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Field Work

SCIAA'S Maritime Research Division Returns to Confederate Shipyard

By Christopher Amer

The Maritime Research Division's (MRD) work at the Mars Bluff Navy Yard continued this fall (for a history of the Navy Yard and CSS *Peedee* and our joint work at the site with East Carolina University's Program in Maritime Studies in 2009 see SCIAA's newsletter, *Legacy*, Volume 13, Number 2, August 2009, p. 1 and 4 through 8). In September 2010, staff of the MRD, along with volunteers Bob Butler and David Freeman, returned to the Great Pee Dee River to video two of the cannon from the ill-fated gunboat CSS *Peedee* (**Figure 1**). Bob, a hobby diver of long standing, is a member of the avocational research group, The Pee Dee Research and Recovery Team that initially located the guns in the 1990s and reported them to SCIAA. Dave

who owns the local dive shop, Palmetto SCUBA Connection, has actively supported and participated in our survey and diving at the site for the last two years.

The Pee Dee is a river of extremes. The water depth and flow can fluctuate wildly depending on the release of water from four dams upstream and, of course, the weather. In 2009, when we invited ECU to conduct an underwater field school at the site the river rose to over 20 feet giving the field school students and interesting dive experience, to say the least. In September of this year the water was so low that we experienced problems just launching our boats. As if a paucity of water depth was not enough, the river was choked with branches and cut logs that lay off

the landing from an ongoing operation to clear trees that had, over the years, piled against the highway bridge piers just upstream of the boat ramp.

Diving in the shallow water, we took little time to re-acquire the 6.4-inch Brooke Rifle and clear sediments to expose some of the diagnostic features of the nine-inch Dahlgren. Stills taken from the video footage revealed features characteristic of the nine-incher (**Figures 2 & 3**) and clearly show the letters "JMB" (John M. Berrien) inscribed in the end of one trunnion (**Figure 4**). The serial number FP 573 on the breach and Berrien's initials suggest the gun was cast in 1862 at the Fort Pit Foundry in Pittsburg. John M. Berrien was ordnance duty officer in Pittsburg between 1862-4 and would have marked each gun he inspected. The 6.4-inch Brooke Rifle was cast at the Selma foundry.

We spent the following day conducting a magnetometer survey of the site to monitor how the site had changed magnetically since the 2009 field school fieldwork and if the

flooding that same year had exacted an impact on the site. The survey could potentially suggest areas that may hide the missing third gun, a seven-inch Brooke Rifle that to this date has eluded detection. Earlier in summer 2010, the same crew, along with Dr. Larry Babits, director of the ECU program, spent nearly a week investigating magnetic anomalies at the site hoping that one of them would be the larger Brooke gun. While we encountered vast array of buried metal objects largely associated with the logging industry, along with numerous modern artifacts, we found no trace of the third gun.

The high point of the survey was reached when we moved the magnetometer survey downstream to investigate the reported location of the remains of the gunboat, CSS *Peedee*, from which the Confederate gun crews has jettisoned the cannon prior to scuttling the gunboat on March 15, 1865. Using the description of an eyewitness who actually saw the wreck in 1954 when the river was extremely low, we dropped the sensor into

(Continued on Page 5)



Figure 1

Volunteers David Freeman (left) and Bob Butler (right) discussing their findings after a dive.



Figure 2 (above)
The flared muzzle of the nine-inch Dahlgren gun.



Figure 3 (upper right)
The left percussion hammer/lock bracket on the nine-inch Dahlgren gun.



Figure 4 (lower right)
Left trunnion of the Dahlgren with the initials "JMB."

Confederate Shipyard (Continued from page 4)

the water and, almost immediately, picked up large number of magnetic readings suggesting scattered wreckage. A group of iron fastenings in timbers just visible through the turbid waters of the river confirmed the presence of a wreck. In November, we conducted a side-scan sonar survey of the site, which confirmed that most of the wreckage is buried beneath a sand bar that, over time, has accreted over the remaining iron and timbers of the wreck

(Figure 5). Is this scattered wreckage all that remains of CSS *Peedee*? Confirmation of the identity of the wreckage (if we are even able to do so from the remains) will have to wait for another day. Meanwhile, plans to raise the two cannon located at the Mars Bluff Navy Yard continue, with a projected raising date in late spring or summer 2011. ■

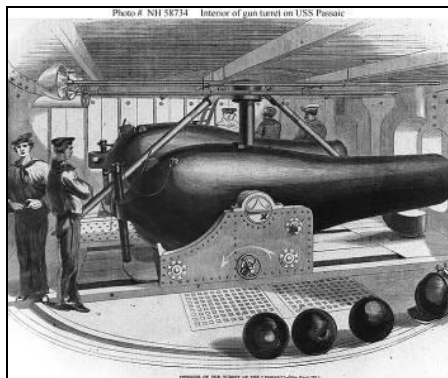


Illustration of the turret Dahlgrens on USS Passaic showing the percussion locks ready to fire.

Figure 5
Magnetic anomalies (red positive and blue negative) overlying sonar images of the sand bar that covers the wreck thought to be CSS Peedee. The magnetic anomalies span a distance of approximately 200 feet.

