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Part Three

S. C. Shipbuilding In The Age of Sail

(Editor's Note: In the first two installments of this article we discussed the beginnings of shipbuilding in colonial South Carolina, the spread of shipbuilding throughout the colony, and the types of vessels being built by South Carolina shipwrights. In this third and final segment, the materials used in wooden shipbuilding in South Carolina will be discussed.)

By Carl Naylor

The early boatbuilders as well as shipwrights found local woods to be excellent building materials. The massive, naturally-curved live oak for the vessel's main timbers and the tall, yellow pine for planking and decking were as ideally suited for the small skiff as for the large three-masted ship.

Live Oak and Yellow Pine

The Gazette for 28 September 1765, after noting the vessels presently being built by Carolina shipwrights, claims that "as soon as the superiority of our Live-Oak Timber and Yellow Pine Plank, to the timber and plank of the Northern colonies, becomes more generally known, 'tis not to be doubted, that this province may vie with any of them in that valuable branch of business . . . ."

And, six years later, the Gazette for 8 August 1771 reports that there had been several recent orders for Carolina-built ships from England as "Proof that the Goodness of Vessels built here, and the superior Quality of our Live-Oak Timber to any Wood in America for Ship-Building, is at length acknowledged." Of course, the Gazette's enthusiasm may have been somewhat of an eighteenth-century public relations effort, but there were others with no, or at least less visible, ulterior motives who praised Carolina-built vessels.

Henry Laurens, the owner of many vessels built both in South Carolina and elsewhere, was one who promoted the superiority of the Carolina vessels and the skill of local shipwrights. In 1765 while discussing the cost of shipbuilding in Carolina with William Fisher, a Philadelphia shipowner, he notes that "The difference in the Cost of our Carolina built Vessels is not the great objection to building here. That is made up in the different qualities of the Vessels when built or some people think so." He adds that a vessel built in Philadelphia "would not be worth half as much (the hull of her) as one built of our Live Oak & Pine . . . . " Writing to his brother James from England in 1774 in reference to acting as an agent in having a ship made in Carolina for a Bristol mercantile firm, he admits his hope that a Carolina-built ship on the Thames would assure that "our Ships built of Live Oak & Pine will acquire the Character & Credit which they truly Merit."

Live oak and pine construction, along with the other popular shipbuilding timbers, were frequent advertising points in a vessel's sale. On 21 May 1754 the South Carolina Gazette ran a typical ad of this sort. It was for the sale of a schooner that would carry 95 to 100 barrels of rice. The ad notes that the vessel is "extraordinary well built, live oak and red cedar timber, with two streaks of white oak plank under her bends, the rest yellow pine."

Live oak was an obvious and common choice for shipbuilding, yet cedar, although immensely less abundant, was also a favorite shipbuilding material due to its ability to resist the infamous teredo worm, also known as the shipworm. In 1779 when the new state sought to have a 42-foot pilot boat made the specifications recommended that "the whole of the frame Except the flore [floor] Timbers be of Cedar."

These woods also made for vessels with long lives. At a time when the average life expectancy of a wooden vessel was about fifteen years, Carolina-built ships boasted usual lives of twenty to thirty years. Once again, we turn to the colonial ship registers for evidence. In 1766, the 20-ton schooner Queenley was registered to trade between Carolina and Georgia. The Queenley was built in 1739 in South Carolina, twenty-seven years earlier. When the 15-ton schooner Friendship was registered for trade in 1773, it was already twenty-eight years old, having been built at Hobcaw in 1745.

For additional evidence we turn to other sources. The South Carolina Gazette ran a story in 1773 that the aptly named 125-ton ship, Live Oak, was "constantly employed in the Trade between this Port and Europe." The Live Oak had been built on James Island twenty-four years earlier.

This quality of Southern timber even reached the ears of Alexander Hamilton who wrote in his Federalist Papers that "The difference in the duration of the ships of which the navy might be composed, if chiefly constructed of Southern wood, would be of signal importance . . . ."

USS John Adams

The high point of South Carolina wooden shipbuilding occurred on 5 June 1799 with the launching of the 550-ton frigate John Adams at the Paul Pritchard Shipyard on Shipyard Creek. The Adams carried twenty-six 12-pound cannons and six 24-pound carronades making her the first U.S. Navy vessel to be armed with carronades.

She was built with a variety of native South Carolina woods. The floor timbers and futtocks were of live oak, the upper timbers were of cedar, the keel and keelson were of Carolina pine, the masts and spars were of long-leaf pine, and the deck beams were hewn from yellow pine logs cut along the Edisto River.

In 1803 she saw action off Tripoli against the Barbary Powers. During the War of 1812 she spent most of her time blockaded in New York harbor. In 1863, at the age of sixty-four, she was ordered

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License Checks

or anyone authorized by the institute may appropriate any artifacts and data that have been collected or recovered as a result of a violation of this article.” SCIAA staff members have never resorted to this type of punitive action and hope it can be avoided in the future through diver cooperation with the requirements of the law.

It had been hoped that more license checks could be performed this year, however, due to personnel changes and other project schedules, this turned out to be the only license check for 1993. Because the divers that have been encountered, both those with and without current licenses, expressed their desire to see us more active in cruising the rivers to check licenses and help identify their finds, next year a series of license checks is planned not only for the Cooper River but also for major rivers in the Beaufort and Georgetown areas.

Marion

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nineteenth century. Likewise, the terrestrial survey team found no evidence for a military camp but did manage to locate a colonial site contemporaneous with Marion’s occupation.

Funding for the project was provided by the landowner, Sonoco Products Company, and led by the Cultural Resources Consulting Division of SCIAA under Steven D. Smith. For further information about the project and its findings, please contact Mr. Smith at the Columbia office.

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to join the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron off South Carolina. Her long and illustrious career ended in 1867 when she was sold out of the Navy and sent to the breaker’s yard.

Decline of Wooden Ships

The wooden shipbuilding industry declined during the first half of the nineteenth century. This was due to a general economic decline in the state and, of course, the development of steamships and steel-hulled vessels. However, small wooden vessels—yachts, fishing boats, pilot boats, barges, canoes, skiffs, launches, dugouts, batteaux, etc.—were still being constructed and used on the river and coastal waterways of the state. This small boat industry continued into the twentieth century.

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