CHAPTER 9

Early Architecture from the Southern Georgia Strait Region

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Introduction

One of the defining characteristics of the Northwest Coast culture area are permanent villages constructed of split cedar planks. To date, few sites containing preserved architectural remains have been investigated in the Southern Georgia Straits region. The architectural details that are present pose a number of archaeological problems: how is it possible to identify perishable architecture?, how long has the historically documented architectural pattern been present?, and what was the greater social function of that architecture?

Much of what we assume we know about the prehistoric architecture of the southern Georgia Strait region has been derived by direct analogy with historical Coast Salish houses. These houses were of two types: a temporary summer dwelling constructed of mats supported by poles, and a permanent or semi-permanent winter dwelling of hewn planks supported by posts and beams (Suttles 1990). While temporary architectural remains have been excavated (*e.g.* Patenaude 1985), the larger, more durable wooden architecture will be the focus of this paper. Both shed and gabled roofs were present, though the latter is supposed to be the more recent of the two.

Archaeological excavations of prehistoric houses on the Northwest Coast have been relatively rare (Ames *et al.* 1992, Grier 2001, Leclair 1973, Schaepe, this volume). The archaeological visibility of these sometimes-large structures is limited by the general absence of non-perishable construction materials. The remains of these structures in the archaeological record is limited to postmoulds of wall and roof supports, and to internal features such as hearths, steaming pits, benches, and storage boxes. The recognition of these features as belonging to prehistoric architecture is limited by the in field recognition of the features, the scale of architecture as a function of the size of the excavation, and the depth at which some of the features are buried by later deposits. As such, the identification of architecture on the Northwest Coast is as much a matter of luck as research design. In some instances it has been possible to infer the presence of houses on the basis of accumulated shell around the periphery of these structures *e.g.* Whalen Farm (Smith 1921), Helen Point (Carlson1970a),False Narrows (Burley 1988), Beach Grove (Matson et al. 1980), and Garrison Bay (Stein 2000).

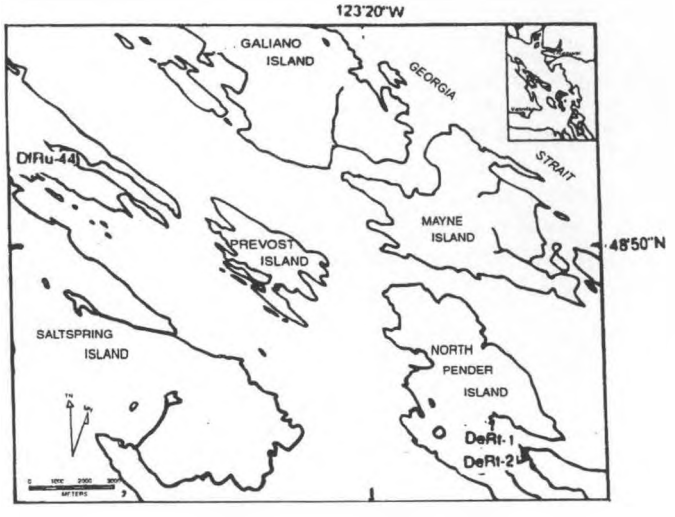

Figure 9:1. **Location of the Pender Canal (DeRt 1 and 2) and Long harbour (DfRu 44) Sites in the Gulf Islands.**

The question of how far the historical analogy of larger rectangular plank houses can be extended into the past remains an open one. The Pompeii-like preservation of the slide-covered site of Ozette (Samuels 1991) suggests that historically documented size and construction techniques for coastal houses extended at least 400 years into the past. This would suggest that the ethnographic

pattern would be applicable for the San Juan Phase. Some (*e.g.* Borden 1970, Burley 1988:45, Mitchell 1971:52) have extended the model of large plank houses to the Marpole phase on the basis of the presence of large (>30cm diameter) postmoulds encountered during excavations. While the presence of single or even multiple postmoulds are by themselves scant evidence for large architecture, the excavation at Dionisio Point (Grier 2001), of a substantial portion of a rectangular depression exposed a number of postmoulds and interior hearths suggesting that large plank houses were present by the Marpole phase. Test excavations in house depressions at False Narrows (Burley 1988), Beach Grove (Matson *et al.* 1980) and Garrison Bay (Stein 2000) suggest that these large rectangular features also date to the Marpole phase. Earlier phases have yielded fewer large postmoulds suggestive of plank houses. Matson (Matson and Coupland 1995, Matson 1996) suggests that a small depression at Crescent Beach represents a "pithouse". However, the scale of excavation and the absence of postmoulds make the interpretation of this feature difficult. Two Charles phase plank houses have been excavated at the Mauer (Le Clair 1973), and Hatzic (Mason 1994) sites along the Lower Fraser River that included interior benches. To date, no contemporaneous permanent architecture has been identified in coastal contexts. Carlson and Hobler (1993:36) suggest that sites containing houses immediately paralleling the beach older than 2250 years ago have been inundated or eroded due to changes in relative sea level.

The three sites detailed in this paper are coastal shell middens located in the Gulf Islands of Southwest B.C. (Figure 9:1). All are located at the heads of inlets that affords them maximum protection from gales. These sites were excavated between 1984 and 1988 by S.F.U. projects headed by Roy Carlson (Carlson 1986) or myself (Johnstone 1991). Each multi-season project was primarily a salvage effort to mitigate against threat to the site from erosion or development. While all of the sites had multiple cultural components, the architectural features were identified from Locarno Beach phase (2300-3300 BP) deposits in each case.

The Pender Canal Sites

The oldest architecture from this study was excavated from DeRt-2, located at the head of Bedwell Harbour. A series of 5 postmoulds 20 cm in diameter intruded from a compact organic-rich midden 30 cm into the sterile glacial till underlying the site extend in a line over a distance of 6 meters (Figure 9:2). The diameter of these holes is smaller than the historic descriptions of support posts. This, and their close 1-meter spacing, suggests that these constitute a non load-bearing, freestanding curtain wall with planks attached to their eastern face. One indication of relative permanency of this wall is a 40 cm thick deposit of shell-rich midden east of the alignment of postmoulds (Figure 9:2). This deposit is thickest where it abruptly terminates vertically at the line of post moulds, suggesting that it was either banked up against a rigid, non-moving artificial obstacle, or truncated during the construction of the architectural feature. The presence of this midden also defines and interior and an exterior to this wall, and suggests that the wall was the eastern part of a larger structure. As no further alignments of post moulds that may have corresponded to a western wall were encountered within the limits of the excavations, we might assume that this structure was greater than 7 meters in width.

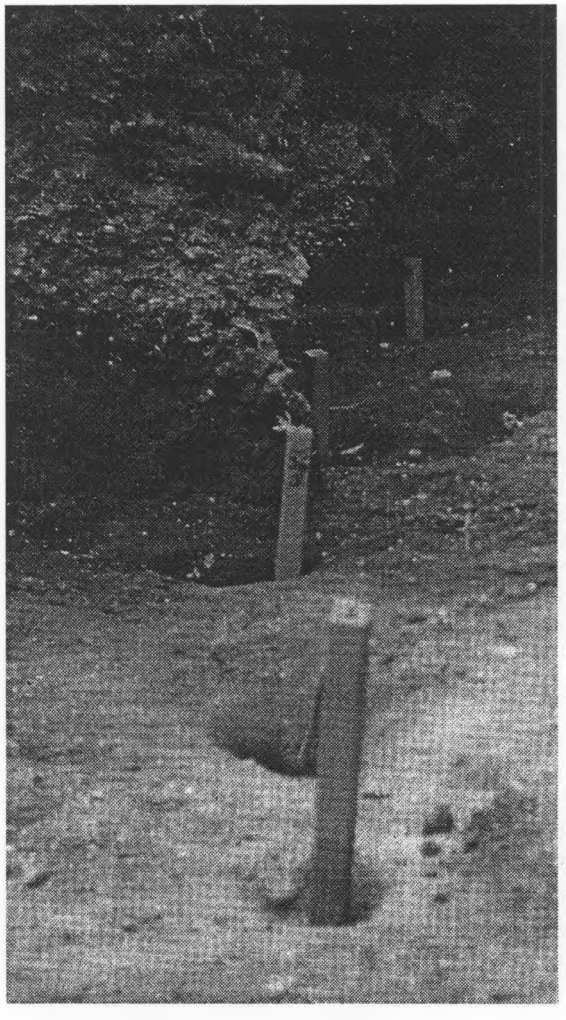

Figure 9:2. **The Row of Post Holes and adjacent Midden at DeRt 2.**

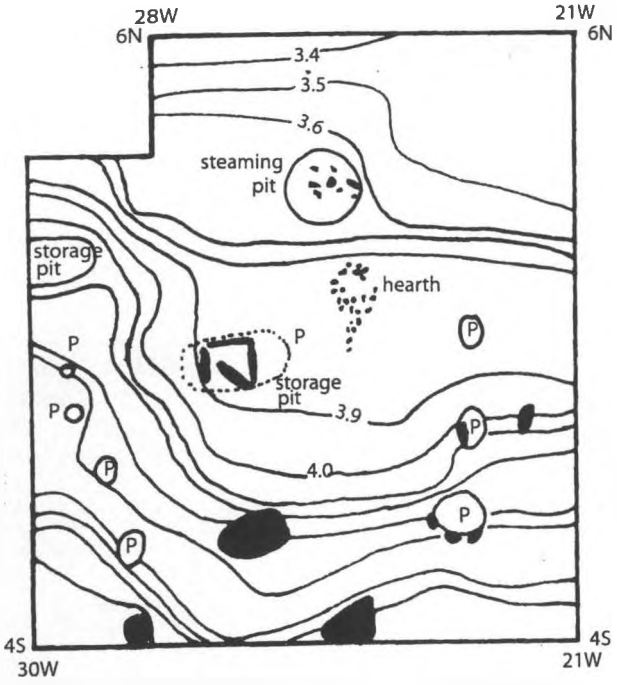

Figure 9:3. **The House Floor and Associated Features at DeRt 1.**

A second set of architectural features was excavated at DeRt-1, located in a cove off of Browning Harbour approximately 100 meters north of DeRt-2. Seven post moulds extending from a compact, dark midden into the sterile glacial subsoil define a level rectangular space 5 x 6 meters in size (Figure 9:3). The post moulds range from 15 to 30 cm in diameter, with the larger ones having stones set vertically into their walls, likely as shims.Unlike DeRt-2, a number of features are located inside or adjacent to thestructure. The most unusual of these was a stone box constructed of sandstone slabs set on edge into the earthen floor and covered by a fifth slab. This feature is located near the corner of the structure, out of traffic's way. A circular hearth was more centrally located, where it might provide an efficient source of light and heat as well as a locus for cooking. External features included a steaming pit and a slab and clay lined pit to the west above a bedrock outcrop. Mitchell (1971:144) has reported a similar clay and stone lined pit from Montague Harbour dating to the Locarno Beach phase.

Long Harbour (DfRu-44)

The architectural remains at Long Harbour (DfRu-44) are the most complete and show the most detail (Figure 9:4). Two size classes of post moulds are present: the smaller has a diameter of 10-15 cm, while the larger are from 30-40 cm in diameter. Both classes of post moulds are from 20 to 30 cm deep and intruded from a dark midden into either a subsoil of glacial till, or gravel beach sediments. Some post moulds have tabular stones embedded in their sides, presumably to act as wedges to secure the post within its hole. The smaller posts are spaced 60 cm apart in a line running for 8.5 meters. These are probably the remains of a non-load bearing curtain wall that supported horizontal planks. The larger post-moulds are located within the smaller post moulds and are probably the remains of load bearing roof supports. A thin shell rich midden was located to the west of the line of wall posts, while a more substantial shell rich midden paralleling the first was located to the east, on the ocean side of the structure. These middens and floor contours suggest a width of 7.5 m for this structure. Associated features include a steaming pit located towards the back of the structure and a more centrally located hearth.

Comparisons and Interpretation

The three structures presented are roughly contemporaneous features dating to the Locarno Beach phase. Each was located on a relatively level portion of the site, backed up against rises in the underlying till, and roughly paralleling the beach. There is no evidence to suggest that the localities for these structures were artificially leveled or excavated. Much of the documented contours can be attributed to preexisting topographic relief to which the buildings were accommodated. Changes to the local relief consist of accumulations of shell around the perimeter of the building; particularly on the side facing the beach. Stein (2000:68) proposed that such shell deposits might have been deliberately banked against some structures in order to insulate them.

The scale and fixed position of the walls suggest a high degree of permanency to which wooden planks were secured. The Long Harbour example probably had larger interior posts designed to support the roof. While we cannot be certain of the lentos of these structures, we can more confidently suggest a width of 7-8 meters.
As a group, the three structures from the Pender canal sites and from Long Harbour are interpreted as permanent structures in light of the size of post moulds, the scale of the overall features, and the relative permanence as reflected by accumulated middens around the perimeters. Such structures are more substantial than the mat house, and on that basis, a seasonal structure can be rejected. Determining their exact function is somewhat more problematic, especially given the percentage of the structures that were excavated. Building function must then be inferred from

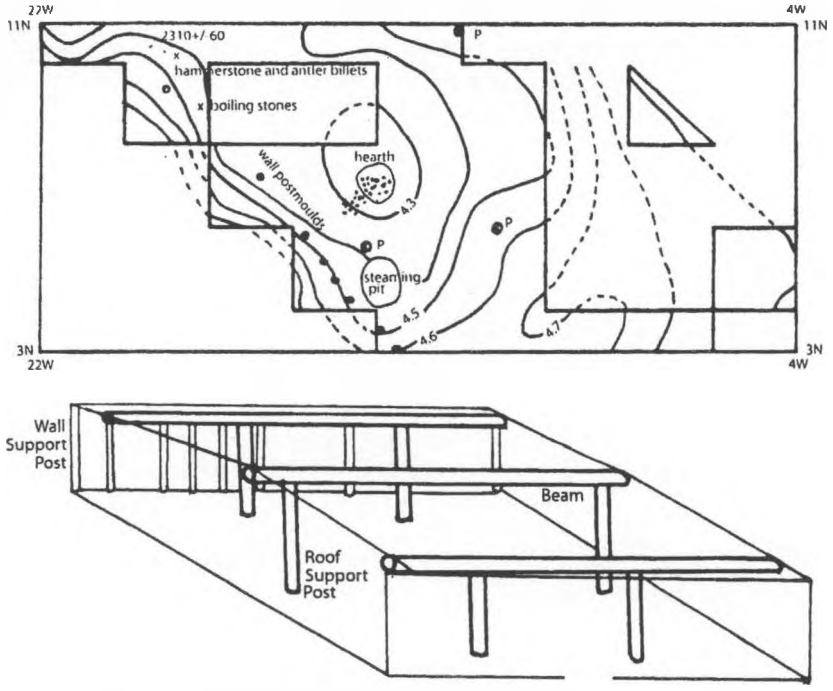

Figure 9:4. **Upper: Plan of Post Holes and Features at Long Harbour (DfRu 44). Lower: Reconstruction of House Frame.**

of the structure that were suggestive of its possible use. A number of burials were found externally. While it is possible that the building may relate to the nearby mortuary activity, there is no direct evidence to support this hypothesis. The structure at DeRt 1 was more completely exposed and had more associated features. Storage pits, hearths, and steaming pits are all domestic features, and suggest that the structure there can be interpreted as a semi-permanent house. While the structure at Long Harbour lacks obvious storage features, there is good evidence for food preparation in the form of smoking, steaming, and boiling. Minimally, this structure can be interpreted as a kitchen, but given that roof beams serve also in a storage capacity when items are suspended, it is equally likely that this building served as a house.

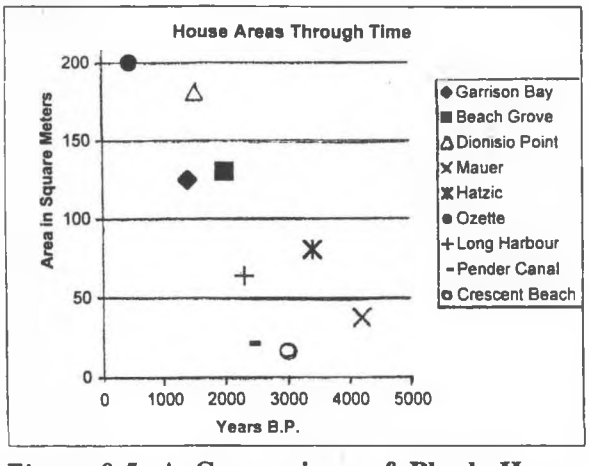

Figure 9:5. **A Comparison of Plank House square Footage for different Time Period.**

Conclusions

The Pender Canal and Long Harbour sites indicate that permanent split plank houses were present at coastal settings of the Southern Strait of Georgia by the Locarno Beach period. Technologically, they closely resemble their ethnographic counterparts in terms of materials and construction techniques. In terms of scale, these houses do not resemble the large multifamily longhouses of the historic period. Instead, it is likely that these structures were single or extended family residences. Coupland (1996) has suggested that multifamily housing arose due to the development of social competition for wealth and prestige and that the larger houses were required to house the greater labour pool. Alternately, Ames (1996) suggests that the increased space was necessary to store the surplus product of this competition. A comparison of plank house space from different periods (Figure 9:5) suggests that the differences in size were of degree rather than of kind, and that house size increased gradually over time rather than rapidly evolving into a more complex form. Given the lack of evidence for excavated floors, thick deposits of shell accumulated around a structure may be the result of long occupation periods, or multiple occupations rather than the large labour investments of corporate groups. In any case, these data do not inform us about the nature of village structure; either of intrasite variability in house size and use, or of village spatial organization.