline, including basalt flakes, the cast-off product of shaping and sharpening those tools. Basalt flakes were also found embedded in phosphate rock formed by bird droppings, suggesting that the basalt flakes are of some antiquity. Basalt flakes had not been previously identified on Rose Island. One basalt flake embedded in the phosphate rock had charcoal embedded with it, which means the archaeologists will be able to get a date on its age using Carbon 14 dating.

In any event, it is now confirmed with physical evidence that Samoans visited and worked on Muliava long before Europeans “discovered” and named it. Other Samoan names for the atoll were Motu o Manu (island of seabirds), which it still is today as a nesting refuge, and Nu’umanu (place of the sea monsters). That last name still remains a mystery that the past holds onto.