

Archaeologists Locate Confederate Cannons, Naval Yard

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Archaeologists from the University of South Carolina and East Carolina University have located two large cannon from a sunken Confederate gunboat in the Pee Dee River and have identified where the Mars Bluff Naval Yard once stood on the east side of the river in Marion County, S.C.

State underwater archaeologist Christopher Amer and state archaeologist and research associate professor Dr. Jon Leader began work April 30. The project called for locating and, eventually, raising three cannon, each weighing upwards of five tons, that were once aboard C.S.S. Pee Dee, as well as determining the location of the naval yard where the gunboat had been built.

Amer said the underwater research has been very successful, despite rising waters that have created a higher or more swift-moving current and lower visibility.

“Our underwater work hasn’t been easy,” Amer said. “In spite of high, near-flood water in the river, we have located two of the three cannon and have raised two 7-inch Brooke artillery shells and four 6.4-inch Brooke shells. Water operations also have located pilings from the dock where vessels were outfitted and evidence of post-war logging operations.”

Leader, with the help of eight university students, conducted terrestrial operations using ground-penetrating radar and other remote-sensing

technologies to identify where the buildings of the naval yard once stood. The data was used to create a 3-D map for excavation work.

Archaeologists and graduate students are digging pits, measuring 50 centimeters wide down to the Pleistocene layer, so that artifacts can be dated in the soil layers where they lay before they are excavated. A variety of objects, including ceramics, glass and nails, provide clues to the location of specific buildings and activity areas at the naval yard, which operated as a Confederate States of America (CSA) stronghold from 1862 -1865.

“A smoking pipe bowl fragment recovered by the excavation team bears the initials ‘WG,’” Leader said. “WG pipes are known from American Revolutionary War and others sites to ca. 1830. It gave us quite a start, as one of the original owner’s initials was also WG, a remarkable coincidence.”

Among the resources Amer has used in the project is a letterbook kept by Confederate Lt. Edward Means from Aug. 3, 1864, to March 15, 1865 (among holdings at Louisiana State University), which provides valuable information about operations at the Mars Bluff Naval Yard.

Amer says the university’s research findings and the artifacts recovered will help tell the story of the people who worked at the Mars Bluff Naval Yard and how they constructed the Confederate warships.

“The artifacts recovered to date provide us with a tantalizing glimpse into past lifeways at the site,” Amer said, “and remind us of a time in this nation’s history when, in the face of advancing overwhelming odds, the Confederate officers, sailors and workmen at the only inland Confederate naval shipyard in South Carolina, along with the local community, gave it their best shot.”

The Mars Bluff Naval Yard was one of a score of Confederate naval yards that were located inland in Southern states so gunboats and support vessels for the war could be built and protected from Union forces. Mars Bluff was chosen for its inland location, proximity to the railroad, water communication with Charleston via Georgetown and the abundance of ash, oak and pine lumber.

C.S.S. Pee Dee was a 150-foot Macon class gunboat that was built at Mars Bluff and outfitted with two Brooke rifled cannon and a Union Dahlgren cannon and launched in January 1865. The Pee Dee's career was short-lived. Fearing that the gunboat might fall into enemy hands as Gen. William T. Sherman's Union troops moved from Columbia northward to advance on North Carolina, commanders ordered the cannons thrown overboard into the Pee Dee River before the ship was scuttled on March 15, set ablaze and blown up.

The project of the S.C. Institute for Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of South Carolina is funded in part by a \$200,000 grant from the Drs. Bruce and Lee Foundation in Florence. Plans call for the cannon and artifacts recovered from the Mars Bluff Naval Yard and associated with the C.S.S. Pee Dee to be preserved at conservation laboratories at Francis Marion University under the supervision of Leader. They will then be exhibited at the Florence County Museum.

The project includes collaboration with East Carolina University and Francis Marion University. ECU's Program in Maritime Studies is conducting a field school on the site through June 19, providing support to the SCIAA team's research and excavation work.

Amer said researchers have been aided greatly by the Pee Dee Research and Recovery Team, which conducted an underwater survey of the site in the 1990s under an intensive survey license from SCIAA, and by the owners of the property on which the site is located. The owners have

allowed the university and ECU archaeologists to stage the underwater operations on their property and conduct terrestrial archaeology.

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