Mud, Sweat, and Tears

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Malcolm Boat Excavated

Mud, Sweat, And Tears

By Christopher Amer

During the late Colonial Period the Ashley River, born in the swamps of South Carolina’s Lowcountry and emptying into Charleston Harbor, was a busy highway of transportation. All manner of craft plied its waters ferrying goods, supplies, and people between the thriving plantations situated along its banks and the busy harbor port. Rice, indigo, and agricultural products were exported, while luxury goods, domestic necessities and building supplies, such as bricks and Welsh slate for constructing and roofing the plantation houses, were imported to the growing colony. It was within this cultural milieu that one of the hundreds of vessels locally owned and built, having outlived its usefulness and suffered more than its share of repairs, was dragged out of the main thoroughfare and abandoned in a slough approximately 12 miles from Charleston.

The Underwater Archaeology Division of the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology became aware of the boat in 1984 when a fossil collector searching along the river bank noticed timbers eroding out of the bank and reported the find to institute staff. The exposed part of the boat was stabilized with sandbags while funding was sought to excavate and preserve the site which was being destroyed by the wash from passing powerboats. Two years ago a matching grant from the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology and the South Carolina Department of Archives and History was secured allowing the division to conduct work on the Malcolm Boat, named after its discoverer James Malcolm.

The site, which is exposed at low tide and fully submerged when the water rises, was excavated during three weeks in March/April 1992. With the assistance of a host of eager volunteers including students from the College of Charleston and members of an Augusta dive club. We excavated only the starboard half of the hull using the logic that boats are essentially symmetrical, therefore the half in a better condition needed to be recorded. This strategy also left half the site for further research and would allow us to evaluate the effectiveness of site stabilization using the unexcavated port side as a control. Excavators kept track of hull timbers by using sequentially numbered cattle tags and loose timbers and artifacts were recorded in situ, removed, photographed, and drawn to scale.

Once the entire starboard side of the vessel was exposed, a grid consisting of two-meter-square units was

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erected and leveled over the site. Using the grid, the field crew recorded the hull, making plan, profile, and section drawings and taking numerous photographs and photo montages, using a photo tower, to aid in the reconstruction of the vessel.

After the site was recorded the hull was reburied and stabilized using hundreds of bags filled with “backmud” and seven cubic yards of sand donated by the county. The exposed slope was held in place with polyethylene Geoweb confinement fabric to protect the sediments and serve as an anchorage for the returning flora.

Artifacts recovered from within the hull and bilges suggest that the boat was abandoned during the latter half of the 18th century. Artifacts include bottle fragments, pipe stems, ceramics, slate, a pewter spoon, and a small cask containing an unidentified resin, possibly Cypress. Fragments of a small pulley block were also recovered from within the starboard side of the hull.

The hull was built of local woods and largely fastened with iron nails and wooden treenails. The 11-meter-long keel was cut from a single piece of Southern Yellow Pine and finished to approximately 23 cm on a side. Oak timbers made up the gracefully curving stem and stern structure. The stern was fitted with a transom and retained hardware for rudder attachment. The vessel was framed with white oak and live oak. Each of the 22 square frames along the keel were made up of a floor timber, which crossed the centerline of the boat, and three futtocks. Planks were of pine and cypress. The 8.35-meter-long pine keelson was notched over each frame and held two mast steps on its upper surface. One side had also been notched out to allow for placement of a bilge pump.

Analysis of the remains reveals a round hulled, keeled vessel with a transom stem. The hull is 12 meters long (40 ft.) with an approximated 4 meter (13 ft.) beam and an estimated depth of hold of 1.7 meters (5.5 ft.). A displacement of approximately 23 tons is suggested. The vessel had a fairly sharp entry below the waterline and was roomy above. She had a full bodied midsection that carried aft to the transom. The construction features observed on the hull - numerous made frames along the cargo area of the hull and flexible end timbers, additional futtocks installed and a keelson notched over and fastened to each frame - suggest a boat designed with the ability to carry heavy loads. Yet the hull would have had a graceful shape and was no doubt pleasing to the eye.

We have given her a sloop rig as the rig is not inconsistent with the scant evidence found on the hull and with historical accounts of boatbuilding in South Carolina during the latter half of the 18th century. During that period many European shipwrights and artisans came to Charles Town from Europe bringing with them their boatbuilding traditions and practices of construction. From the 1740s to the time of the Revolution the four active Charles Town shipyards built many sloops and schooners in the 20 ton range, which were able to to ply the coastal waters of the colonies and to enter into the West Indies trade. A transom stern would have enhanced the vessel’s cargo carrying capacity and seaworthiness for offshore voyages and, as this illustration of Charles Town harbor in the 18th century illustrates, appears to be the stern of choice of colonial shipwrights in South Carolina.

At some point in the vessel’s career the owner appears to have changed the mast location, possibly converting the rig configuration to that...
Underwater Archaeology Discussed At Conference
by Scott Heavin

Archaeologists from around the globe presented papers on their current research or excavations at The Society for Historical Archaeology's 1993 Conference on Historical and Underwater Archaeology held 6-10 January in snowy Kansas City, Missouri. Covering such diverse topics as drydocks, bead manufacture, barges, and Spanish Caravelles, there was a topic of interest for everyone in attendance.

Being new to the "archaeological community," this was my first full-fledged conference. One aspect that surprised me was the presence of sport divers and avocational archaeologists in attendance at this professional conference. Underwater archaeology seems more and more to be coming out of the professional closet, and of interest to those without degrees and certificates. Next year's conference in Vancouver will be co-hosted and organized by an avocational group, The Nautical Archaeology Society of British Columbia.

With so much to see in so little time, I ran back and forth between presentation rooms hoping to catch the most interesting of the topics being discussed. Perhaps one of the most interesting sessions was a panel discussion on ethics, with two of the eight member panel being from SCIAA. While the topic invariably seemed to degenerate into a discussion of the nasty habit of treasure hunting, many important issues were brought into the open and are sure to be discussed in offices and in the field throughout the coming year. Many proposals concerning guidelines, and ethical considerations are sure to be a part of next year's conference in Vancouver.

Being a newcomer to field, one of my first observations was that everyone seemed to know everyone else. This close knit group is quick to welcome new faces into the professional fold, and of interest to those without degrees and certificates.

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of a schooner to take advantage of this more economical rig which, with its ease of handling and smaller crew requirements, was the most popular rig for locally-built craft.

The Malcolm Boat is significant on a number of levels. It's abandonment and location is helping to confirm an emerging pattern of small craft disposal in the many small creeks and sloughs of the state's Lowcountry when those craft's usefulness was at an end. The boat's construction is not inconsistent with contemporary boatbuilding practices that were imported to the New World from Europe and developed during the Colonial Period while utilizing the abundant colonial woods ideally suited for shipbuilding. The boat also tends to confirm, along with other vessels investigated in South Carolina, the extensive use of transoms noted in historical sources. Also historically documented is the practice, after 1760, of plantation owners having their own vessels built that were capable of going beyond the colonial confines and conducting trade as far away as the Caribbean and South America. The Malcolm Boat is one of the first vessels studied in South Carolina that architecturally demonstrates this capability and, as such, is opening a new chapter in South Carolina's Maritime Tradition.