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Port Royal Sound Survey: Results from the 2003 Field Season

By James D. Spirek

The search continued in 2003 to discover the remains of *Le Prince*, a 16-century French corsair, navy wrecks, and other shipwrecks in Port Royal Sound. Remote-sensing operations were very productive in the extent of area surveyed and in the identification of ground-truthed magnetic and acoustic anomalies (Fig. 1). Funds to continue the search for *Le Prince* and other shipwrecks were obtained by an Archaeological Research Trust grant (ART). Besides funding remote sensing operations, ART funds permitted the translation of several Spanish documents related to *Le Prince* obtained earlier in Spain. Remaining funds from a Navy Legacy grant provided the means to search Port Royal Sound for naval remnants from the Civil War.

Offshore in Search of *Le Prince*, *Marcia*, and Other Unfortunates

Still waters and tranquil weather provided excellent working conditions on the shallow waters of the Great North Breakers and Gaskin Bank. Two separate remote sensing ventures in March and August added another 6.5 square miles in the priority survey block at the entrance to Port Royal Sound. Always in search of *Le Prince*, we also hoped to detect the remains of the whaler *Marcia*, intended for the Second Stone Fleet off Charleston but sunk after striking bottom, and other historically recorded shipwrecks. Since 2001, we have averaged during a week surveying about three days on the shoals and two days in the sound due to inclement weather or deteriorating

conditions as the day progresses. For the two-week stretch in August, every day was spent on the shoals, thereby increasing to 50 percent coverage of the bottomlands in the main survey block. We have surveyed the majority of areas where deep water meets shallow sandbars, approximately from the 20-foot contour to "barnacle-scraping" depth at low tide. These geological features were a priority to survey as hazards to navigation for ships entering the sound. The remainder of the area to survey covers bottomlands in depths ranging from 20 to 50 feet deep, excepting two shallow areas yet to complete.

From September 22-26, we returned to the sound to visually inspect prioritized magnetic and acoustic anomalies. We were able to investigate four magnetic anomalies, one in the priority area, and two in secondary areas. The fourth anomaly was in Whale Branch River. Two anomalies were modern debris-wire cable and an unidentified iron construct. The object resembled a 1950s-60s-era gas station fluorescent light pole. The other one proved troublesome to reacquire. Using two different metal detectors, a hand-held proton magnetometer, dodging shrimp boats, and swimming the cesium magnetometer around, finally pinpointed the elusive magnetic anomaly. Earlier that week, we had resurveyed this anomaly by cross-hatching over the anomaly with N-S and E-W lanes spaced five meters apart. The anomaly displayed a very complex magnetic signature suggest-

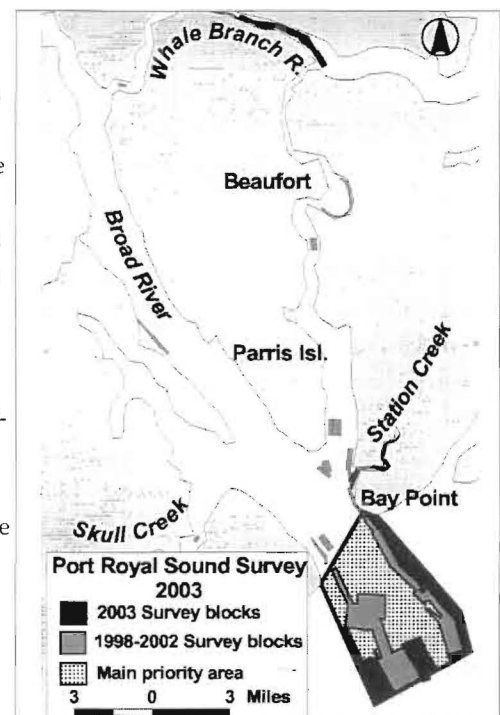


Fig. 1: Map of Port Royal Sound Survey remote sensing operations as of 2003. (SCIAA photo)

ing the presence of multiple ferromagnetic materials associated with this site. Sonar did not reveal any exposed structure. After making contact with an object four-feet deep with the ten-foot hydraulic probe, we began dredging to determine the source of the anomaly (Figs. 2 and 3). Digging down into the fine, sandy matrix we found two planks forming an angle, with another board wedged on one side, perhaps an intrusive log as one side was rounded. A sample retrieved from the planks suggests the boards are made of pine. As it was late in the day and end of the week, we were unable to enlarge the excavation or to continue probing to locate a metal object. The complexity of the magnetic signature and the presence of wood suggest the source of the anomaly may be associated with the remains of a ship. Further

See *LE PRINCE*, Page 26

LE PRINCE, From Page 25

inquiry, however, is needed before making this distinction.

Translation of Spanish Documents Regarding *Le Prince*

ART funds, plus additional money from the Underwater Archaeology Research Fund, provided the means to transcribe the Spanish and then to translate into English, sections of several documents obtained from the Archivo General de las Indias in Seville, Spain. We retained the services of Dr. Karen Paar, a 16th century Spanish research specialist and SCIAA Research Affiliate, who previously worked with documents related to Santa Elena for her dissertation. Dr. Paar provided a summary of the documents and a translation of pertinent sections of the documents relating to *Le Prince*. One document, written by the governor of Cuba, relates the appearance of *Le Prince* at the harbor entrance to Havana, as well as the arrival of a small Spanish dispatch vessel. Apparently, the governor suspected the corsair and dispatch vessel were in cahoots to conduct illegal trade. He then relates that *Le Prince* sailed east and obtained foodstuffs from a Spanish colonist. Here, witnesses relate that the corsair had lost men that were killed in an earlier engagement, was heavily armed, and crewed by about 180 people. The governor stated, "If I found myself with a galley in this port, it [*Le Prince*] would not return to France." As we know, nature did the work for him. The other two documents contained sections previously translated by Jeannette Connor in her work *Colonial Records of Spanish Florida: Letters and Reports of Governors and Secular Persons*. These two documents, only partially

translated by Connor, gave important information concerning the location of the shipwreck. We hoped that a perusal of the complete documents might reveal additional information left off by Connor. Besides some minor differences in the translations by Connor and Paar, no new information concerning the French corsair emerged. The information gleaned from these documents, however, supports the positioning of our main search block at the entrance to Port Royal Sound.

Investigations Around the Union Naval Repair Station at Station Creek

For the past three years we have surveyed a substantial portion of Station Creek in search of remnants of the Union naval repair station in operation from 1861 to 1865. Many anomalies, both at the historical location of the station, and throughout the creek, were detected by the magnetometer and sonar. In May, we visually inspected four magnetic and acoustic anomalies. Archaeologists dove at an acoustic target identified as a rock mound, perhaps associated with a shipwreck or building materials used to construct the facilities at the small hammock used by the Union navy. Initially, divers encountered rock, some iron and copper fasteners, and wood scraps. Additionally, a conglomeration formed by a large iron bar, a ceramic ginger beer bottle, and a brick was recovered and photographed, and then returned to the ballast mound. While having all the hallmarks of a

shipwreck—rocks, fasteners, and wood—there were no articulated timbers to positively conclude the site was a shipwreck. We moved over to another magnetic anomaly close-by and found an assortment of modern iron debris, including cable, rods, a bike wheel, and a boat trailer. Perhaps, a fisherman used this motley collection of debris to construct a private fishing hole. Then, we investigated a large magnetic anomaly further up Station Creek. Divers found a modern 18-foot long metal pipe, about five inches in diameter lying on the bottom.

Several days later we returned to the rock mound to try and find the magnetic anomaly associated with the rocks. The archaeologists encountered several fasteners, wood fragments, boiler slag, and a large copper drift pin about five feet long. Moving along the channel side of the mound, we finally found frames, ceiling and exterior planking, and copper sheathing. This was the proof needed to positively identify the site as a shipwreck (Fig. 4). The Station Creek Shipwreck (38BU2080), is most likely one of the whalers intended for the Stone Fleets off Charleston, but



Fig. 2: Carleton Naylor handing metal detector to Jim Spirek. (SCIAA photo)

diverted for use as floating machine shops to repair South Atlantic Blockading Squadron vessels. We intend to conduct additional investigations at the site later this year, and to look at near-by magnetic and acoustic anomalies. This positive identification marked the first discovery of a shipwreck by the MRD relying solely on the ADAP-III marine remote sensing ensemble. Later that same day, we dove a near-by anomaly and discovered two large iron bars, weighing between 75 to 100 pounds each. Conceivably these bars were iron stock used to fashion needed parts by the Union foundry.

Dr. Chester DePratter accompanied us one day to conduct a reconnaissance of the nearby hammock that was used by Union forces as the land-based repair facility (38BU238 & 239) in conjunction with the floating machine shops. Earlier in 1997, during the pedestrian survey phase of the project, we had briefly visited the site and poked around the palmetto trees and bushes in search of evidence of the Union occupation. We noted a copious amount of shell and some slag on the island, and several pilings in the marsh heading to the creek. Depositing Dr. DePratter on the island, we continued diving operations on nearby anomalies. For several hours, Dr. DePratter explored the hammock for visible remains and completed a field sketch of his findings. He noted the presence of a well, pilings, slag, and glass, as well as an unreported shell ring.

Search for USS *George Washington*

For four days in February, we conducted remote sensing operations on Whale Branch River to search for the remains of the Army gunboat,

USS *George Washington*, sunk by Confederate artillery in 1863. The primary survey block was situated at the proposed historical location of the shipwreck and then expanded east and west to encompass the area between the Highway 21 bridge to Brickyard Creek. Unfortunately, contemporary correspondence indicates that shortly after the gunboat sank, a Navy gunboat towed the wreck to a different position in the river to ease salvage of the gunboat by an Army unit. In the late 1930s, crabbers found a bronze howitzer reportedly from the gunboat, which was shortly removed to the Beaufort Museum where the weapon is still on display. A re-



Fig. 3: Jack Melton and Christopher Amer use hydraulic probe to isolate magnetic anomaly. (SCIAA photo)

searcher in the 1980s attempted to locate the gunboat with a magnetometer where the howitzer was found but detected no evidence of the gunboat.

One of the surprising finds from these survey blocks was the sheer number of magnetic anomalies in a waterway of limited commercial navigation. We believe, based on sonar records, that the vast majority of these anomalies most likely

represent the accumulation over the years of crab traps that have lost their buoys, with some possibly related to the phosphate industry active in the late 1800s. At the proposed historical and original location of the shipwreck, a number of large magnetic anomalies were detected. Probing with a 20-foot hydraulic probe failed to make contact with the sources of the anomalies. These ferrous materials may represent items of the gunboat that broke away during the fire that consumed the wreck, and as the wreck was dragged away by the Navy. Only one other magnetic anomaly had the potential to represent the remains of a steamboat in the river. The position of the anomaly, however, was wrong in relation to the positions of Union and Confederate forces. While the gunboat was supposedly deposited closer to positions occupied by the Federal Army on the south bank of the river, the anomaly was located on the Confederate side of the river, not the Union side.

We decided to investigate the anomaly anyway. The side scan sonar revealed a ridge that was formed of hard mud, which continued down into the channel, while the bank side consisted of pluff mud. A number of iron rods sticking straight up were immediately encountered. Probing with a four-foot hand held probe did not make contact with anything buried in the mud. Continuing the search, several abandoned crab traps were found on the bank side. Based on these findings, it was determined that the site consisted of modern debris, as some cinder blocks and rocks were also found on the site. This dive proved memorable as the friction of moving against the swift current in the darkness caused the zooplankton to fluorescence and completely en-

See *LE PRINCE*, Page 28

LE PRINCE, From Page 27

shroud me in a swirling suit of green. After determining that the magnetic anomaly was a conglomeration of modern debris, I did one more pass simply to tickle my mind with the underwater lightshow.

Skull Creek Shipwreck (38BU723)

We returned to the Skull Creek Shipwreck on May 27 to gather information to delineate the site and to identify any exposed ship components along the perimeter of the ballast mound. As mentioned in an earlier *Legacy* magazine, the identity of the shipwreck is uncertain, but we have posited four possibilities: 1) the Martin's Industry Lightship burned by the Confederates, 2) a whaler intended for the Stone Fleets off

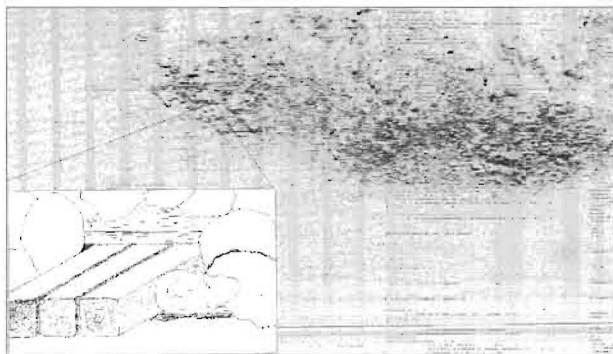


Fig. 4: Sonogram showing Station Creek Shipwreck ballast mound. Inset, drawing of ship structure: frames, ceiling planks, and exterior planks, not to scale. (SCIAA photo)

Charleston, 3) a Confederate blockship to thwart navigation in Skull Creek, or 4) an unknown 19th century wreck. Additional research is needed to help reveal the identity of the wreck. Underwater, the first task was to simply measure the basic dimensions of length, width, and height of the ballast mound. Circumnavigating the periphery of the ballast mound, we found several large copper drift pins and several iron fasteners protruding from the bottom. Probing with a four-foot hand-held probe failed to contact any

wooden structure associated with the fasteners buried in the sediment. Lying on the opposite side of the ballast mound was a post. During the initial discovery of the shipwreck in 1985, SCIAA underwater archaeologists called the object a mast. We wanted to ascertain whether this was a mast fragment, or a more modern relic. As the diver fished around in his wetsuit sleeve to pull out a wood sample from the pole, an oily slick emanated from his hiding place, as well as the unmistakable smell of creosote. The presumed mast was most likely the precursor of the adjacent channel marker pole.

Bay Point

Two magnetic anomalies were chosen for ground-truthing off Bay

Point Island on May 28. During the Civil War, the area was used by both Confederate and Federal forces, and earlier during the War of 1812, a British warship wrecked in the general vicinity. Both targets were investigated the

same day and found to be associated with automobiles. The first target was the body of either a Ford Model-T or -A vehicle, and consisted of the engine block, drive shaft, lower passenger frame, and four fenders and wheels. The car rested in eight feet of water at low tide, and was surrounded by a scour in coarse sand. The lack of fishing line suggested the car body is either recently exposed or not known as an artificial reef. The second anomaly consisted of the lower structure of the car body, where the seat belt is

attached to the floor, as evidenced by remnants of the lower seat belt. The findings prompted the crew to call the area "Jim's Junkyard." A plausible suggestion for the presence of the car and part is the severe ongoing erosion at Bay Point; originally resting on dry land, these objects have since been subsumed by the ocean. Alternately, they could have been deliberately tossed into the water as a private, artificial reef.

Conclusion

The year 2003 proved especially productive for our remote sensing operations in Port Royal Sound. While the remains of *Le Prince* remain elusive, the discovery of a Civil War-era shipwreck, the potential remains of another shipwreck, the Model-T or -A vehicle remains, help to bolster our resolve in finding the French shipwreck. Again, the principal investigators wish to thank the Board of Trustees of the Archaeological Research Trust for their continued support of our project. We also wish to thank the administrators of the Navy Legacy grant for their support of our mutual goals to investigate the State's and the Nation's sunken naval legacy. We have secured additional funding to continue the search for *Le Prince* and the mapping of the Station Creek Shipwreck in 2004 from SCIAA's Robert L. Stephenson Archaeological Research Fund. These funds will allow us to conduct three weeks of survey and two weeks of ground-truthing and mapping. If you would like to help in our efforts to search for shipwrecks and other submerged archaeological artifacts, please consider sending a tax-deductible contribution to the Archaeological Research Trust Fund earmarked for the Port Royal Sound Survey.