Winyah Bay Indigo Society Cannon Project

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An early Federal period cannon was found behind the Rice Museum in Georgetown, South Carolina, on an adjoining privately owned lot in 1991. The cannon was discovered during an upgrade of the city utilities as part of the renovation of the waterfront area. When found, the cannon was heavily concreted with rust, tar, glass, pottery and other debris. It had clearly been dumped into an historic midden. The bore of the cannon was all but choked closed, and there was a noticeable obstruction partway down the bore that could be clearly felt with a carefully used probe. It was not clear whether or not the cannon was loaded, which is a serious consideration for a state that has produced what may be the largest number of loaded historic cannons recovered archaeologically in the nation. The owners of the property moved the cannon to a more secure and safe location where it sat for several years.

The Winyah Bay Indigo Society is the oldest continuously operating men’s club in the United States. Originally founded by petition to the Colonial Assembly in 1757, it was approved by the English Crown in 1758. The society has dedicated itself to community service and good works from that time to the present. It is notably credited with founding the first free school north of Charleston, which was incorporated into the public school system in 1903 and still operates today. The society chose the cannon as a project to benefit the public in 1996 and contacted the SCIAA for help. For the next four years the SCIAA team consisting of graduate interns and the SCIAA conservator went once a month to Georgetown to meet with Commander Joseph Bull (USNR, Ret.), a junior warden of the society, to work on the cannon as a cooperative project.

The initial work on the cannon occurred at a secure location. The worst of the outlying crust of brick, pottery, tar, and glass were mapped and removed. The bore was analyzed and determined to be unloaded and only debris-filled. This was very fortunate. The cannon was then moved to the city’s maintenance lot and put into a custom-built wood and fiberglass tank made by the society. There it was carefully subjected to electrolytic treatment in sodium carbonate. The removal of the final crust in a controlled environment protected the underlying cast ornamentation and foundry marks. Research by society members has determined that the cannon was
The finished Indigo Society Cannon on display in Georgetown’s Rainey Park on Front Street. (SCIAA photo by Jonathan Leadel)

Built to federal contract in the 1790s. Only three cannons of this type have survived, the other two are located in Savannah, Georgia.

Every month, the cannon was removed from the tank with the assistance of the city staff and their crane. The SCIAA/Society conservation team photographed and hand-cleaned the cannon, checked and charted the salt freed by the electrolytic process into the water, and renewed the solution. The cannon then was returned carefully to the tank, and the anodes and cathodes cleaned, repositioned, and replaced. While this is a standard procedure for cannon conservation, the occluded bore called for a more creative approach.

The SCIAA has used a variety of techniques to clear the bore of historic cannon over the years. The Indigo Cannon, as this one came to be called, was intractable to previously used techniques owing to the nature and quantity of the debris that filled the bore. A new technique was devised that proved very successful. A miniature cutting head with adjustable tungsten cutters that cut both forward and at the perimeter, stabilized by a collet that fit the bore, and flushed with running water to remove debris made short shrift of the obstruction. In all, eight feet of the bore was cleared safely using the device. Plans for the B & L cannon bore cleaner are available from the SCIAA.

The conservation of the cannon was completed using a series of passivating coatings. This was necessary due to the seaside location, where the cannon would be displayed. On November 1, 1999, the Mayor of Georgetown presided over the Indigo Society cannon’s placement in its mounts in Georgetown’s Rainey Park on Front Street.