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The Mepkin Abbey Vessel

Cooper River
South Carolina

By Drew Ruddy
To my knowledge, the first dives at the Mepkin Abbey site in the Cooper River were made by Jim Batey and a friend of his from Florida in about the late spring or early summer of 1970. I am not totally aware of what artifacts they recovered but I do remember Jim having a case gin bottle with a fair amount of glass deterioration which he reported having been recovered from the site. I had been diving in early 1970 with Bob Densler, Julian Muckenfuss, Steve Howard and Chris Bueter on a fairly regular basis. Bob and Muck reported having located a dugout canoe down the Cooper across from the rice mill of Comingtee plantation. They had informed Dr. Stephenson of the Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology about the canoe and we attempted to relocate it but were unsuccessful. Jim told us that he had seen a canoe at Mepkin and we mounted a dive to try and locate it in an effort to be able to report its location to Dr. Stephenson. As I recall, my first dive at Mepkin included Jim Batey, Bob Densler, Jack Thompson, and Chris Bueter. We did comb the bottom along the bluff in search of the elusive canoe which we were never able to locate. Two finds of the day were an interesting stone object recovered by Bob Densler which is quite possibly Native American and a small millstone recovered by Chris Bueter and myself.

Native American stone artifact recovered by Bob Densler.
Chris Bueter and I discovered the millstone in the approximate vicinity of the Luce boathouse pilings lying on the hard marl bottom. We picked it up and walked together up the side of the bank where we were able to lift it into Bob's boat.

Millstone recovered by Chris Bueter and Drew Ruddy.

Shortly after this day on the Cooper River, Bob Densler returned to Mepkin on a day off during the week bringing with him Don Hayes, a friend from the North Charleston Volunteer Rescue Squad. Don had never been diving before and Bob was teaching him without the benefit of a certification course. Bob was not big on formal diving education. They geared up and descended to the marl bottom, and proceeded to bounce along hanging on to the lead clump which Bob used as an anchor. As they drifted downstream of the bluff, Bob encountered a stray anchor line which trailed across the bottom into the murk. Bob began to follow the abandoned line in hopes of recovering a lost anchor and as he did it brought him into the frames of the Mepkin boat wreck. Apparently after losing the security of hanging on to Bob's anchor clump, Don became uneasy. As Bob was beginning to investigate his discovery, Don began to panic and thrashed to head for the surface. In doing so he kicked Bob’s mask and flooded it. Bob assisted Don in reaching the surface and they regained
entry into the boat. When both had regained composure, Bob took sightings on landmarks on the shore so that he could return to the wreck and they departed.

That evening Bob called me and told me of his discovery. We planned a trip for the following Saturday morning. Accompanying us on the return to the site were Julian Muckenfuss, Bob’s long time diving partner and his father Robert Densler, Sr. (Papa D) who would assist in the boat.

Upon arriving at the site Bob very carefully aligned the range markers and dropped his anchor reporting that we should be over the wreck. I very eagerly geared up and jumped into the water and descended on the anchor line. Upon reaching the bottom I found that I was on the frames of the wreck. I began to swim forward and almost immediately found a stoneware jug lying just within the wreck on the port side. Upon recovering the jug, I ascended the anchor line and handed it to Papa D. All were excited by the find and after returning to the bottom I soon heard Bob and Muck in proximity on the wreck. I began to slowly swim around the outer parameters of the vessel taking in some of the construction features. It had a very impressive bow stem which curved up into the current. As I progressed down the starboard side, I began to hear Bob screaming into his regulator. Thinking that he might be in trouble, I began to swim to the middle of the wreck to assist him. The interior of the wreck, aft of the mast step, was loaded with what appeared to be a cargo of wood of varying and assorted sizes. Bob was on top of the pile of wood, approximately amidships reaching down and pulling out stoneware jugs and setting them on top of the lumber. I took two of the jugs and swam to the surface and handed them into the boat. I repeated this process for all seven of the stoneware jugs which Bob found buried in the cargo of wood. Upon completion of the dive, we learned that Muck had recovered one additional stoneware jug forward of the mast step in the bow area. Also two mid nineteenth century three-piece mold bottles and two hammers were recovered. I can't say at this time who recovered these objects or exactly where they were found. During the course of this dive, Bob removed some wood from inside of the wreck. He found no additional artifacts and a substantial wooden cargo remained in the wreck. I do not remember any upper structure of the wreck being in place. The stern post and rudder were not in place. We found no other types of artifacts that day and there was no indication of any of the ship's rigging or tackle. It is my thought in retrospect that the boat may have been used to tend the rice field bank with the assorted sizes of wood being used for dike maintenance. The significant number of jugs may have been containers for drinking water for the slaves working along the banks. The two hammers may also suggest involvement in a repair or maintenance role.

Upon returning home to Bob's house, we contemplated the significance of this find. Bob who was normally rather low key and avoided pictures and publicity suggested that his wife take a photo of our group with the artifacts recovered. He grabbed a piece of sheet rock and leaned it against the front of his van as a backdrop and we posed to record this moment of discovery.

Early in 1969, the year before this discovery, South Carolina had enacted its first underwater antiquities law. It seemed that no one was really sure how finds in the rivers were going to be handled by the State. Technically no artifacts could be removed from a site without an underwater salvage license but it was unlikely that the few divers
exploring these river sites were going to seek licensure. It was uncertain as to whether the State would very willingly grant permits. We of course had not received a permit to dive in the Mepkin area but had had a kind of a verbal nod from Dr. Stephenson to look for the canoe. I was not totally sure how the situation would be handled. Although there were very few divers doing anything in the rivers at this time, there was a general attitude that nothing should be reported to the State and an awareness that it was highly unlikely that this law could be enforced in any significant way. I however did not hold this point of view and recognized that the discovery of the Mepkin vessel could be significant to the archaeologists and wanted to report it. I composed a letter which I sent to Dr. Stephenson the following week reporting the find. He responded with a sense of interest but with no attempts to be condescending or punitive. It was helpful to know that we could have an open dialogue with the State and that they would be interested in information which we could provide. It seemed that a precedence was being established which would allow the sport diver to continue hobby activities without involving a major salvage license.

June, 1970 - L to R-Drew Ruddy, Julian Muckenfuss, Bob Densler, and Papa D.

We did not return to the wreck for some time but a little over a year later we stopped by to make a dive and show a new friend, Bill Ripley the site. While basically doing a sightseeing dive and not anticipating the discovery of any additional artifacts, Bob digging down into the wood pile in probably the approximate location of his previous finds, recovered two additional stoneware jugs. This brought the total of jugs recovered from the wreck to eleven, nine of which were recovered by Bob Densler.
Stoneware Jugs Recovered From
The Mepkin Abbey Vessel

(Jug 1.)
Jug 1 was recovered by Drew Ruddy on the port side of the Mepkin Vessel and was later given to the monks of Mepkin Abbey.

Brother Stephen Petronek holding jug 1.

The Charleston Museum has a very similar jug in their study collection. Catalog No. HC-784.
Jug 2 was recovered by Bob Densler. The Charleston Museum has a similar Jug (HC 765) in their study collection. They have an almost identical piece on display in the Miles Brewton house exhibit in the gallery of the museum.
(Jug 3.)

Jug 3 was recovered by Bob Densler in the wood pile a year after the first seven jugs were recovered.
Jug 4 was recovered by Bob Densler. A similar jug is in the Charleston Museum (HC 784). It also has cobalt decoration and is embossed NATHAN CLARK JR. ATHENS, N.Y. The Museum catalog dates this piece between 1843 and 1891.
Jug 5 was the second of the two jugs recovered by Bob Densler a year after the original finds.
Jug 6 is one of two jugs recovered by Bob Densler marked SWAINE. Bob also recovered a very large Swaine jug at the Moreland Landing site further down the Cooper River. The Charleston Museum has two Swaine jugs in their study collection. (HC 301 and HC 302).
Jug 7 is marked P. CROSS HARTFORD. Research conducted by Ralph Wilbanks indicates that this grocer was in business between 1805 and 1810.
(Jug 8.)
Jug 9 was recovered by Bob Densler. A similar jug is found in the Charleston Museum study collection. (HC 748)

Identified by archaeologist Carl Steen as an Edgefield piece from the John Landrum site.
(Jug 10.)

Jug 10 is a second Swaine jug recovered by Bob Densler.
Jug 11 was cracked when recovered in 1970 and has not been photographed as it was in pieces awaiting repair when photography was conducted. It is currently in the possession of Julian Muckenfuss.

In November of 1980, the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology conducted an underwater survey on the Mepkin Abbey wreck. Present on the project were Alan Albright, Ralph Wilbanks, Rodney Young and illustrator Darby Erd. I was present as a volunteer. Much time was spent in mapping and drawing the wreck. Further cargo wood was removed from the wreck for purposes of studying the hull. A bottle was recovered beneath the wooden cargo and to my recollection it was on the starboard side of the keelson toward the stern of the wreck. The bottle was missing the neck which was not found on board the wreck. The body of the bottle was free blown and appeared to have been from the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. It is probably in the SCIAA collection in Columbia at this time. During this survey Ralph Wilbanks discovered the stern post and rudder lying on the bottom, aft of the wreck. It was decided to raise it for documentation and conservation. It was brought to the surface with a lift bag and towed down river to the Pimlico boat landing where it was manually loaded into a truck and taken to Walterboro and re-submerged in a farm pond. It was later removed and taken to Columbia for conservation and study. It has recently been returned to the wreck site for observation by divers. Following this project, Ralph presented a paper at the annual Conference on Underwater Archaeology and a report was drawn up describing features discovered on the hull of the wreck.

In more recent years, the Mepkin Abbey Vessel has become a site on the Cooper River Underwater Heritage Trail. A continuing effort is being made by the SCIAA staff to further record and study the wreck. Efforts are currently underway by Sue Vezeau of Texas A & M University to conduct an in-depth hull study for her master's thesis. It is hoped that the above listed information regarding artifacts from the Mepkin Abbey Vessel will be of assistance to these professionals as they continue their endeavors to further interpret this relic of South Carolina heritage.
Drawing of the Mepkin Abbey Vessel done by the SCIAA staff, Fall, 2000.

Staff members involved with the ongoing project are Chris Amer, Lynn Harris, Jim Spirik, Carl Naylor and Joe Beatty.

Preliminary deck plan by Sue Vezeau, Texas A & M University.
Vessel Profile: SCIAA drawing by Darby Erd.

Stem: SCIAA drawing by Darby Erd.
Mast Step: SCIAA drawing by Darby Erd.
Stern Post and Rudder: SCIAA Photo.

Stern Post and Rudder: SCIAA drawing by Darby Erd.
Mepkin Plantation