Archival Quest For *Le Prince* Continues

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Archival Quest For Le Prince Continues

by James D. Spirek

Recently, Chester DePratter and I received a Robert L. Stephenson Archaeological Research Fund (RLSARF) grant to continue our quest to learn more about Le Prince, a French ship that sank off Port Royal Sound in early 1577.

The RLSARF grant award of $4,059 allowed us to contract with Dr. Bernard Allaire, a French researcher specializing in sixteenth-century French maritime endeavors, to conduct research in Normandy archives for documents related to the ship. He was, as readers may remember, also responsible for locating the first five documents related to the corsair and detailed in previous Legacy articles (See Legacy Vol. 3, No. 3, 1998, pp. 10-13 & Vol. 4, Nos. 1-3, 1999, p. 27).

Allaire’s mission was to spend three weeks looking for documents in the notarial archives of the Normandy port cities of Le Havre, Rouen, and Honfleur.

Our research strategy was based on information drawn from the previous five documents pertaining to business conducted in the port of Le Havre and surrounding towns. In addition, Allaire was to seek out materials related to privateering and other seafaring activities such as earlier and contemporary voyages, outfitting, and ordinance.

Before launching into the results of our research project, an explanation of the adversary that Allaire was up against—the notarial archive, or tabellionage, is in order. In sixteenth-century France many commercial contracts and transactions were drawn up by notaries, or tabellions, employed by the king. These transactions were prepared in a volume, folio style, written one transaction after the other to fill a page and in chronological order. These volumes were classified based on the nature of the transactions as either héritages or meubles. The héritages volumes consist of contracts related to possession transmitted by inheritance, bills of sale for houses or land, and mortgage loans. The meubles volumes consist of all other types of documents, and most importantly, commercial transactions involving seafaring ventures. Some volumes, however, contain a mixed bag of documents.

The Rouen tabellionage consists of 10 to 15 volumes per year, Le Havre four volumes per year, and Honfleur one or two volumes a year. Each volume represents the work of one notary and therefore the number of volumes correspond to the available number of notaries at the office. For the most part, the archives are complete for the time period under study.

Results of the Le Prince document search included the identification of 25 additional documents, all from the Le Havre archive, to add to the previous five documents also found at Le Havre. A total of 168 documents related to contemporary Normandy seafaring ventures were also identified from all three archives.

Funds also permitted the transcription from the original French and then their translation to modern French and English of three documents. The newly found documents relate to the 1575 voyage to the Cape Verde Islands or to the adjacent African coast, Sierra Leone on the west coast of Africa, and then to Peru (West Indies) as described in the Le Prince Charter-Party document previously obtained by Allaire.

Based on these new documents the 1575 voyage occurred during a three month period with a departure from Le Havre in mid-May or early June with a return in late August or early September.

Another important aspect of these documents is the mention of other notaries and cities in France where other notarized transactions occurred, most notably in Paris. These documents point Allaire, for instance, to the Paris tabellionage to retrieve the meubles volumes written by specific notaries rather than search, perhaps fruitlessly, through countless volumes of Paris notaries looking for Le Prince related documents.

Unfortunately, no additional 1576 documents were found that relate to the final voyage of the ship, other than the two previously found documents. The absence of documents at Le Havre suggest that most of the major business transactions were occurring in Brest where the ship was at port, based on information from these two 1576 documents. Therefore, the hunt must continue at the Brest archives in search of materials related to the final voyage.

The majority of these documents revolve around the efforts of the noblemen Mathe Fapoco, owner of Le Prince, and Oratio Rosso, captain of the ship, to secure investors to finance the voyage. Investors included two royal officials, merchants, innkeepers, a carpenter, a butcher, and members of the ship’s crew. These investors bought shares in the voyage that were used to buy victuals for the ship and merchandise to trade and barter during the voyage. The return on their investment depended on the interest they secured, while acknowledging that profits depended on “...the risks and fortunes of the sea, in the said ship.”

Other documents relate to the outfitting and victualling of the vessel. Several documents detail the purchase of two kinds of casks hooped with iron and chestnut, and subsequent payment for them. Other transactions concern the sale of some of the rigging associated with the artillery and the securing of funds for repairs and other necessities for the ship. Two other documents deal with the purchase of “claret” wine and biscuits for drink and food aboard the ship. Another pair of documents unrelated to the voyage concern the purchase of a parrot by Rosso from a Rouen merchant, however, they do (Continued on page 12)
provide confirmation that the ship was out to sea during June.

In addition to looking solely for *Le Prince* documents, Allaire also noted relevant transactions regarding corsairing and seafaring endeavors during this period. These documents describe the organization and financing of similar triangular voyages undertaken by *Le Prince* to Africa and then to the West Indies and back to France, the sale of merchandise from these voyages, ordnance, privateering, and other miscellaneous materials.

Other documents are of great archaeological importance, specifically those dealing with naval ordnance and coovery. Some of the transactions describe in great detail the types and markings on the artillery, and the type of woods used to construct the gun carriages and wheels. Documents about coovery mention the use of chestnut hoops, along with iron ones, to bind the cask staves together. This type of specific information will help to distinguish the remains of a ship hailing from France rather than those from Spain, England, or elsewhere in Europe.

In conclusion, the research to uncover documents related to *Le Prince* and similar ventures was successful from both a historical and archaeological viewpoint. They have expanded our knowledge of the finances, people, and outfitting surrounding the genesis of a voyage to Africa and the West Indies in the 1570s. Importantly, they have revealed other avenues to travel to gather more information about *Le Prince* in France. All of this information should help in our upcoming survey to look for *Le Prince* and other casualties on the shoals and sandbars at the entrance to Port Royal Sound.

**Reminders**

(Continued from page 2)

- quarter whether collecting has occurred or not.

Divers are reminded that they must submit two report forms each quarter. Artifact Report Forms are submitted to the Charleston Office of SCIAA’s Underwater Archaeology Division. Fossil Report Forms are submitted to the South Carolina State Museum in Columbia. To assist divers in reporting their finds, both the Artifact Report Forms and the Fossil Report Forms, which are supplied to the diver with his license package, have preprinted addresses on the back.

Divers who fail to submit reports after receiving the reminder run the risk of having their license revoked. They will also be barred from reapplying for a license in the future.