

Mepkin Wreck Project Continues: Is Vessel Henry Lauren's Plantation Boat *Baker*

By Lynn Harris

SCIAA work on the shipwreck located near Mepkin Abbey on the west branch of the Cooper River Underwater Heritage Trail continued this fall with the aid of a grant from the ART (Archaeological Research Trust) Board. Lou Edens, Board member and owner of Rice Hope Plantation, very generously offered our underwater team accommodations at this beautiful historic B & B conveniently situated on the bank of the Cooper River. Historical research, detailed site mapping, and the reconstruction and redeposition of the rudder on the site were the primary objectives for this year.

With the donation of threaded fiberglass rods from Strongwell Corporation in Bristol, Virginia, the separate rudder components recovered in the 1980s have been successfully united and can be viewed on site when the trail reopens in the spring next year. We were also fortunate to have the assistance of our former intern and current graduate student, Sue Vezeau, who joined us from Texas A & M Nautical Archaeology Program along with her goniometer to take hull lines as a reconstruction project for a term paper. We look forward to the results.



Figure 1: Sue Vezeau measures fasteners of vessel's stempost (SCIAA photo).

The possible association of the wreck with Henry Laurens, a successful merchant, planter, Revolutionary War leader, and President of the Continental Congress, makes this wreck of the few riverine hulks to which we might be able to attach some sort of locational history. Fortunately for us, Laurens was a prolific correspondent, writing not only about political issues, but also about the day to day activities involved in running a plantation. These activities included boat operations.

On December 7, 1773, while Henry Laurens was in England, he received a letter from his brother James, informing him about the condition of his Mepkin plantation boat, the *Baker*. James explained that the vessel had recently been taken to a carpenter for repairs and "it now appears that her bottom is so bad, that it remains a doubt that she will swim with a Load of Wood."



Figure 2: Sue Vezeau uses goniometer to record curvatures of loose timbers from the wreck (SCIAA photo).

Despite the liability of the worm-eaten *Baker*, the boat continued to be used for a variety of plantation tasks with the crew "taking care not to Load (the cargo) too deep" in case she sank. Evidently the boat was used for at least another six months when on July 19, 1774, the carpenters advised James that the vessel was unfit for service and it would be as "expensive to repair her as to build a New Vessel of Equal Burthern." In subsequent years a nameless plantation boat is mentioned in

the Laurens records as servicing Mepkin, and there is no longer any mention of the *Baker*.

Did they continue to use the *Baker* in her unfit state until she finally plummeted into the murky depths of the Cooper River still carrying the cargo of wood we see jammed onto the starboard side of the wreck today? Or was she replaced by a similar boat that came to its demise many years later?

Artifacts found in proximity to the wreck, like stoneware jugs, date to the 1700s and 1800s. Like most waterfront areas adjacent to historic plantations, artifacts may represent the refuse or losses of many years of habitation on the Mepkin tract rather than a cargo that provides archaeologists with a neatly packaged date range.

Riverine shipwrecks, like log piles, also become roadblocks in a riverbend attracting both modern and historic trash. Neither do most wooden wrecks found in the tidal areas of rivers have any decking or superstructure left that would hold cargo items firmly in place. In this instance, the construction of the boat might yield more definitive clues about the identity and context.

We know that the vessel was southern built. The frames, apron, stem, mast step, and sternpost are oak. The keelson and outer hull planks are southern pine and the treenails are bald cypress. Although the shipbuilding lumber was likely to have been obtained locally, Laurens notes that vessels built in South Carolina have all their materials for rigging and sails imported.

In 1763 Timothy Creamer, the overseer of Laurens' recently purchased Mepkin property, organized for a schooner to be built at a James Island shipyard as the plantation boat. The timing suggests that this was most probably the *Baker*. In a Mepkin estate inventory dating to 1766, the *Baker* was valued at 2,600 pounds with four slave crewmen aboard. At this time, slave patroon Scaramouch was in charge of Henry Lauren's boats. He was portrayed as a skillfull boatman, but also a rebellious trouble maker and an obvious risk.

In 1777, surprisingly, Scaramouch was placed in charge of one of the coastal vessels. In this year Tom Peas became a plantation patrolman—only to die in 1778—much to the distress of the overseer who wrote that "I am at loss for a patrolman and white men are not to be hired."

In 1771 Laurens ordered that the *Baker* be converted from a schooner rig into a single mast rig. He describes how he saw many sloops in his travels to Pennsylvania and Jersey and that a sloop with a similar hull design to the *Baker* not only had "some Advantage gained in Point of Sailing," but also the "Labour and Expence of at Least one Man is saved by such Rigging."

If we assume the *Baker* lasted until 1774, this is a lifespan of 11 years for the vessel, which was to be expected of locally built vessels. Comparing the archaeological record to the historical information, it is interesting to note that the keelson of this relatively small vessel is comprised of two distinct sections scarphed just aft of the saddle-style mast step. Additionally, the keelson aft of the scarph was chamfered, but forward of the scarph it was not.

Generally, for a riverine vessel of this size (around 48 feet), a single timber was utilized for the keelson. This might reflect a later modification in rigging design or alternatively major repairs. Furthermore, a saddle mast step for a small vessel is also unusual. Could this step design have facilitated versatility of mast positioning on a rig that local shipwrights were less familiar with than the more popular Carolina schooner, as noted by Laurens in 1774? Was this mast step more common than the middle colony boat designs at that time? More comparative research on this mast step may be our most important construction clue yet.

Other design features observed on this boat that are not present on any other vessels we have studied in South Carolina, are three shallow notches on top of the keelson. These notches were probably used to support stanchions for an awning or tarpaulin to protect the cargo. This might suggest that the vessel was undocked or semi-decked.

There is a possibility that early navigation regulations may have influenced boat design in South Carolina. A clause in an Act of Trade that dealt with boat registration in the colonies specified it was only applicable to 'decked' ocean-going or coastal vessels, and not to "undecked" watercraft doing business in plantation waters. Instead, boats like the *Baker*, were given permits by local naval officers and made exempt from taking out bonds. This may have led to a proliferation of building undecked plantation boats with designs and hull lines that would not be construed as sea-going.

Historical records reveal that there were often differences in opinion by authorities about what constituted a "decked" and a "sea-going" vessel. Breaches in Navigation Acts occurred frequently in unwatched rivers and sounds. Under the cover of darkness small craft could land and load barrels onto ships and secret hiding places along the shoreline. As part of a class of vessels that did not require formal registration, these undecked smallcraft had much more leeway in illegal trading activities.

Henry Laurens was a successful merchant, but his frustrations with navigation regulations are obvious in his papers. As the colony started to break the economic umbilical

with England and tensions grew, he increasingly became a target of the officials. It would seem likely that he might build a boat in such way that it could easily avoid the stifling laws.

Our research into the identity of the boat continues as more of the later Laurens documents become available through the USC History Department.

Author's Note: See our next newsletter for the Mepkin shipwreck site plan, hull reconstruction, and research conclusions. Many thanks to all those who helped with this project including volunteers Doug Boehme, George Pledger, Rusty Clark, Sue Vezeau, Charleston Scuba Staff, Gunter Weber for helping with photography and video footage, and Lou Edens for providing luxurious housing.