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Charleston Harbor Stone Fleets Survey

By James D. Spirek

On two separate occasions and locations in 1861 and 1862, the Union navy sank a total of 29 ex-whaling and merchant vessels in an effort to block the two main entrances into Charleston Harbor during the Civil War (Figure 1). These obstructions were intended to frustrate the passage of blockade runners bringing war material and other sundry products from Europe and returning laden with cotton, rice, and naval stores. The ships broke apart and pieces washed ashore, a new channel supposedly scoured out, and blockade runners bypassed the obstructions with minimal diversion from their preferred route through Maffitt's Channel along Sullivan's Island. Over the years, the vessels reportedly slipped under the "quicksands" at the bar and eventually faded into the historical and archaeological record of South Carolina.



Figure 1: Illustration of the sinking of the First Stone Fleet. (In *Harper's Weekly*)

Working under an American Battlefield Protection Program grant from the National Park Service from 2008-2011, the Maritime Research Division (MRD) conducted several remote sensing operations to locate the two stone fleets, as well as other naval casualties of the conflict (see *Legacy*, Vol. 16, No. 2, pp. 4-9). At the bar of the Main Ship Channel, MRD detected 15 ballast mounds clustered

together, along with a few other wrecks, indicating the position of the First Stone Fleet (n=16) sunk in late December 1861. MRD and volunteers dove on five of the sites and documented visible features, which included rocks, wood structure, and fasteners protruding out of the sand. Meanwhile, the Second Stone Fleet (n=13), sunk at the entrance to Maffitt's Channel in early January 1862, eluded detection, although several ballast mounds were located. Due to the size of the rocks, some quite large, and quarried as well, suggested these wrecks might relate

to the building of the stone jetties, and specifically wrecked during the 1885 hurricane. A subsequent foray using private funds from our Underwater Archaeology Research Fund, located a couple of other potential shipwrecks in the area, but unfortunately "lumpy" seas prevented survey operations until a later date.

Earlier in 2013, the MRD prepared and received a National Park Service Historic Preservation Fund grant administered by the South Carolina Department of Archives and History to continue our stone fleet research. The grant will fund additional efforts to document each of the 29 vessels once all the fleets are accounted for, and to nominate the two stone fleets to the National Register of Historic Places as National Register Districts. Currently, we have launched another remote sensing foray in an attempt to locate the Second Stone Fleet. Analysis of the findings suggests we are in the right neighborhood with the discovery of several more ballast mounds (Figure 2). The location of these ballast mounds, however, means that we may have to re-assess our initial identification of the previous ballast

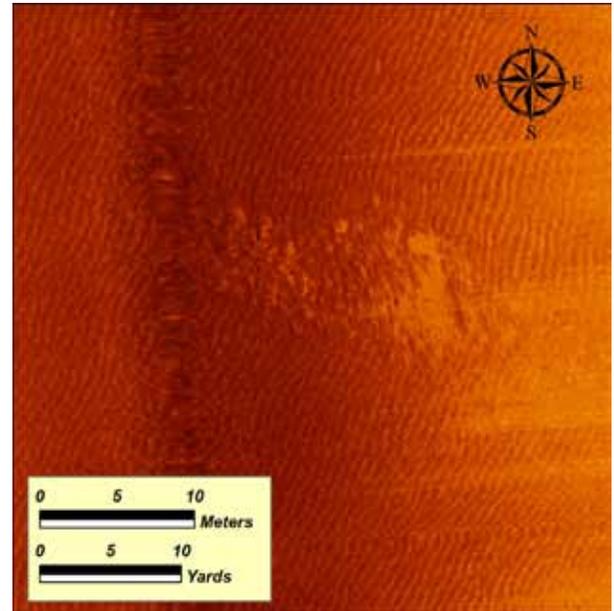


Figure 2: Sonogram of a ballast mound located in the Second Stone Fleet search area. (SCIAA graphic)

mounds as barges, and instead, consider them as potential stone fleet vessels.

Additionally, we are conducting historical research on the 45 vessels that comprised the entire stone fleet sent south to Savannah and Charleston. Interesting details of these ships' histories are emerging relating to their whaling and merchant days. As we are in the bicentennial years of the War of 1812, one of the vessels sunk in the First Stone Fleet, *Rebecca Sims*, had been captured by the British navy in 1812 and sent to Port Royal, Jamaica as a prize and its crew imprisoned. Following a court finding in its favor, the ship and its crew were released and sailed to New York City with recently freed American merchant sailors and officers of the USS *Vixen* that had been captured during a fierce sea battle with a British warship. The ship then proceeded up the Hudson River to lay-up until the end of the war. The ships' histories interweaved with the archaeological record will provide a more complete interpretation of the events that eventually led to their scuttling off Charleston Harbor. Ultimately, the project will serve to broaden our understanding of the maritime archaeological legacy in the rivers and coastal waters of South Carolina.