

MARITIME HERITAGE ON DISPLAY: UNDERWATER EXAMPLES FROM SOUTH CAROLINA

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1. INTRODUCTION

Two recently created interpretive paddling and diving trails on the Ashley and Cooper Rivers near Charleston, South Carolina, allow both the diver and non-diver access to remnants of the state's riverine and coastal maritime heritage. Located in South Carolina's Lowcountry, the trails meander through swamps and marshlands inhabited by an array of wildlife including ospreys, bald eagles, ducks, alligators, and fish, especially large catfish. Archaeological sites on the trails include the remains of sailing ships, steamboats, and ferry and plantation landings. These sites are situated in a culturally modified landscape altered from a prehistoric environment of hardwood swamps to one conducive to colonial rice agriculture, and to modern water-control devices including a dam. These sites range in age from the early English colonial period to the beginning of the twentieth century. The purpose of each trail is to communicate to the visitor the historical and archaeological significance of these vestiges of the state's maritime heritage and surrounding maritime cultural landscape. In a more utilitarian sense, the trails also are intended to help stimulate historical tourism to the area.

Initiated by and under the direction of the Underwater Archaeology Division of the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology (SCIAA) at the University of South Carolina, the construction of each trail relied heavily on volunteers, local businesses, and other governmental agencies. Inspired by the successful practice of improving public access to

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submerged cultural resources by other state and international programs such as in Florida, New York, Israel, and Australia, SCIAA hoped to embark upon a similar recreational and educational use for a selected few of the state's many intertidal and submerged archaeological assets. In South Carolina there is no specific legislative mandate for SCIAA to improve public access to submerged cultural resources in the state. However, SCIAA interpreted sections of the South Carolina Underwater Antiquities Act of 1991 that are concerned with education as a mandate to improve public access to these underwater museums for educational purposes (S.C.C.L. 54-7-840). Ancillary benefits from this approach also permit SCIAA to promote stewardship, recreation, and tourism centered on selected and monitored cultural resources.

These two trails represent SCIAA's first forays into improving public access to interpreted intertidal and underwater archaeological resources in the state. An earlier proposal by SCIAA in the late 1980s to create an underwater preserve on the remains of the SS *Lawrence*, an iron-hulled steamer that wrecked off Port Royal Sound in 1899, never went beyond the early planning stages. Local divers and dive shop owners showed no enthusiasm for the project, mainly objecting to the winds and currents that made the site a fickle place to dive (Beard, 1990). Subsequently, the idea to create this and other preserves was abandoned. Several years later the notion to provide interpreted public access to the state's maritime resources was revived under the direction of Lynn Harris, SCIAA's manager of the Sport Diving Archaeological Management Program. Harris combined her professional interest in shipwrecks and her recreational pursuits of canoeing and kayaking to create the Ashley River Trail.

2. ASHLEY RIVER TRAIL

In 1995, a SCIAA Research Affiliate, Billy Judd, located thirteen intertidal watercraft sites along a four mile stretch of the Ashley River. The watercraft remains represented a diverse range of wooden sailing and motorized vessels, a barge, and a tugboat of composite wood and concrete construction, all from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, although the majority of the vessels date from the nineteenth century. Those sites were later recorded by SCIAA personnel and volunteers using funds awarded from the Robert L. Stephenson Archaeological Research Fund, a SCIAA in-house grant program (Figure 1). Two of the motorized vessels had copious amounts of phosphate nuggets inside the hulls that suggested an affiliation with the phosphate industry which flourished in South Carolina from 1867 to the demise of the industry at the turn of the last century (Harris, 1995; Harris, 1996).

Concurrently, a state-wide heritage tourism initiative--the South Carolina Heritage Corridor--commenced under the direction of the South Carolina



Figure 1. Recording remains of an intertidal wreck at low tide on the Ashley River Trail (SCIAA photograph).

Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism (SCPRT). Envisioned to run from the Upcountry to the Lowcountry, or for non-South Carolinians, from the mountains to the coast, the SCPRT planned the corridor for visitors to undertake independent exploration of a series of trails along forests, bays, canals, and rivers by means of walking, canoeing, kayaking, and biking. The SCPRT solicited trail nominations, and SCIAA in turn asked for sport diver input regarding the addition of an underwater component to the corridor. SCIAA suggested a set of criteria including accessibility, popularity, safety, historic theme, and photographic potential for the divers to keep in mind when proposing a site. Responses received from sport divers were mixed; some inappropriately wanted sites where they could collect artifacts or fossils, or nominated shipwrecks located outside of state waters, but local divers generally were positive and enthusiastic about the concept (Harris, 1995b).

SCPRT invited Harris to participate in the corridor development as a member of the Area IV board representing Charleston, Colleton, and

Dorchester counties. The board wanted to portray neglected aspects of South Carolina history and Harris suggested a trail accessible by canoers or kayakers focused on maritime heritage. Fortunately, the recently documented wrecks proved ideally suited for just such a trail. Heartily endorsed by the regional corridor committee, the paddling trail provided an opportunity to incorporate the rivers and watercraft remains as a theme in the overall scope of the heritage corridor. The theme of the trail encompassed the vital economic connection with Charleston, plantation history, and local industries such as phosphate mining, transportation, and technology that formed an important part of the local story but had not yet been fully explored.

Most of the wreck sites on the Ashley River Trail are visible only at low tide. With a tidal range of as much as four feet, paddling to view the ten wrecks must revolve around the tides. Equipped with a laminated slate developed by SCIAA, a paddler relies on the illustrated guide to navigate through the trail. The slates also offer historical and archaeological information discussing the demise of the vessels, their use on the river, phosphate mining, vernacular shipbuilding, and adjacent historic properties such as Magnolia Plantation and Middleton Place. Alternately, paddlers can arrange guided tours through Old Dorchester State Historical Park or Middleton Place Plantation; trail slates are available from both of these locations. On these guided tours, visitors also can stroll about these two historic sites--Dorchester is an archaeological park centered on the remains of an abandoned colonial town active from 1695 to the 1750s and Middleton Place was an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rice plantation and is now a tourist attraction. Accompanied by a visit to the park or plantation, the trail visitor can link the history of the adjacent lands with that of the waterway. To quote Park Officer and Ranger Ty Houck, the primary park guide for the paddling trail:

It is a unique paddle trip because it is literally a flowing timeline. It is a one-of-a-kind program where you can paddle in an idyllic natural setting without leaving the suburbs and see shipwrecks without getting wet. At the upper reaches of the trail it is wild and scenic with blue herons flying overhead, and alligators sunning on the banks amongst the spider lilies. As we get closer to the park, colonial shipwrecks and phosphate mining barges begin to appear, followed by the subdivision of Ashborough gently bringing us into the modern day.

The park organizes approximately twelve tours a year that range from four to sixteen people, and who vary in age from teens to septuagenarians. The History Club of the Citadel has visited the trail at least three times. Word about the trail is communicated through the Park's Internet site and *Park View* publication, flyers, word of mouth, and outside media sources, primarily newspapers. Many of the paddlers respond with positive comments about the trail and appreciate the ability to view shipwrecks and nature at the same time.

The only downside is that the park has a limited number of canoes and demand for paddling the trail is exceeding supply. The park rangers hope to obtain a small grant to purchase more canoes in the near future. On the upside, the trail requires virtually no maintenance, and the guides monitor the sites for any signs of deterioration. In one example of site maintenance, SCIAA reattached a vessel's keelson to the frames with stainless steel fasteners to prevent the timber from washing away.

3. COOPER RIVER UNDERWATER HERITAGE TRAIL

In discussing ways to improve public access to archaeological sites for divers, SCIAA considered the merits of creating a preserve centered on an individual site or to link a group of sites into a trail. Ultimately, the trail idea proved more attractive for a number of archaeological and logistical reasons. Most notably, there existed a cohesive group of suitable wrecks easily accessible on the west branch of the Cooper River and the SCIAA field office in Charleston was conveniently close to the sites for implementing field operations and for monitoring the trail in the future. In 1997, the Division received a \$7,500 grant from the United States Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration's National Recreational Trails Program which was administered by the SCPRT to develop a trail for scuba divers. Matching funds were secured through the use of donated time by volunteer sport divers. Berkeley County public works, a private construction firm, and two local dive shops provided in-kind support for trail construction. Additionally, a private individual donated \$500 for use on the trail. Later, Harris obtained two SCIAA Archaeological Research Trust grants totaling \$3,700 to more fully record two of the wreck sites.

SCIAA's plans for the trail included introducing mooring buoys to prevent anchor damage to the wrecks, and also creating slates depicting each site and providing diving advice aimed towards minimizing inadvertent damage to the wrecks. In the fall of 1997, SCIAA organized a meeting and invited historic preservationists, fellow archaeologists, sport divers, and dive shop owners to discuss creating the trail. Unexpectedly, response from the sport diving community was ambivalent. Instead of endorsing an opportunity to improve public access for diving as was expected, the divers and dive shop owners in attendance stated their belief that more divers on these sites would adversely impact the wreck sites. SCIAA countered that these sites had already suffered extensive damage by having been completely stripped of artifacts during the 1970s by sport divers. Additionally, these sites already had high visitation from sport divers through individual visits and dive shop sponsored tours. In fact, this stretch of the river is one of the most frequented dive spots in South Carolina. SCIAA's management position contended that, by enhancing public access to these sites, chances for their long-term

preservation were improved by lessening harmful impacts made by anchors and divers. At a subsequent meeting, and with time to reflect on the proposal and the resulting benefits, the divers and dive shop owners proved more amenable to launching and assisting the project.

Over a period of several months in 1998, SCIAA worked in conjunction with volunteers to record the remains of six trail sites ranging in age from the early 1700s to the early 1900s. Historical and archaeological data about the sites also were gathered. Fortunately, a copious amount of information existed from previous SCIAA work in the area and from the efforts of the Cooper River Survey Project, a survey team composed of a group of sport divers working under the guidance of SCIAA to document the archaeological remains along this stretch of the river (Harris et al., 1993). Additionally, the Division received two SCIAA Archaeological Research Trust grants in 1999 and 2000 to conduct more in-depth investigation of two wrecks on the trail, the Pimlico and Mepkin Abbey Wrecks.

Conceivably, and depending on the tides and other variables such as time to wander about viewing the sites, a diver to the Cooper River Heritage Trail, which is touted as a blackwater diving experience, could complete the whole circuit of six sites in one visit. If a diver does not finish the trail, they can always come back to complete the tour. The first site on the trail, the Strawberry Wreck, possibly represents the remains of a small British warship burned by Colonel Wade Hampton and his group of partisans during the Revolutionary War. Divers in the past reported finding sheathing with the British broad arrow mark on the wreck. The wreck is in the vicinity of the Strawberry Ferry landing, a cribwork structure constructed of logs, ballast stones, and bricks. The ferry landing was built in 1705 to provide service between Charleston and the frontier town of Childesbury, located on the opposite bank, and outlying settlements (Figure 2).

Heading upstream the diver next visits the Pimlico Wreck, which consists of the remains of a large sailing ship buried in the sand on the edge of the river channel, probably dating to the early to mid-nineteenth century. Recent archaeological investigations revealed a substantial amount of the lower hull of the vessel from bow to stern. Apparently, the ship was stripped and abandoned based on the absence of ballast stones and associated artifacts, although the site is littered with aboriginal ceramic ware, most likely eroded from nearby Native American sites and subsequently deposited in the wreck. The amount of exposed structure varies as sand sweeps back and forth across the wreck depending on tides and the increased flow of released water from the upstream dam.

Continuing onwards the diver next splashes over to inspect the Pimlico barge, which apparently was a towing barge as evidenced by rings on either end that suggest the vessel was towed in train. The barge most likely dates to the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. Completely intact, divers liken the dive experience on the barge to "diving in a bath tub." Towards the marsh



Figure 2. Remains of Strawberry Ferry landing cribwork (SCIAA photograph).

bank, the diver and boat passengers can view the remnants of rice agricultural relics including puncheons to support the dikes and a rice trunk that regulated the flow of water in and out of the rice fields.

The last two sites on the trail, a shipwreck and a landing, are adjacent to an historic plantation associated with Henry Laurens, a prominent colonial planter, merchant, shipowner, and politician. The property was owned by the Laurens family until 1827. Divers located the wreck in the mid-1970s and found cargo consisting of siding planks and a multitude of stoneware jugs that dated the wreck to the early 1800s. The remains of the small sailing vessel, which show evidence of burning, consist of the lower hull, extant from bow to the mortise of the stern post. The stern post and rudder were recovered by SCIAA in 1980 for analysis and indicated the vessel was constructed of local woods. Lines recorded from the vessel, probably a work boat, show it to be flat-bottomed with a hard chine at the turn of the bilge (Wilbanks, 1981). The Mepkin landing, a log and ballast stone crib work, was constructed using mortise and tenon joinery and was used to load and offload goods and products destined for plantation use or sale in Charleston. Scattered about the landing are artifacts including bricks, tiles, ceramics, and miscellaneous iron

fasteners. The property currently is owned by Trappist monks who run the Mepkin Abbey.

4. TRAIL INTERPRETATION AND MANAGEMENT

Infrastructure to support the trail includes a brochure, laminated slates, mooring buoys, and guidelines. The brochure provides a brief promotional synopsis of the trail for potential visitors. Six interpretive slates are available at local dive shops. An introductory slate provides a history of the river's usage, local flora and fauna, mooring details, and diving information, especially in regards to blackwater diving; a trail map is located on the reverse side. The remaining five slates focus on a particular site or group of sites. Each slate consists of a site plan and a discussion of the historical usage or theme associated with the site, such as rice agriculture, local economy, riverine and coastal watercraft, shipbuilding, and any special diving instructions. The moorings consist of a buoy and a three hundred and forty-pound cement block staked into the marl river bottom. The blocks serve to anchor boats and to provide a pedestal for signage. Guidelines radiate out from the mooring blocks to the archaeological site. The guidelines are necessary as visibility in the river is highly variable, depending on tide and season. Maintenance of the trail focuses primarily on monitoring the six buoys and hardware, which may become fouled from floating vegetation and accidental boat strikes, among other minor "nuts and bolts" issues. Originally conceived as a year-round trail, maintenance issues cause the trail to be closed from October to April. This affords the opportunity to clean buoys, restore mooring apparatus, and fix any other problems.

Since the completion of the main trail work in the spring of 1999, several enhancements or changes to the trail have transpired. An unexpected enhancement of the trail occurred in the fall of 1999 with the addition of a large ship anchor which had been illegally retrieved from within the trail area by local divers. Under SCIAA supervision, the anchor was placed at the Pimlico barge site, although not its original location, due to the relative ease of returning the nine hundred-pound anchor to the river with a crane at this site. Another anchor, snagged by a shrimper in the southeastern part of the state, was added to the trail in 2000. With no funds to conserve the anchor the decision was made to place it next to the first anchor and to monitor its condition. In the fall of 2000, the stern post and rudder were returned to the Mepkin Wreck (Figure 3). The timbers were staked near the stern of the vessel after reconstituting the assembly with synthetic rods. Addition of this assembly now affords the diver a more complete picture of the construction of a colonial ship.

In addition to focusing on individual trail sites, the interpretive materials also discuss the surrounding environment. Essentially, the whole river system



Figure 3. Divers resting before replacing the Mepkin Wreck rudder and stern post (SCIAA photograph).

bears signs of human intervention: the immediate landscape was altered from cypress swamps to rice fields through slave labor; the Lake Moultrie Dam, upriver of the trail, regulates the flow of the river; Old Santee Canal, built to improve navigation to the interior, and Durham Cut, used to access the trail, were dug in the early 1900s to divert freshwater to Charleston. The printed materials also point out other nearby cultural attractions, including plantations, Old Santee Canal State Park, Mepkin Abbey, and Cypress Gardens, that divers and their families might like to visit during their stay in the area.

Visitation at the trail is mostly channeled through the three local dive shops in the Greater Charleston area. Most use the sites as a training ground for easing divers into a blackwater experience. SCIAA also employs the sites on the trail during a Field Training Course for sport divers to teach them the basics of recording shipwrecks. Individual divers also visit the trail. SCIAA still is working on developing ways to gather feedback from visitors and to respond to their concerns or problems about the trail. The trail program still is evolving and SCIAA envisions it continuing to develop over the years with the possible inclusion of other sites, as well as through augmenting interpretation

of existing sites with new information. A trail webpage also is in development, both for the non-diving public and for those who would like to plan a trip to the trail.

5. CONCLUSION

The Ashley and Cooper River Trails provide opportunities for visiting divers and paddlers to easily access and explore intertidal and submerged remnants of South Carolina's maritime heritage. These forays into providing public access to submerged cultural resources have proved beneficial by promoting the historical and archaeological significance of these selected sites to a range of organizations and individuals who otherwise might not have joined forces to protect their maritime heritage. At the present time, SCIAA is attending to the Cooper River Trail with buoy maintenance and continued documentation. No immediate plans exist to create another trail or preserve in the state; however, additional sites may be developed for public visitation. In the meantime, the trails are open to all to enjoy the maritime heritage of South Carolina in an open air and underwater museum.

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