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South Carolina Shipbuilding in the Age of Sail - Part 1

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focus. Most point and shoot cameras focus to about 2 to 3 feet.

7. You must put a size reference in the shot. Copy the scale shown at the end of the article on a sheet of white paper and paste it to a piece of cardboard. This will make an excellent reference scale. In a pinch, put a ruler by the artifact. Don’t cover up any of the artifact with your scale. These are just basic instructions designed for those with basic equipment. A little care and thought can make the difference between a clear sharp photo, and one fit only for the trash can. A good photo enables the SCIAA people to identify your artifact, and if it’s of interest they may want to use it in the next issue of the Goody Bag. In the next article I’ll give you some tips for those with more advanced equipment and experience. Until then, good diving and good shooting.

South Carolina Shipbuilding in the Age of Sail - Part 1

By Carl Naylor

As soon as the early Carolina colonists cleared their land and built their homes they undoubtedly turned back to the sea and constructed water craft. The rivers and creeks of what was to become known as the Carolina Lowcountry provided ready-made highways for the colonists, and they needed a variety of watercraft to carry on the business of establishing a new colony. They needed vessels to visit their neighbors, to trade with the friendly natives who inhabited the region, to carry goods from a central landing place to their respective homes, and (not least of all) to explore their new world. Fortunately, any colonist with the tools and knowledge to build a house could build a boat to suit almost any purpose.

A Slow Beginning

In a letter written in 1680, Maurice Mathews, one of the colony’s original settlers and eventually its surveyor-general and Commissioner to the Indians, noted that “There have been severall vessels built here, and there are now 3 or 4 upon the Stocks.” This is perhaps the first written record of boatbuilding in Carolina and probably refers to “vessells” capable of at least coastal trading. The myriad amount and variety of small skiffs, launches, barges, boats, and canoes needed by the colonists would hardly be worth mentioning.

More evidence of early shipbuilding in the colony comes from the ship registers. Under English law, vessels used for intercolonial or trans-oceanic trading were required to be registered. Few of these records remain. However, dispersed amongst the colony’s early records of deeds, inventories, bills of sale, and wills are several registers for the year 1698. Of these fifteen remaining registers, only four are for vessels built in “Carolina.” These are the 30-ton sloop Ruby and the 50-ton sloop Joseph both built in 1696, the 30-ton brigantine Sea Flower built in 1697, and the 30-ton sloop Dorothy & Ann built in 1698.

There are other indications that the shipbuilding industry in South Carolina got off to a slow start. In 1708, Governor Nathaniel Johnson reported to the Board of Trade in London that “There are not above ten or twelve sail of ships or other vessels belonging to this province about half of which number only were built here besides a ship or sloop now on the stocks near launching.” In 1719, Governor Robert Johnson reported that “Wee are come to no great matter of [ship]building here for want of persons who undertake it tho no country in the world is [as] plentifully supplyed with

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timber for that purpose and [so] well stored with convenient rivers . . ." He notes that of the twenty or so vessels belonging to the port, "some" were built here.

**Largest Manufacturing Industry**

As the colony grew and began to thrive so did the boat and ship building industries. While not comparable with the shipbuilding activities of the northern colonies, shipbuilding became South Carolina's largest manufacturing industry. And just as important, was its impact on the local economy. In addition to shipwrights, the construction of a vessel needed the services of joiners, cooper s, blacksmiths, timber merchants, painters, chandlers, glaziers, carvers, plumbers, sailmakers, blockmakers, caulkers, and oarmakers among others.

The extant ship registers show that between 1735 and 1775 more than 300 ocean-going and coastal cargo vessels, ranging from five to 280 tons burthen, were built by South Carolina shipbuilders. This included ships, snows, brigantines, schooners, and sloops. These names referred to the vessel’s rig, that is its mast and sail arrangement, and vessels were seldom mentioned without accompanying it with its type. This preoccupation with a vessel’s rig is understandable. Denoting the rig distinguishes the schooner Betsy, from the brigantine Betsy, or the sloop Betsy. Even more, those tall wooden masts and billowing sails of the various rigs were easily its most recognizable feature and the first part of a vessel that appeared as it approached over the horizon.

Undoubtedly, Carolina-built vessels were quite similar in most ways to those being built in Britain and the other colonies. The wide, rounded hull-shape of the ocean-going cargo carrier, with its blunt bow and tapering stern at the waterline — meant to imitate the shape of a duck gliding through water — and square stern cabin, had become, like the rigs themselves, fairly standard and widely copied by shipbuilders after centuries of development, innovation, and imitation. Since many of the shipwrights of colonial South Carolina were trained in the best English shipyards or in other parts of America, this is hardly surprising. John Rose, the Hobcaw shipbuilder, had learned his trade on the Thames at the Deptford Naval Yard. His partner, James Stewart, had apprenticed at the Woolrich Naval Yard, also on the Thames, and many of the other prominent Carolina shipbuilders had learned the art of shipbuilding before arriving in the colony. Georgetown shipwright Benjamin Darling had come to Carolina from New England. Charles Minors who built vessels in Little River came from Bermuda, while Robert Watts who set up his shipbuilding business at the remote Bloody Point on Daufuskie Island, where he built the 170-ton ship St. Helena in 1766 and the 260-ton ship Friendship in 1771, had come to South Carolina from Philadelphia.

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Nevertheless it would be hard to imagine that local shipwrights and boatbuilders weren’t being influenced by local conditions and preferences and modifying the basic designs so that their vessels accommodated the needs of their customers.

(Part 2 of this series will examine the types of vessels built by South Carolina shipwrights and the shipyards in which they were built.)