Workers digging at a beachfront construction site earlier this month unearthed prehistoric human remains — and stumbled upon on a mystery: Is it an American Indian burial site?

The remains were found when two construction workers at the site, in the 900 block of S. Ocean Blvd., were using a Bobcat to move dirt from one area of the 1.7-acre lot when they dug up what appeared to be a human skull and a femur bone buried about 4 to 5 feet underground, according to a police report.

It is not clear if the bones belong to the same person.

Per state law, construction on the house stopped immediately on Dec. 11, and crime scene investigators and the Palm Beach County Medical Examiner's Office investigated. They determined that the remains had been buried for more than 75 years and were not part of a crime scene — at least not a modern-day one.

The medical examiner referred the case to local anthropologist Robert McCarthy, an assistant professor at Florida Atlantic University's School of Anthropology.

"[McCarthy] was able to make the determination that these were prehistoric human remains," said Medical Examiner's Office spokesman Harold "Russ" Ruslander. "We contacted state archaeologists and they assumed jurisdiction."

McCarthy could not be reached for comment despite calls to his office and an e-mail.

Jennifer Davis, spokeswoman for the Florida Department of State, said officials asked McCarthy to rebury the remains.

"There's no determination as to how old they are," Davis said. "We instructed the property owner to hire an archaeologist to investigate where there are remains and make recommendations on how to move forward with construction."

Ryan J. Wheeler, state archaeologist and chief of the Bureau of Archaeological Research, said in an e-mail that his office's prefers that the site remains undisturbed. He said the consulting
archaeologist will write a report including recommendations on how to handle the remains and determine the size of the burial site.

"We consult with the Seminole Tribe of Florida and the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida regarding final disposition," Wheeler wrote. "Our preference is to leave the remains where they were found."

Wheeler said in the e-mail that the law does not prevent the property owners from using or building on the site, but it's unclear when the work will resume.

"The intent of the statute is to ensure that all human burials are treated with respect and afford proper protection," he wrote.

According to property records, the site belongs to a limited liability corporation named after the site's address.

Attorney Thomas Graner, who is representing the owner, declined to comment.

Wheeler said that there are many archaeological sites throughout the state that are preserved through public ownership.

In Palm Beach County, there are several archaeological sites, including the Jupiter Inlet Complex. The large shell mound on the south side of the inlet was excavated between 1884 and 1992 and a burial mound and several shell mounds on the north side at the U.S. Coast Guard Station there, excavated in 1885.

Big Mound City on the J.W. Corbett Wildlife Management Area is another important archaeological site, Wheeler said.

It has been protected since 1947 and it is part of what is called the Belle Glade culture. The site was occupied from as early as 500 B.C. until about 1650. Big Mound City consists of 23 mounds, including two or more burial mounds, where the Everglades meet the pinewood flats in about 143 acres of public land.

*Staff writer Alexia Campbell contributed to this report.*

*Maria Herrera can be reached at meherrera@SunSentinel.com or 561-243-6544.*

Copyright © 2011, *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*