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SCIAA's Underwater Archaeology Division Completes First Phase of the Port Royal Sound Survey

By James D. Spirek and Christopher F. Amer

The Underwater Archaeology Division of the SC Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of South Carolina is currently undertaking a comprehensive inter-tidal and submerged cultural resource survey of Port Royal Sound. Funded in part by a National Park Service Historic Preservation Survey and Planning Grant, administered through the SC Department of Archives and History, the project is under the direction of co-principal investigators James D. Spirek and Christopher F. Amer, assisted by Division personnel Lynn Harris, Joe Beatty, and Carl Naylor. Laura Von Harten, a local maritime historical researcher specializing in the fishery industry of Port Royal Sound, is a consultant to the project. Additionally, the project is supported by local institutions and groups, as well as by individuals, interested in the maritime history of the sound. The survey began this summer and will continue until August 31, 1998. Research components to complete the project will be implemented as funding permits.

The mission of the Port Royal Sound Survey-phase one, is to study and develop the historical, archaeological, and geographical context of the region’s prehistoric and historic maritime past. Research methods include locating archival documents and historical references, reviewing the Archaeological Site Files and Hobby Diver reports for previously documented sites, studying maps and remote imagery, among other research avenues to build a database of known and potential archaeological sites in the project area. Besides relying on texts and pictures, we will interview local watermen, divers, and others who are familiar with underwater and inter-tidal features such as unknown obstructions, snags, rock piles, pilings, landings, shipwrecks, and other items of interest. The information assembled through this research will provide a baseline of information by which to plan and conduct field work to record archaeological sites in and along the periphery of the sound.

The fieldwork for the first phase of the project is largely complete. Field methods for phase one included conducting aerial reconnaissance of the sound’s shoreline and implementing a pedestrian survey, supported by small boats, along the shoreline, both accomplished during low tide. During the three-week pedestrian survey more than 60 archaeological sites were newly located, or re-visited. Previously unrecorded sites were documented, i.e., measured drawings and photographed, for inclusion in the State Site Files. With the assistance of John Peterson, on loan to us from Steve Smith’s Cultural Resource Consulting Division, the latitude and longitude of the individual sites was recorded using a hand-held GPS unit. A GIS-compatible computer database, composed of information relating to a site, will be constructed for analysis and managerial purposes.

Based on the gathered research and field data the project team will demarcate areas for planned marine remote sensing operations, for the, as yet, unfunded phase two of the project, to locate submerged archaeological sites. Criterion to determine areas for survey include proximity to known historical activity or archaeological sites, information acquired from watermen and divers, and geographi-
cal features or ship “traps,” i.e. sandbars and shoals. Using funds appropriated through the South Carolina General Assembly 1997 legislative session, the division has purchased an integrated marine data-gathering system. The ensemble, which is being custom designed by Sandia Research, Inc. in New Mexico, will consist of a cesium magnetometer, a side scan sonar, a DGPS unit, and a digital fathometer. Incoming electronic data obtained during the survey will be processed by an on-board computer system using proprietary software from Sandia.

Following the electronic survey, we will process the magnetic, acoustic, bathymetric data and devise GIS overlays in order to analyze and prioritize anomalies for visual inspection. Equipped underwater archaeologists and volunteers will ground-truth targets to identify and record those anomalies that are archaeologically significant.

By these means, the division will begin to construct a comprehensive inventory of inter-tidal and underwater archaeological sites in the sound that include shipwrecks or abandoned water craft, landing and wharf remnants, prehistoric sites, and other materials on state-owned bottom lands. The division will use the gathered information to develop guidelines for the preservation of these cultural resources; for example, addressing issues concerning access and suitability of a site’s recreational, educational, or scientific benefit to the citizens and tourists of South Carolina. Other management issues of concern include possible, or on-going, impacts to these resources due to development, erosion, and artifact collecting.

Eligibility for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places or sites bearing historical or archaeological significance to the maritime history of South Carolina. The Port Royal Sound Survey will initiate a program of long-term and comprehensive regional surveys throughout South Carolina under the direction of the Underwater Archaeology Division of the SCIAA with the support of local organizations and volunteers.

One of the more interesting sites near Beaufort is a barrel well associated with Fort Frederick. The wooden barrels, of which only the top of the uppermost barrel is exposed, were placed one atop the other down to the level of fresh water to line the well and prevent it from collapsing. The close-fitting barrel staves would also deter salt water from contaminating the well water. Because the barrel is exposed to the effects of current and boat wake, the crew stabilized the site against further erosion. A second site, located downstream, revealed the bottom planking and frames of an early 20th-century boat, possibly used in the oyster industry.

SCIAA wishes to thank those volunteers who flew the aerial reconnaissance with us, and who battled rain, deep pluff mud, and razor-sharp oyster shells, for helping make this first phase of the survey a success. If anyone has any information pertinent to this survey, please contact James Spirek or Christopher Amer at SCIAA (803)777-8170 or spirek@garnet.cla.sc.edu or amerc@garnet.cla.sc.edu.

Hull fragments of a 20th century wreck on Cane Island on the Beaufort River. [Photo by Christopher F. Amer]