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Maritime Research Division

Charleston Harbor Stone Fleets Research at the National Archives

By James D. Spirek

The Internet is a historical researcher's dream, especially for those used to thumbing through countless books and scrolling through newspaper microfilm in search of scraps of information concerning their topic of interest. A Google search gathers an impressive number of articles, books, documents, and images, some germane, others not so much, and some, well completely not relevant. Where the internet particularly shines is in locating obscure resources otherwise undetected by researchers due to time, location, or financial restraints.

Despite the wonders of this modern online informational age, a vast number of historical resources remain unavailable on the Internet. Accessing these non-electronic resources require a trip to an archival repository, and in our case a trip to the National Archives in Washington, D.C. to support our Charleston Harbor Stone Fleets project funded by a National Park Service Historic

Preservation grant administered by the South Carolina Department of Archives and History.

Barely a month into his new job, Nathan Fulmer, our new underwater archaeologist in Charleston, got to "vacation" in DC with me, to look for materials at the archives related to purchasing, outfitting, and sinking the two

stone fleets. These two stone fleets were intended to obstruct the primary channels to prevent Confederate blockade runners from entering and exiting Charleston Harbor during the Civil War. Nathan and I drove to D.C. in mid-February of 2014 to spend a week at the archives. We had postponed our trip by a week because weather forecasts from the area suggested wintry mix throughout our planned week. We did not want to lose any valuable time at the archives due to snow, and therefore delayed our trip to the following

government in the D.C. area. Despite the set-back, Nathan and I managed to peruse a number of archival resources including navy vessel logbooks, correspondence between the purchasing agents and the navy, and a trove of paperwork associated with the sale and outfitting of the vessels destined for the stone fleet.

Our first research priority centered on the logbooks of those U.S. navy vessels engaged in sinking the First and Second Stone Fleets off Charleston Harbor. While the First Stone Fleet, sunk in late December

1861, received the most attention, particularly by newspaper reporters that accompanied the expedition, we hoped to learn more about the sinking of the Second Stone Fleet in late January 1862. There is a dearth of specifics related to the Second Stone Fleet as by this time European criticism of the First Stone Fleet apparently dampened the Federal Administration's desire to publicize the sinking of another obstruction

off Charleston Harbor. For those that have not reviewed a naval or merchant vessel's logbook, there are basically two kinds depending on the information written down by the crew. The first type of logbook contains metrological information of sea states, wind direction, latitude and longitude, and perhaps a mention or two of any unusual activity aboard the



Figure 1: Nathan perusing a logbook from one of the navy vessels involved with the two stone fleets (SCIAA photo)

week. Unfortunately, like two pedestrians walking towards one another and not sure which way the other is going, end up bumping into each other, so too did we end up smacking into the snow storm for the ages, at least so proclaimed by the *Weather Channel*. Consequently, we lost a day and two hours of research time at the archives due to the shutdown of the U.S.

vessel. Information contained in this type of logbook may excite a climatologist, but not a historical archaeologist, unless wind direction or currents figure into the research of a particular shipwreck. The second type of logbook that addresses the ship's activities and surrounding events form the basis by which to construct a historical narrative or to guide archaeological investigations. These were the logbooks that we sought, and fortunately, the majority of the logbooks we examined fell into this latter category.

The numerous entries in the logbooks from the disparate vessels combined to form a good image of the events surrounding the two stone fleets. The logbooks noted the chaotic arrival of the first contingent of 25 stone fleet vessels off Tybee Island and Port Royal Sound in early December 1861. There several of the vessels grounded or wrecked on the shoals and others lacked suitable ground-tackle requiring assistance from the Union blockading force. Afterwards, the navy vessels spent time marshalling these vessels at Port Royal, and then escorted or towed them for scuttling at the Main Bar off Charleston. The logbooks also referenced the arrival of the second contingent, numbering 20, at Port Royal during the interval between the two sinking's, as well as the events surrounding the sinking of the Second Stone Fleet at the entrance to Maffitt's Channel. Other specific information included the scuttling of several vessels to form breakwaters to facilitate the landing of Federal troops at Tybee Island, Georgia, the scavenging of sails, blocks, and other accoutrements off the hulks by navy vessels, and the diverting of several vessels for logistical purposes to serve as floating store houses or machine shops. The logbooks of those vessel's actively engaged in sinking the stone fleets recorded their actions of towing the hulks into position, recovering sails and spars for later use, or in one instance, having to go back to one vessel since the sailor's had forgotten to open the plug to sink the hulk. Of particular archaeological importance, Nathan located a reference to lashing and

sinking two vessels together of the Second Stone Fleet. This proved of interest, as during our survey operations last year the sonar generated an image of a ballast mound extremely close to a previously documented ballast mound. One hope of this project is to provide a name to these anonymous ballast mounds, and with references like that, will help in our quest to provide a history to these shipwrecks. These logbook entries are valuable bits of information that will help to develop our historical narrative and guide our archaeological explorations of the two stone fleets.

After mining the logbooks for nuggets of information, we turned our attention to a cache of documents concerning the navy's purchase of these merchant vessels. We found a number of materials associated with the purchase of each of the vessels, except for the bark *Peri*. These documents consisted of bills of sale, ship registries, and Custom House declarations clearing a vessel for sale. One associated document in particular proved of extreme interest: a spreadsheet created by Richard H. Chapell, charged with purchasing and outfitting the vessels for their intended use as part of the stone fleet. The spreadsheet listed expenses to purchase stones, make repairs, buy provisions, crew the vessels, and a plethora of other items. Additionally, Chapell sold items no longer required by

the vessels, including copper sheathing stripped from the hulls, whaling gear, anchors and chain, and navigation gear. Of particular interest was that Chapell oftentimes sold an expensive anchor or chronometer and then turned around and bought cheaper replacements for use on the voyage south. For instance, he sold a chronometer for \$100 and then bought one for two dollars. Apparently, he attempted to defray the total costs of the vessel to the U.S. Government by these means. A couple of unique documents were also found: an inventory of all the supplies aboard one of the vessels, and the original secret sailing instructions that each captain received prior to heading south. At the end of one of the boxes containing these documents, we found a letter by Chapell to Gideon Welles, the Secretary of the Navy, summing up in good detail his efforts to assemble and outfit the two stone fleets. As above with the logbooks, these documents, combined with all our other research, will assist us to develop the historical context and to guide our archaeological inquiry of the two stone fleets sunk off Charleston Harbor. Currently, we are conducting visual reconnaissance of each of the 29 wrecks composing the two stone fleets. Look to subsequent issues of *Legacy* for progress reports concerning these efforts.

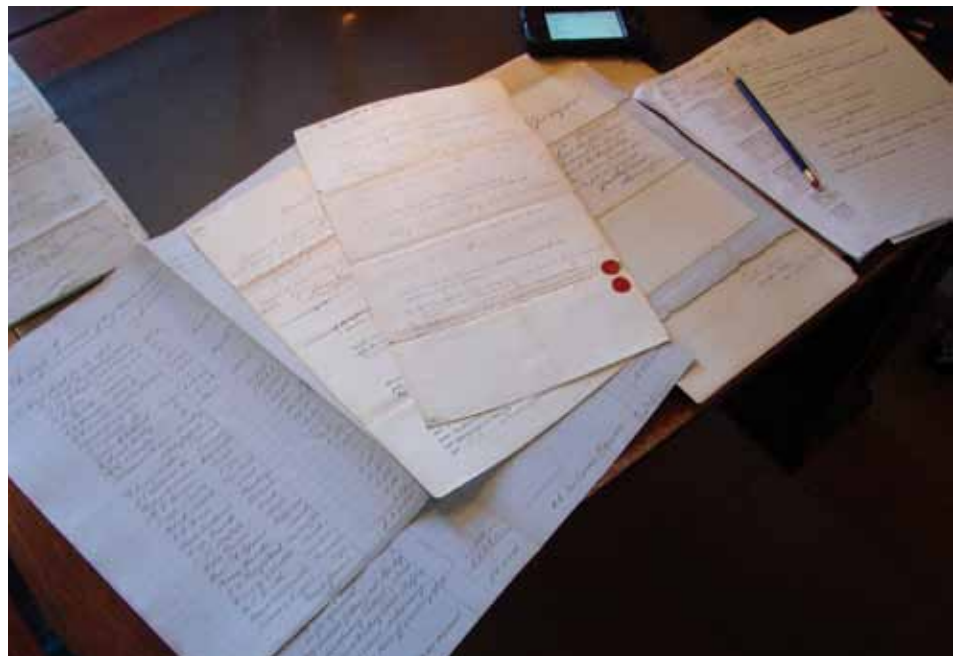


Figure 2: Bill of sales, Chapell spreadsheet and other documents associated with purchasing and outfitting the two stone fleets (SCIAA photo)