Le Prince Search Continues in Spain and in Port Royal Sound

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Chester DePratt and I were awarded an Archaeological Research Trust grant to fund archival research in Spain and field work in Port Royal Sound to continue our efforts to locate the remains of Le Prince, a French corsair wrecked in 1577, and other shipwrecks in the vicinity. Besides the ART funds, we used funds from a Department of Defense Legacy grant to search for several Civil War naval supply vessels also lost on the shoals of Port Royal Sound. The ART grant originally was intended to support remote sensing operations in continuation of the previous year’s endeavors in Port Royal Sound. While planning this next phase of the project, we received an email from our researcher in Spain, Claudio Bonifacio. He reported having a possible lead concerning a Spanish salvage attempt to recover unspecified cannons in Florida, perhaps off Le Prince. If this salvage effort was related to Le Prince, our efforts to locate the French corsair would have to account for this possibility, as the Spanish often salvaged accessible shipwrecks. Essentially, if iron cannons were removed from the shipwreck site, their absence would dramatically alter the magnetic signature of the wreck site. More importantly, this information might also contain more precise locational information to aid in finding the shipwreck.

Archival Research

Amending the grant to cover Bonifacio’s research costs, we directed him to follow the salvage lead in the Archivo de las Indias General (AGI) in Seville, Spain. Bonifacio located a lengthy document, over 160 pages long and in very poor condition, of an inquiry into the reputed salvage of the cannons from Florida. For all the document’s length, Bonifacio could not determine the location, the number, or even if the cannons were retrieved. He also located a couple of other documents related to the salvage expedition, but these records again failed to shed light on the endeavor. In addition, Bonifacio found several other documents pertaining to the ship and French corsairing in general.

Based on the information in our files concerning the shipwreck and events at Santa Elena, we do not believe that this salvage attempt, or any other, was made on Le Prince by the Spanish. This belief is founded...
on the incompatible timing between when the Spaniards became aware of the wreck and when the salvage endeavor was organized. The shipwreck occurred in early January 1577, and the salvage attempt was preparing in Havana around mid-spring of that year. The first indication, however, that the Spaniards became aware that Le Prince shipwrecked is in October 1577, when the new Governor of Florida, Pedro Menendez Marquez, arrived from Havana to St. Augustine in that month. Marquez reported upon his arrival the news that the corsair wrecked off Santa Elena. Returning to Santa Elena and finding the poop deck of the wrecked galleon in the sound, Marquez remarked that he did not know where the hull struck on the shoals. This assessment of when the shipwreck was first known to have occurred but not exactly where, and when the salvage effort was planned, do not suggest this effort was directed towards retrieving cannons from the corsair. Perhaps, the salvage endeavor was to recover the cannons left at Santa Elena, or alternately, from another shipwreck located somewhere else along the Florida coast. Documents in our possession detailing the re-establishment of Santa Elena in 1577 and until its final abandonment in 1587 fail to reveal any salvage attempt made on Le Prince during this period. We believe that any large iron components carried by Le Prince, that is cannons and anchors, are most likely still in proximity to the shipwreck, and therefore acting as magnetic beacons to aid in locating the remains of the corsair.

Figure 2: Main survey area and completed survey blocks. (SCIAA photo)

Marine Remote Sensing Operations

During two separate excursions, April 8-12 and September 30-October 7, 2002, we resumed marine survey operations to locate Le Prince, US naval vessels, and other shipwrecks in Port Royal Sound (Figure 1). The weather was excellent, especially during the second period with flat seas and good tidal windows which facilitated remote sensing operations on and along the treacherous shoals of the Great North Breakers and Joiner Bank. Using SCIAA’s ADAP III marine remote sensing equipment, we increased our survey coverage in the sound to 8.4 square miles of bottomland. Our survey transects total 653 linear miles, or a distance equivalent to traveling from Port Royal to the Mississippi River. In the main priority area, we have encompassed 6.5 square miles, or about 25 percent of the 23.7 square mile area (Figure 2). Another 353 magnetic anomalies were detected in the new survey area. Of these, several anomalies bear further investigation to determine their potential historical or archaeological significance. The majority of the magnetic anomalies, however, were small 1 to 10 gamma anomalies, suggestive of small, single-source ferrous objects. We plan to continue surveying in the main area next year, as well as implementing ground-truthing operations to identify the sources of prioritized magnetic or acoustic anomalies detected during the course of the survey.

During our survey of a section of Station Creek, we examined from a distance an iron object lying about 100 yards in the marsh (Figure 3). It

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appears to be an iron-hulled vessel, about 50 feet long or so and proud of the marsh by 5 feet, with some wood planks piled on the deck. Nobody, however, felt adventurous enough to slog through the marsh to get a closer look at the object. We decided to wait until another occasion to investigate the hulk when we could take the jonboat and get closer to the vessel by threading our way through the small tidal creeks during high tide.

We had several volunteers join us during the October survey. Jack Melton from Kennesaw, Georgia, a recent graduate of our Field Training Course, volunteered for three days. ART board member Bill Behan and a friend, Jim Scott, visited on the last day of the survey during an unusually calm day on the Great North Breakers (Figure 4). We appreciated their help and support while they were with us.

Dr. DePratter and I would like to express our thanks to the Board of Trustees of the Archaeological Research Trust for providing the funds to search for Le Prince and other shipwrecks and for their continued support of this research project. Additionally, funds from our Naval Wreck Survey grant allowed us to survey for Navy shipwrecks in the same locale. 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.