Many of us zoom through the Naval Live Oaks Preserve on a daily basis never even giving what lies behind the tall stands of pines and sprawling live oaks along U.S. 98 a second thought.

We’re more focused on maintaining the strictly enforced speed limit and navigating the congested lanes than noticing the preserve is a veritable bank of ancient history, some of it dating back to prehistoric time.

On Feb. 8, Gulf Islands National Seashore and Pensacola’s Destination Archeology Resource Center have partnered up to offer the public, for the first time, an opportunity to slow down, pull off the highway and take a peek into the park’s long, albeit not so well-known, Native American past.
“We’re not the first humans to appreciate the spectacular resources in our area,” Seashore Superintendent Dan Brown said. “This is an opportunity to discover who utilized this area in the past and how they lived.”

Seashore park ranger Mike Aymond and archeologist Mike Thomin with the Florida public resource center will lead the slow, easy 2-mile hike after about a 15- to 20-minute presentation at the parks group camp pavilion.

People who can’t or don’t want to participate in the hike but are interested in learning about the area’s history are invited to just attend the presentation, Thomin said.

Since the seashore is responsible for protecting ancient sites, hikers will be taken near them but not through them.

An outdoor museum

The Naval Live Oaks area is one of the few remaining spots on the highly developed peninsula where artifacts of the past still are preserved, and oftentimes laying in or nearby the paths of visitors unaware.

While hiking through the park’s network of trails on a recent frigid morning to fine-tune the logistics of the event, Aymond and Thomin stopped often to inspect whether rock shards and oyster shells were possible tale-tell signs of the ancient inhabitants or came from more modern visitors.

“These people who lived here 1,000 years ago. We really didn’t have historic documents about them until after the Europeans came,” Thomin said.
Ancient roadway was trod by Native Americans, 19th century settlers

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But their trash, in the form of discarded shells, pottery shards, arrow heads, along with burial sites and remnants of their villages, as sparse as they may be, help archeologists piece together their history, he said.

“During the hike, we’ll stop along the way, and I’ll have examples of pottery shards and projectiles that are typical of what we’ll find in those prehistoric times,” Thomin said. “This will help (hikers) recognize the artifacts they might stumble on along the way.”

Educating the public about recognizing and appreciating without disturbing the artifacts is one of the goals of the hike. The seashore wants to avoid the looting of sites that happened in the park in the 1960s.

“Someone walking in and picking up one thing and walking away with it may be neat for them, but they can really do some damage,” Aymond said.

It’s a piece of evidence a trained archeologist would use to fit together a jigsaw puzzle portrait of the lives of prehistoric people.

Just in case hikers stumble upon artifacts in the future, Thomin will have cards available that detail what to do and whom to call.

And he’ll explain why it’s illegal to take an artifact home.

“Why we call this Preservation Past is because the natural environment and natural resources are very important, and we need to protect it,” Thomin said. “But equally important is the cultural resources here that also need protection. They are non-renewable resources.”

Our ancient residents

“Who were the actual people who lived here? That’s one of the big
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mysteries of Pensacola,” Aymond said.

No one even knows the tribal name of the prehistoric natives.

The earliest written accounts came from the Spanish explorers, but by that time, many of the natives here were transplants pushed out of their native homes by the influx of Europeans and tribal wars, Thomin explained.

“It gets pretty complicated with so much upheaval and assimilation of tribes,” he said.

Dozens of native sites do give up clues about the earlier residents, Thomin said.

Without giving away too many spoilers about the hike, Thomin said it mostly will focus on the main evidence these mysterious residents left behind: the oyster-shell mounds scattered around the park.

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 Were they used to build houses on or were they middens? he asked.

Middens are the equivalent of today's garbage dump that native families typically compiled around their homes.

Aymond, who's a repository for a wealth of natural resource information about the seashore, will talk about how the ancient residents relied on the plants, trees and sea life, still found in and around the park, as their grocery store.

"This plant is a good example," Aymond said tugging on a branch of a holly plant bursting with red berries. "This was a staple for the Native Americans. They made their black drink out of this. It's got high levels of caffeine in the leaves and other alkaloids. They used it not only in ceremonial drinks but as a daily tonic for their health. Kind of like the way we drink coffee."

Their starches came from the live oak acorns they ground into flour. Oil was pressed out of pignut hickory nuts, and protein in their diet was harvested from seafood teeming in the surrounding bays.

Hikers also will cross paths with more modern history.

The first military road built in 1824 connecting Pensacola and St. Augustine bisects the north side of the park.

There are remnants of an 1800s orange tree plantation, which relied on slave labor, hidden in the thick woods, along with traces of individual homesteads. And a sand roadway leading to a ridge is where a segregated Boy Scout camp for Black Scouts once stood.

"There's a ton of history out here," Thomin said. "We could turn this into five or six different tours."

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