Wreck of the Tracy D: *Discovery of an Unidentified Shipwreck on Ossabaw Island*

The LAMAR Institute
Archaeological investigations at the North End Plantation, Ossabaw Island took place during the winter of 2005. Several of the archaeology project team members participated in an unrelated discovery of a shipwreck on the South End Point of Ossabaw Island in St. Catherines Sound during that period. This previously unknown and, as yet, unidentified wreck was first discovered by Tracy Dean, who noticed nineteenth century bottle glass and ballast flint on the beach and the wreck site was named in her honor. Additional evidence of the wreck was discovered during several subsequent visits to the site. This brief monograph describes the site discovery and field conditions that were observed in early 2005.

The first discovery of the wreck was made in February 2005 by LAMAR Institute Research Associate Tracy Dean, assisted by colleagues Ginger Ellerman and Dan Elliott. The debris scattered on the head of the beach (immediately below the eroding dune line) consisted of one nineteenth century bottle base and small pebbles of European flint ship ballast. Several oak timbers were observed jutting out from the exposed dune, including two planks that were apparently connected (Figures 1 and 2). Heavily corroded square nails (probably machine cut varieties) were embedded in one section of timber planking. The ballast flint and bottle glass were located immediately south of the ship timbers. Archaeologists Elliott and Dan Battle returned for a second visit in late February 2005, armed with a Nautilus brand metal detector, to better define the site extent. Additional surface artifacts were observed and Battle was able to delineate an extensive iron debris field on the lower beach area by using the metal detector.
Archaeologists Ronnie Rogers, David Crass, and Elliott and Danny Brown and Jim Bitler made a third visit to the wreck site in early March 2005. A large section of ship planking and iron drift pins were exposed during that period. A metal probe was used to explore the horizontal extent of the shallow buried wreckage surrounding the exposed section of planking. Archaeologists recorded measurements and made a rudimentary sketch of the primary exposed wreckage.

The exposed planks were oriented perpendicular to the beach. The maximum extent of wood was 9.8 meters, or approximately 32 feet, and it covered an area at least 4 meters wide. The planks were approximately 26 cm wide. The wreckage extended at least another 2 meters west and GPS locations were recorded during that visit.

Archaeologists Dan Battle, Elliott and Dean and geophysicist Dean Goodman returned to the site for a fourth time in early April 2005. One small section of ship’s timber was exposed on the lower section of the beach during that visit, which is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Dean Examines Partially Exposed Timber on South End Point, Ossabaw Island.

Figure 4 shows the exposed timbers and horizontal iron drift pins, which were photographed by Jim Bitler during a fifth visit to wreck site. Another view provided by Bitler shows a close-up of metal drift pins, which were oriented vertically (Figure 5).

A small surface collection of representative items was made and include:
Figure 4. Wreckage, South End Point, Ossabaw Island (green cap denotes scale).
1 Small piece of sheet copper (possibly sheathing)
2 Small flat iron strips
1 Machine cut square nail (removed from oak timber exposed in dune)
1 Wood sample from said oak timber
1 Post-bottom mold light olive green bottle base
2 French flint pebbles (honey colored)
1 English flint pebble (dark gray)
4 Unidentified flint pebbles
1 Quartzite pebble.

These artifacts appeared to be size graded by wave action and the objects were generally smaller than 5 cm in diameter. These small artifacts were clustered on the southwestern portion of the site and were most prominent near the beach/dune interface.

The debris scatter associated with the wreck is crescent shaped and covers an area of South End Beach stretching at least 350 meters east-west by 75 meters north-south. The approximate centerpoint of the wreckage is located at UTM Zone 17, E486883 N3509278. The largest section of intact wreckage (see Figure 4) is located at approximately E486992 N3509280. Other ship timbers are located at E487039 N3509312; E486970 N3509287; and E487031 N3509294. Large iron objects (possibly pins or spikes) were located at E487066 N3509308 and E487031 N3509294.

St. Catherines Sound has claimed multiple ships throughout history. The observed wreckage may actually be portions of more than one vessel. The three site visits that were made revealed the dynamic character of the South End Beach. The observed wreckage varied significantly during each of these visits, which were made within a relatively short time span. It is notable that the wreckage had not been observed prior to 2005 despite years of frequent patrolling by Georgia DNR and Ossabaw Island Foundation staff. Ossabaw Island managers were advised of the presence of the wreck so that it could be wisely managed. A state site form was completed for the site based on the accumulated information. The State of Georgia Underwater Archaeologist Jason Burns was advised of the wreck.

The combined archaeological evidence suggests a ship that wrecked in St. Catherines Sound in the nineteenth century (or early twentieth century) and the wreckage was strewn on the cape of the South Beach of Ossabaw Island. None of the timbers show any clear evidence of burning.

It should be cautioned that this dating evidence is scant and limited to machine cut square nails (ca. 1790 to 1865) that was removed from a section of ship planking and one bottle fragment of a post-bottom mold type commonly produced in the mid-nineteenth century,
which was found on the shore amid other small pieces of wreck debris.

The presence of European ship ballast stones may indicate that it was a transcontinental watercraft. However, ballast is not a reliable indicator of a vessel's use area. Ballast was continually recycled. It would be dumped out in one port, often on top of and mixed into other ballast, and then the pile would be shoveled into the next vessel that needed it. The Georgia coast had no native ballast stone—so, even coasters and steamboats that never left the state carried "foreign" (out of state or out of country) ballast. Other local alternatives would have included scrap iron, brick rubble, or stone from the Georgia piedmont (Judy Wood personal communication October 31, 2005).

Archaeologist Judy Wood has compiled an extensive inventory of known shipwrecks from historical sources. Several wrecks are documented in the general vicinity of Ossabaw and St. Catherines Island, but the identity of this wreck is not immediately obvious. Among the mid-nineteenth century wrecks were the noted Enoch Dean, which snagged on a creek entering St. Catherines Sound in the 1860s while fully loaded with supplies and people bound for an intended Freedmen settlement. Higginson (2005) described the Enoch Dean during war time as a, “a river steamboat, which carried a ten-pound Parrott gun, and a small howitzer”. The final resting place of this steamboat in St. Catherines Sound is presently unknown.

The discovery of this unidentified wreck has important implications for the identification of other potential wrecks on the south end of Ossabaw Island. The developmental history of the beach geomorphology on this part of Ossabaw Island is not well established at present. Portions of two modern nautical charts (Figures 6 and 7) from 1971 and 1985 exhibit the dynamic character of the Ossabaw Island shoreline. The location of dateable relics may help to date one portion of the beach. If a pattern of beach advancement is at work here (as has been observed on other portions of Ossabaw Island), then older wrecks are possibly located more inland from this wreck location. The “Tracy D” wreck may serve as a benchmark in the search for additional wrecks, such as the row galleys Washington and Trumbull which were both beached and burned by sailors in the Georgia Navy, who were fleeing Sunbury on January 9, 1779 (Elliott 2005).

Figure 6. Portion of 1971 Coastal Chart Showing South End Point, Ossabaw Island (NOAA 2005).
Figure 7. Portion of 1985 Coastal Chart Showing South End Point, Ossabaw Island (NOAA 2005).

References Cited

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