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Marine Archaeology Comes to Pensacola

Archaeological Background

ROGER C. SMITH

In 1987, shortly after taking my post as Florida's state underwater archaeologist, Bureau of Archaeological Research Chief Jim Miller, my new boss, sent me a newspaper clipping from the *New Orleans Times Picayune*. The article featured a young man named Larry Broussard and artifacts he had collected during weekend dives in Pensacola Bay. A photo showed Broussard, a medical student at Louisiana State University, with an array of iron and other encrusted objects that his research suggested came from a Civil War shipwreck named *Judah* in shallow water at the western portion of the bay. Miller suggested that I contact Norman Simons, then curator of the Pensacola Historical Society Museum, who might shed light on *Judah* and other shipwrecks in the area. I soon learned that for years Simons had carefully collected records of ship losses, old charts and maps, reports of wreck sites, oral histories, and artifacts recovered by divers. He and I contacted Broussard, who agreed to bring the artifacts and meet with us at the museum, housed at Old Christ Church in Pensacola's historic district. I invited Judy Bense, an archaeology professor at the University of West Florida, to attend the Saturday meeting, and she brought her assistant, Caleb Curren. Our discussions soon turned from *Judah* and the artifacts that Broussard had

found to the need for an underwater survey of the bay to search for its maritime secrets.

Designation of the Gulf Islands National Seashore in 1971 had prompted an archaeological survey of portions of the new park by Florida State University. With assistance from Simons and others, eight maritime sites were recorded on land and in shallow water.¹ Meanwhile, the National Park Service conducted a brief offshore reconnaissance with a magnetometer near Fort Pickens, but divers encountered no cultural materials.² More than a decade later, prior to dredging the Pensacola harbor channel and turning basin for the U.S. Navy's Strategic Homeporting Project, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers conducted a remote sensing survey in front of the Pensacola Naval Air Station. The two-week survey in 1986 located 173 magnetic targets, of which fifty-six were associated with side-scan sonar images.³ Twelve were selected for additional investigation, and the following year Tidewater Atlantic Research was contracted to investigate the targets. None were found to be significant, but the scattered remains of *Convoy*, a nearby shipwreck, were recorded.⁴ This was the same site from which Broussard had recovered artifacts, thinking that they were from *Judah*. It soon became clear that the Pensacola Bay system was rich with maritime heritage sites. For example, in 1988 local Milton resident Warren Weeks guided me to the site of a well-preserved, two-masted coastal schooner submerged in a back bayou of the Blackwater River. Almost 100 feet in length, the early nineteenth-century vessel was intact from rails to the keel, with its pump and windlass still in place.

In May 1988 Simons and I organized a conference on maritime history and marine archaeology, sponsored jointly by the Florida Division of Historical Resources, Pensacola Historical Society, Historic Pensacola Preservation Board, and University of West Florida. The conference brought together for the first time networks of amateur historians and archaeologists, recreational divers, commercial fishermen, and university and state archaeologists, who began to focus on local maritime history and the potential for marine archaeology in Pensacola Bay. The conference was complemented by the opening of an exhibit of Broussard's artifacts from *Convoy*.

Within months of the conference, UWF archaeologists conducting a

terrestrial survey of Deadman's Island for the City of Gulf Breeze were shown the remains of a small colonial ship eroding from the beach in shallow water. Bense invited me and my wife KC to help make a preliminary investigation of the site with students and volunteers, and together we organized a marine archaeology lecture class that was taught in the spring of 1989.⁵ The class included fieldwork on a fishing smack buried under the sand at Perdido Key.⁶

Due to the exposed and fragile condition of the wreck at Deadman's Island, a university field school to record the site was undertaken during the summer of 1989. With the co-sponsorship and support of the City of Gulf Breeze, ten undergraduate students from several universities received classroom and field training under supervision by Robert Finegold, Marianne Franklin, and me.⁷ We discovered that the small colonial British vessel had been in the process of careening (exposing its hull for cleaning and repair), when she was found to be unseaworthy and apparently was abandoned.⁸ A permanent exhibit with artifacts and interpretive materials was installed at the Gulf Breeze Recreation (now Community) Center.

Concurrent with the field school, a team of volunteers under the direction of East Carolina University graduate student David Baumer thoroughly documented the Blackwater schooner, which was placed on the National Register of Historic Places the following year.⁹ Loaded with a partial cargo of bricks, the schooner had been abandoned near a local brickyard and forgotten. An eroded name board on its transom was illegible, so the vessel's identity remained a mystery.

Early in 1990, during dredging operations to deepen the entrance channel to Pensacola Bay for the Strategic Homeporting Project, a bronze artillery piece became lodged in the pump of the dredge vessel *Carolina*.¹⁰ A concerned crew member released the news to local media, prompting temporary relocation of dredging activities. Corps of Engineers archaeologist Dorothy Gibbens invited me to inspect the find, and we made our way to the dredge with required hard hats and steel-toed boots. At the head of the boarding ladder, we were greeted by an enormous bulldog named Bud, which eagerly led us across the deck to the bronze cannon. The eighteenth-century howitzer's encounter with the dredge had left a piece of the steel cutter head embedded in the bronze.