South Carolina State Archaeologists Team-Up to Help History Detectives

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By Jonathan Leader and Christopher Amer

Christopher Amer and I, in our capacities as State Underwater Archaeologist and State Archaeologist, recently teamed up with Lion Television and Public Broadcasting Service television. The occasion was the opportunity to investigate a true South Carolina mystery for a segment of the popular series, History Detectives.

Daryl Boyd, a well-known hobby diver in the South Carolina Sport Diver Archaeology Management Program, found an object lying on top of the riverbed while diving in the Savannah River 13 years ago. The find was in 20 feet of water near the South Carolina bank in the vicinity of the old town of Hamburg. Daryl contacted the Institute and filed a report as required by law.

He brought the object to the Institute for inspection, at which time the object was positively identified it as a "cartridge box plate" from the 71st Scottish Highlanders Regiment. The 71st was a Revolutionary War regiment raised specifically in response to the American Revolution and had a very short regimental existence. It was stationed in the Augusta, Georgia area for only a few weeks in the beginning of 1779. In accordance with state law, Daryl retained his find.

It is important to note that very few 71st cartridge box plates have ever been found in the United States. Daryl has always taken his stewardship responsibilities for the artifacts he collects very seriously and kept the box plate safe. From time to time he tried to find out how the plate had gotten to the place where he found it and what the historical connections it may have had with South Carolina. While some information was available, it tended to raise more questions than it answered.

Fortunately, he passed on his question to Lincoln Farr, Associate Producer of Lion Television’s History Detectives. Lion Television is home based in the United Kingdom. A question concerning a Scottish regiment operating during the American Revolution was intriguing on far too many levels to pass up. Lincoln decided that this was a perfect question to form an episode of the History Detectives.

Lincoln contacted Christopher Amer and myself. Between the two of us, we were well equipped to answer questions on the 71st, the river in which the medallion was found, its metallurgical content, preservation environment, and conservation options of the artifact itself. The initial consultations went very well, and we were sworn to secrecy, forbidden to discuss the findings before the airing of the show.

Fig. 1: 71st Highlander Cartridge Box Plate. (Photo courtesy of Lion Television)
History Detective's Elyse Luray interviewed Chris and I on the morning of March 27th. The filming took place on the USC Columbia campus in a laboratory of the Earth Sciences Building. Dr. Tim Mousseau, Associate Dean for Research of the College of Arts and Sciences, made the laboratory available. Unfortunately the Institute's laboratories had insufficient space to accommodate the film crew. Fortunately, this will be rectified in the new building.

Elyse Luray is well known for her work with the Antiques Road Show and with Christy's Auction House. She is an excellent appraiser of historic materials and has a real interest in history. Not to mention a wonderful sense of humor. Elyse was very well prepared and asked questions about the manufacture and metallic make-up of the embossed buckle, its interaction with the environment, why it was in such good condition, and ultimately, whether or not it was genuine. As an archaeometallurgist and objects conservator, I handled the first set of questions, and Chris, as the maritime archaeologist, handled the latter. Both of us agreed that it was genuine and that the object had been in an anaerobic condition until just shortly before Daryl found it. This accounted for much of its preservation. The domed shape of the cartridge box plate had held it firmly to the bottom as the river's flow ran over the exposed surface adding to its protection.

The filming took the better part of a day, and the episode aired on July 17th on PBS. History Detectives has thoughtfully provided a copy of the show on VHS, which may be scheduled for viewing at the Institute.