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Biscayne National Park: Solving the Mystery of the *English China Wreck*

Over 40 shipwrecks are located within the waters which now make up [Biscayne NP](#) in southern Florida. Among those wrecks, the *English China Wreck* is one of the best preserved. Unfortunately, looting and unintended damage caused by fishing and diving are a threat to the site's integrity and artifacts. These threats, along with a search for conclusive proof of the ship's identity, led the NPS, in partnership with George Washington University, to conduct field excavations during the summer of 2011.

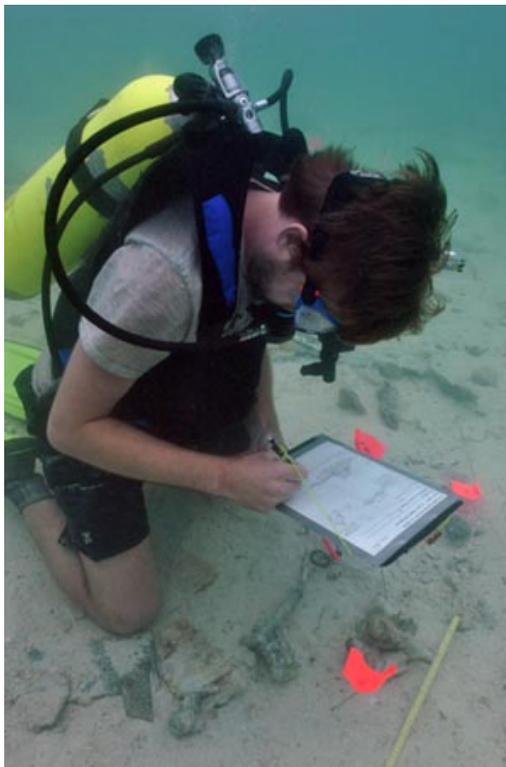
The English China Wreck (ECW) was discovered in 1975, and first evaluated in 1984 by NPS archeologists. The ECW was identified as a middle- to late-eighteenth century vessel, carrying a cargo of British ceramics for export. The wreck was named "The English China Wreck" due to the large quantity of British "chinaware" ceramics onboard. During the 1984 evaluations, archeologists speculated that the ECW could be the remains of either the *Ledbury*, a British vessel lost in 1769, or the *Hubbard*, a British vessel reported lost in the area in 1772. In 2010, however, a non-invasive surface ceramic inventory was conducted which cast doubt on that original assessment. The presence of Spanish-made ladrillos

(bricks) on the wreck, along with British materials, may indicate the ship was involved in secondary trading, and could in fact be of North American, not British origin. Since its discovery in 1975, the ECW has been protected and monitored by law enforcement authorities and the Biscayne NP archeologist. Despite this protection, the wreck has been a target by looters because of its large quantity of easily collectable artifacts.

As a result of the threat posed by looters and the new theory of a possible North American origin, further study of the wreck was proposed with an eye toward expanding on knowledge of American colonial history. This past summer, Biscayne NP partnered with George Washington University and their Southern African Slave Wrecks and Diaspora Heritage Project (SASWDHP) to conduct an archeological field school. The field school was held in June and July of 2011, and included George Washington University graduate students, as well as participants from IZIKO-Museums of South Africa, and the African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA), both of which are located in Capetown, South Africa. The field school was overseen by Charles Lawson, Biscayne NP Archeologist; Stephen Lubkemann, George Washington University; and NPS Southeast Regional Archeologist, David Morgan.

According to Lawson, "The goals of underwater and terrestrial archeological research remain the same (to use collection techniques and scientific data to document and/or collect every piece of information that can be gleaned by the spatial associations between human-made and natural objects and features within an archeological site). The methods in underwater archeology are a little more complicated due to difficulty in seeing, communicating, and limited time on the bottom to conduct work (either because of restrictions on diving depth or the amount of air carried). Many technological devices that are frequently used in terrestrial archeology don't translate well to an underwater environment, such as total stations and GPS units, meaning underwater archeologists have to do things the old fashioned way, with tape measures and stadia rods."

Despite the challenges of underwater work, the 2011 field season on the ECW was a success. The investigators now have more information on the dimensions of the ship. In addition, excavators also discovered evidence of extensive burning which extended to the lowest



English China Wreck project member taking notes. (NPS photo)

portion of the ship, its keel, and on many of the ceramics stored above it. The extent and nature of the burning was significant, and suggests that the ship was on fire when it sank, rather than being burned to the waterline by salvagers after the incident. Knowing that the ship sank due to a fire makes it likely that it will be in historic insurance records, which could one day help identify the vessel. Interestingly enough, the main ceramic assemblages recovered from the 2011 field session can be traced to a specific point in time. Both the creamware ceramics (a specific variety known as "tortoise-shell sponged wheelonware"), and the salt glazed stoneware recovered from the wreck share the same decorative molding patterns. The unique decorative patterns, manufacturing styles, and types of ceramics present on the site lead archeologists to believe the shipwreck occurred during a specific moment in colonial history, a period in which creamware was emerging as a more popular ceramic type and earlier stoneware ceramics were being phased out. Along with ship dimensions and ceramics, several iron padlocks and four broken terracotta figurines (which appear to represent religious icons) were also encountered during the field session.



English China Wreck project members excavating underwater. (NPS photo)

The finds from the 2011 field session and previous excavations have increased the level of significance of the ECW as an important shipwreck site for understanding colonial maritime history in the New World. The number of ceramics recovered and documented in place will allow researchers to construct a ceramic chronology, and eventually the ECW may be considered a "type site" for other colonial period wrecks. A type site is any place with a dramatic collection of a single artifact category that provides a comparison in time and space for other sites. Once archeologists have identified the name and date of the sinking of the wreck, they will have isolated a point in time for the transatlantic shipment of both saltglazed stoneware and wheelonware into the colonies.



Project members, including Biscayne NP archeologist Charles Lawson, right, and NPS Southeast Regional Archeologist David Morgan, examine recovered ceramic sherds. (NPS photo)

Now that the field season has ended, the conservation and analysis work has begun. According to Lawson, conservation of the recovered artifacts is a top priority. Because the artifacts came from a submerged anaerobic mud environment, the preservation of materials is vastly superior to most terrestrial environments. However, these artifacts are almost instantaneously threatened once removed from the water. Ceramics need to be soaked in successive freshwater baths until the salts that have been absorbed into them have been completely leached out. If this is not done before the artifacts dry, salt crystallization will damage the ceramics, causing them to crumble. The process can take several months or even years. Once conservation is completed and artifacts have been analyzed and catalogued, Biscayne NP will display them in the visitor's center.

The park also manages a collection of wrecks that are appropriate for public visitation. These sites are part of the [Biscayne NP Maritime Heritage Trail](#), and visitor access is via SCUBA and snorkeling. In total, there are seven wrecks that span much of the history of seafaring activities in South Florida, representing maritime casualties spanning three centuries.

The 2011 season provided archeologists with more data on the dimensions, cargo, and probable cause of the sinking of the ship, all factors which help determine its identity. There is still much to learn before archeologists can definitively determine if the ship is British, Spanish, or American. Further ceramic analysis and identification of the ladrillos will help to answer these questions. With new information on how the ship sank, historical research can now be done to locate insurance records, allowing researchers to finally determine the ship's name and history.

"As for the historic significance, there is still much to learn before we can say for sure," said Lawson. "Is the ship British or American? Does it have a connection to Florida (probably not, but maybe in St. Augustine)? Are the cargo of bricks really Spanish, and if so was a British ship carrying a cargo of illegal Spanish goods? There is still a lot to learn."

But researchers are one step closer now that results from the timber analysis of the ship have been returned. The timber was birch, which in all likelihood means the ship was built in New

England. This indicates the ship was most likely British, given that all of England's shipbuilding was centered in the colonies in the decades leading up to the revolution.

Becoming Stewards of Culture

In addition to the information and artifacts recovered from the field session significant training was offered to the Southern African Slave Wrecks Project staff. The Slave Wrecks Project, which is a partnership coordinated by the George Washington University Capitol Archeology Institute, offered the opportunity for professional development of a South African staff member, who will soon be running similar projects in South Africa. Biscayne NP also sponsors programs that help to educate the public on responsible stewardship of natural and cultural underwater resources. A volunteer program known as "Diving with a Purpose" has been hosted by Biscayne for several years. Interested volunteers can learn about shipwreck archeology, mapping techniques, and stewardship of sites. The park believes that creating responsible public stewards is the best way to protect these non-renewable resources from looters.

Learn more about [Diving with a Purpose](#) and the [Maritime Heritage Trail](#).

*By Kimberly Munro
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