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An Inventory of Naval Shipwrecks in Charleston Harbor

By James D. Spirek

In 1999, the Underwater Archaeology Division was awarded a U. S. Department of Defense Legacy grant to implement the *H. L. Hunley* and Charleston Civil War Wrecks Inventory and Assessment Project. The main objectives of the project are to gather historical and archaeological information and to conduct remote sensing surveys at the *Hunley* and *Housatonic* sites and at other Navy shipwrecks in Charleston Harbor and environs.

With this electronic data, augmented by historical and archaeological information, we will prepare a management report concerning the approximately 96 U. S. naval wrecks reportedly resting on state bottomlands; out of a total of more than 3,000 naval wrecks worldwide. The wrecks include those from the Revolutionary War to the most recent, *USS Soley*, that ran aground in the 1970s. By far the most numerous wrecks are associated with the Civil War, including 32 whaler hulks assembled to create the two Stone Fleets to blockade the entrance channel to Charleston Harbor.

The award to South Carolina is a continuation in a series of Legacy grants to other state submerged cultural resource programs to build an inventory of Navy wrecks lying throughout the United States. The grant is administered by the Underwater Archaeology Branch of the Naval Historical Center (NHC) at the Washington Navy Yard in the District of Columbia.

Remote sensing operations around the *Housatonic* and *Hunley* sites occurred in the spring of 1999, with the use of our ADAP III system to gather magnetic and acoustic data from the sites. The side scan sonar,

or acoustic data corroborated what we already knew—the sites are buried, while the magnetometer, or magnetic data, detected a large amount of iron at each site, obviously revealing nothing we did not already know.

We added this information to the database initially generated by the National Park Service during the 1996 *Hunley* project. At this writing, we have undertaken limited remote sensing operations at several wrecks in the latter part of February, namely at the *Patapsco*, *Keokuk*, and *Weehawken*, three Federal ironclads sunk around Charleston. We will input the electronic data we gather into a Geographical Information System (GIS) format that will prove useful for future investigations and monitoring of the sites.

The grant also provided funds to hire historical researcher and author, Mark Ragan, most notably known for his research on the *H. L. Hunley* submarine and other Civil War-era submarines. The purpose of Ragan's research was to find documents related to navy ships that were wrecked in South Carolina waters and to create a historical synopsis for each ship. Ragan has completed his research at the National Archives and Naval Historical Center, among other archives, and referenced secondary sources to gather the sought after materials. His research will augment the management report and help to fill the blanks in the Navy's database concerning basic information about each wreck, such as length, when and where reported lost, among other pertinent details.

Another important facet of the grant is to determine the archaeological potential of the ship remains by

examining records of past and modern salvage activities and archaeological investigations. The most intensive and invasive salvage activities on navy wrecks took place in the 1870s in Charleston to remove several Federal and Confederate ironclads from the navigation channels. Modern salvage by salvors and divers has been limited to several wrecks and occurred mostly in the 1970s and 1980s, although the *CSS Pee Dee* had seen earlier salvaging in the 1920s and 1950s. Locations of many of the wrecks remain uncertain and require intensive remote sensing surveys to locate their remains. During our upcoming remote sensing operations, we hope to identify and clarify the position of several shipwrecks in Charleston Harbor.

A primary product of the grant is to use the assembled historical and archaeological research to fill out an information spreadsheet for each wreck. Basic information to complete the forms includes site location, past and present salvage attempts, and ship dimensions, to name a few categories.

Currently, the Underwater Archaeology Division is undertaking research to provide a historical sketch of the Navy's presence in South Carolina. We hope to complete and submit the management report to the NHC later in 2001.

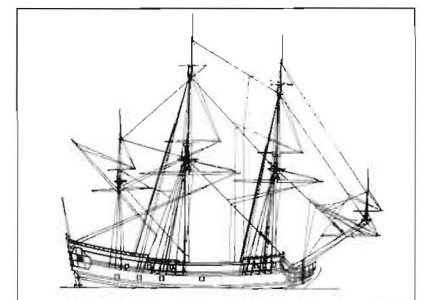


Illustration of the *Carolina* 1670 in Charleston's Maritime Heritage, 1670-1865: An Illustrated History by P. C. Coker, III, p. 1.