

THE PIMLICO SHIPWRECK PROJECT (PART I)

By Lynn Harris

In October 1999, the Underwater Archaeology Division worked on a large shipwreck site in the West Branch of the Cooper River. The project was funded through an Archaeological Research Trust award. The site is located opposite the houses of Pimlico development and has been named the "*Pimlico Shipwreck*" by our staff. This wreck, reported to SCIAA by Jimmy Moss, a hobby diver from Abbeville, was first recorded by SCIAA staff in 1993 and assigned the site number 38BK62. The vessel lies directly off a small island near the west bank of the river in 25 to 30 feet of water. The timbers are embedded in a sandy substrate with the bow facing towards the island shore. The ship lists to port and the starboard side is visibly more intact.

Strong tidal currents in this river bend made working on the site a real challenge at times. As student intern, Sue Kane exclaimed as she surfaced, "it is like diving in a horrible hurricane!" Ronnie Rogers from the Georgia Historic Preservation Office and Maria Jacobsen from the *Hunley* Research Center also joined us for a few days to gain low visibility, tidal working experience and were a great help on the project. "I really can't believe you actually work in the river," said Maria after her first dive. Two dives later she filled her underwater slate with measurements and remarked that the visibility that day was GOOD—three feet at least!

The large dimensions of the vessel and robust scantlings, such as frames and planking, suggest that the owner may have intended for the vessel to operate offshore rather than on inland waterways. In construction, it contrasts to other South Carolina vessels such as *Browns Ferry Vessel* (38GE57), *Mepkin Abbey* (38BK48), or the *Malcolm Boat* (38CH803). It has greater similarity to the *Freeda Wyley* (38HR301), an offshore lumber carrier, wrecked at Myrtle Beach. The other possibility is that it is an ocean-going vessel, for commerce or even warfare, sailing upstream to the "freshes" as a protective measure to prevent the marine organisms that attacked the bottoms of wooden ships in salt water.

When we arrived on the site at the start of the project only the frame tips were visible. The first task was to attach numbered tags to all the visible timbers. The next step was to excavate the wreck using underwater dredges. We decided to expose the entire length of the vessel only along the starboard side. The extent of the site was 19 meters in (62 feet, 4 inches) and we tagged 55 frames. Dredging operations revealed other features such as a stempost, sternpost, knees, and cant frames (Figure 1). One of the most interesting construction features were two large "saddle" maststeps designed to straddle the keel. This type of step is more typically used for larger offshore or coastal vessels. One maststep is located very close to the bow area, the other, almost in the middle of the vessel. This suggests that the vessel may have been rigged as a schooner, one of the most popularly-built vessels in South Carolina. Wood samples from the wreck have been sent to the Center for Archaeological Investigation at Southern Illinois University for analysis, and the results should yield information about where the vessel was constructed.

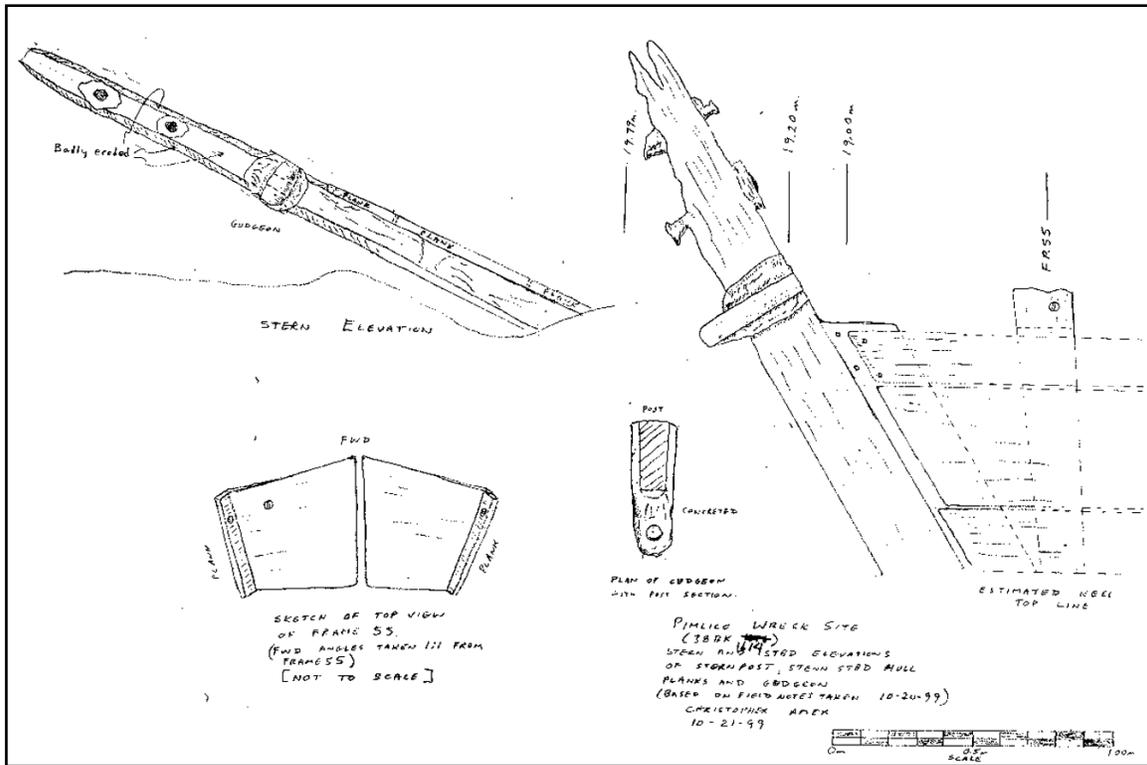


Figure 1: Sketch drawing of stern section of Pimlico Wreck (drawn by Christopher Amer).

Unfortunately, Hurricane Floyd destroyed the relatively good visibility in the last week. We had to postpone our videography and photography recording of the site for next year. (See the next issue of *Legacy* for Part II of the Pimlico project to learn more about the ship.)