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*Flotsam and Jetsam* - December 1998

South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology--University of South Carolina

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South Carolina's First Underwater Trail is Open!
By Lynn Harris

On Thursday morning, October 29, Dr. Bruce Rippeteau and Lynn Harris officially opened the Cooper River Underwater Heritage Trail with a ribbon cutting ceremony. SCIAA staff and sport divers who had helped with trail construction spent the rest of the day conducting a final check of the mooring buoys, underwater monuments, and guidelines leading to the sites. Six sites are included in the Cooper River Heritage Trail.

Strawberry Shipwreck
During an expedition to chase the British out of Moncks Corner during the summer of 1781, Colonel Wade Hampton and his men arrived at Strawberry Ferry on their way upriver. They found four vessels loaded with military supplies for the British and promptly burned them. The Strawberry shipwreck displays evidence of burning on the timbers, and artifacts of British military origin are said
to have been recovered by sport
divers in the 1970s. Small flat-
headed copper sheathing tacks are
embedded in outer hull planking in
the starboard stern area and the
sternpost at the bow. Although the
sheathing is missing, divers who
visited the site in previous years
report the presence of lead sheathing
displaying the broad arrow, indicat-
ing that it once belonged to the
British Admiralty. In addition, the
vessel also had copper plates under
the lead sheathing.

Strawberry Ferry Landing

Strawberry Ferry was established
in 1705 on the western branch of the
Cooper River. It was associated with
the settlement of Childsbury. Like
other colonial frontier towns,
Childsbury’s strategic location on the
inland water route was vitally
important to the region’s transporta-
tion infrastructure and economy. The
ferry landing brick rubble extends 20
yards out from the riverbank about
50 feet from the Strawberry ship-
wreck. At low tide, floor support
rubble with stake and puncheon side
support boards are visible. The
beams have cut-outs for cross
members. The brick floor is mixed
with rubble and sand.

Pimlico Shipwreck

The large dimensions of this
vessel and the robust scantlings, such
as frames and planking, suggest that
it was intended for offshore opera-
tion rather than on inland water-
ways. There is a possibility that it
was used for the lumber trade,
commerce, or even warfare. It may
have sailed upstream to the “fresches”
(freshwater zone in tidal rivers) as a
measure to rid the vessel of marine
organisms that attacked the bottoms
of wooden ships in salt water.
Alternatively, it may have been
seeking shelter upriver during a
hurricane.

Pimlico Barge

The Pimlico barge lies on a marl
and sandy substrate. This barge is
well preserved and divers have
commented that it feels like being
inside a giant bathtub. It has an
overall length of 39 feet and beam of
15 feet. The planked sides are 3 feet
high. The presence of towing rings
suggest that the barge, or a train of
barges, may have been pulled behind
a steamboat to carry additional cargo
or supplies. A very large catfish has
been observed in the space between
the barge and the bottom. Don’t be
frightened by the two eyes peering
back at you. He, or she, is fat and
complacent!

Mepkin Boat

The Mepkin Boat was designed to
carry a heavy cargo, probably
between the plantation and the
harbor, and perhaps even offshore.
Her last cargo appears to be cut
lumber, possibly cypress shingles.
The wreck lies in proximity to former
Mepkin plantation, owned by the
illustrious Henry Laurens—a wealthy
planter, merchant, and Revolutionary
War leader. The records of his estate
written in 1766 reveal that he owned
a schooner called the Baker, valued at
2,600 pounds and crewed by four
slaves. This boat plied between
Mepkin plantation and his wharf in
Charleston. This site is close to a
monastery. Please be considerate of
the residents who often wander
down to the water’s edge for
meditation. Enjoy the sound of the
ringing church bells and the view of
the unusual anchor-shaped cross on
the steeple.

Mooring buoy near the Mepkin Boat. (Photo by Christopher Amer)
Mepkin Dock

Mepkin Dock is a submerged rectangular wooden structure, resembling a log cabin without a roof, and it is currently a home to many fish. It is an example of a typical wooden dock structure historically used by early riverside residences in South Carolina. A dock or wharf served as a platform to load and unload plantation boats. Interlocking palmetto logs were used to construct a crib which was weighted down and sunk in the river. The logs are attached by means of long wooden guide posts visible at the bottom of the cribbing structure. In addition to the cribbing forming the sides of the rectangle on the Mepkin dock, a layer of cribbing was added to the middle of the rectangle dividing it into two compartments. This provided extra stability and strength for the structure.

Diving Advice

Underwater slates with the maps and history of each site will be sold through interested dive stores. Divers have the option of diving through a local dive store or charter business, or as individuals. It is recommended that they at least purchase the underwater maps. The best time to dive on these sites is during the incoming tide which counteracts the natural outflow of the river thereby lessening the strength of the current. Consult local tide tables for times of tides. Generally, tides in the trail area run about three and a half hours behind the listed times for Charleston harbor. Divers should descend down the mooring line to the monument which is equipped with signage that identifies the dive site and sponsors. A guide line is attached on the monument that leads to the site. Please do not anchor on or near the wreck. Use the mooring buoy.

Diving on historic wooden wrecks requires careful personal and equipment control to avoid damaging these fragile structures. All gauges, hoses, and other gear should be situated as to avoid entanglement. Avoid pulling on the structure to move about the site. During periods of strong current, divers should remain on the periphery of the site to lessen potentially adverse contact with the structure. When visiting each trail site, please take only photographs and memories and leave only bubbles. To participate in an organized charter, contact a local scuba diving store. To report any damage to the site or mooring system contact SCIAA at (843) 762-6105. Please help by clearing the weeds on the mooring line and wiping mud off the monument plaque.

Diving in South Carolina rivers is not for the inexperienced diver. Divers should use accepted safe diving practices, including the buddy system, the divers-down flag, and standard open water diving equipment, i.e., gloves and a sharp dive knife to cut monofilament line. Lights are also essential to illuminate these dark water dive sites. During the warmer months divers should be aware of the presence of alligators and snakes in the vicinity.

Many sport divers participated in the construction of this trail. Assistance was also provided by Hightower Construction, Berkeley County Public Works Department, the Berkeley/Charleston/Dorchester Council of Governments, East Coast Dive Connection, and Charleston Scuba. This Underwater Diving Trail was sponsored in part by the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology of the University of South Carolina, the National Recreational Trails Program in cooperation with the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism, and the Federal Highway Administration of the US Department of Transportation.

Willtown: Past and Present

By Drew Ruddy

It was a beautiful afternoon on April 27, 1969, when we lowered our anchor to the bottom of the Edisto River about midway along the bluff at Willtown. Jim Baity, Steve Howard, and I descended into the tannin-stained water to the exhilarating discovery of artifacts dating throughout the span of the 18th and 19th centuries. As South Carolina had only months before enacted the first Underwater Antiquities Law, we reported the find to officials. By June, under the auspices of Dr. Robert L. Stephenson, we received a one-year salvage contract to recover artifacts and record data from the site. At the end of our year's endeavor, both the state and salvers had a collection of artifacts, and we provided field drawings to Dr. Stephenson.

English settlement in the Edisto region began in the 1680s, largely by Presbyterian Dissenters escaping turmoil in England. It is uncertain whether the original town site called London was actually on Willtown Bluff or on nearby land, but by the 1690s a town called alternately New London or Willtown was being established. Although its size and stature are a matter for further research, Willtown was a frontier community and one of the few English settlements of note outside of Charles Towne.

The area witnessed such historical events as nearby destruction in the 1686 Spanish raid which destroyed Governor Morton's home only miles away; attack by Yamasee Indians in the 1715 uprising; and the 1739 Stono slave uprising in which the major battle, involving Willtown militia, was fought a short distance away.

By the mid-18th century, with the Indian frontier moving ever westward and the rice culture flourishing, the town began to atrophy and the area was developed as plantation lands. In 1863, Union gunboats ascended the Edisto in a raid which liberated more than 150 slaves from the area. During the raid, the small armed tug Governor Milton, was grounded and burned near Willtown.

Many years have passed since our first diving efforts at Willtown, and now the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology has a well-run underwater program. In 1997, through conversations with SCIAA staff members Lynn Harris and Carl Naylor, it was agreed that with their guidance, I would complete a report on the underwater site at Willtown. During this season, we returned to the site and laid an approximately 400-meter long datum line along the length of the bluff to provide a reference for mapping and photographic recording. SCIAA staff Lynn Harris, Carl Naylor, and Joe Beatty provided bottom contours using a fathometer. A site map is being prepared by engineer Elbert Hodges. Small samples of artifacts were taken to coordinate current site dynamics with those noted in 1969-70. Artifacts in both the SCIAA collection as well as private collections have been photographed, and an analysis is being prepared. In addition to his assistance as a diver, Steve Howard has done much computer work to prepare photographs for the published report.

Ironically, Willtown, the original county seat of Colleton County, is now in Charleston County. In keeping with Colleton County's historical roots, a display of Willtown artifacts has been established and can now be viewed in the Colleton County Museum in Walterboro.

As the Willtown underwater report nears completion, we would welcome any additional data which may be provided by hobby divers who may have dived the site.

In early 1999, we hope to distribute our finished report, 30 years after those first dives and about 300 years after the birth of the colonial town.

Carl Naylor, Joe Beatty, and Lynn Harris mapping underwater topography of riverbed with depth sounder on the Edisto River near Willtown Bluff. (SCIAA photo)
THE WEE BOAT
By Carl Naylor

Over the years, sport divers have found some unusual items as they cruise along the bottoms of South Carolina’s rivers and creeks. Everything from a Revolutionary War silver hat pin to a brass barrel from a flintlock pistol has been reported on quarterly artifact report forms.

But Darrell Taylor of Moncks Corner (hobby license #2962) has found perhaps the most unusual item to date. Diving in 28 feet of water in the East Branch of the Cooper River recently, Darrell discovered a hand-carved model of what appears to be a 17th century sailing vessel nestled in the sandy bottom.

The model is 7.25 inches long, 3.25 inches wide, and 2.5 inches tall and is carved from a solid block of wood. Hatches, gunwales, and gun ports are all visible on the model, along with a distinctive keel, stempost, and cutout for a rudder.

Darrell first thought the ship model could be a child’s toy, however SCIAA staff members think more likely the model was made either by a sailor who wiled away his time carving his ship or a shipbuilder who carved the model in anticipation of full-sized construction. Either way, the ship model is as exciting and unusual a find as we have seen in a long time.

Darrell has been a licensed hobby diver since 1991, and has extensive experience diving in the Cooper River. He is presently performing conservation on the model boat.