

South Carolina's First Underwater Trail is Open!

By Lynn Harris

On Thursday morning, October 29, Dr. Bruce Rippeteau and Lynn Harris officially opened the Cooper River Underwater Heritage Trail with a ribbon cutting ceremony. SCIAA staff and sport divers who had helped with the trail construction spent the rest of the day conducting a final check of the mooring buoys, underwater monuments, and guidelines leading to the sites. Six sites are included on the trail:



Figure 1: Bruce Rippeteau, Lynn Harris, and Sergio Smith, cut the ribbon at the opening of the Cooper River Underwater Heritage Trail (SCIAA photo).

Strawberry Shipwreck

During an expedition to chase the British out of Moncks Corner during the summer of 1781, Colonel Wade Hampton and his men, arrived at Strawberry Ferry on their way upriver. They found four vessels loaded with military supplies for the British and promptly burnt them. The Strawberry shipwreck displays evidence of burning on the timbers, and artifacts of British military origin are said to have been recovered by sport divers in the 1970s. Small flat-headed copper sheathing tacks are embedded in outer hull planking in the starboard stern area and the stempost at the bow. Although the sheathing is missing, divers who visited the site in previous years report the presence of lead sheathing displaying the broad arrow, indicating that it once belonged to British Admiralty. In addition, the vessel also had copper plates under the lead sheathing.

Strawberry Ferry Landing

Strawberry Ferry was established in 1705 on the western branch of the Cooper River. It was associated with the settlement of Childsbury. Like other colonial frontier towns, Childsbury's strategic location on the inland water route was vitally important to the region's transportation infrastructure and economy. The Ferry Landing brick rubble extends 20 yards out from the riverbank about 50 feet from the shipwreck. At low tide floor support rubble with stake and puncheon side support boards are visible. The beams have cut-outs for cross members. The brick floor is mixed with rubble and sand.

Pimlico Shipwreck

The large dimensions of this vessel and the robust scantlings, such as frames and planking, suggest that it was intended for offshore operation rather than on inland waterways. There is a possibility that it was used for the lumber trade, commerce, or even warfare. It may have sailed upstream to the "freshes" (freshwater zone in tidal rivers) as a measure to rid the vessel of marine organisms that attacked the bottoms of wooden ships in salt water. Alternatively, it may have been seeking shelter upriver during a hurricane.

Pimlico Barge

The Pimlico barge lies on a marl and sandy substrate. This barge is well preserved and divers have commented that it feels like being inside a giant bathtub. It has an overall length of 39 feet and beam of 15 feet. The planked sides are 3 feet high. The presence of towing rings suggest that the barge, or a train of barges, may have been pulled behind a steamboat to carry additional cargo or supplies. A very large catfish has been observed in the space beneath the barge and the bottom. Don't be frightened by the two eyes peering back at you. He's, or she, is fat and complacent!

Mepkin Boat

The vessel was designed to carry a heavy cargo, probably between the plantation and the harbor, and perhaps even offshore. Her last cargo appears to be cut lumber, possibly cypress shingles. The wreck lies in proximity to former Mepkin plantation, owned by the illustrious Henry Laurens—a wealthy planter, merchant, and Revolutionary War leader. The records of his estate written in 1766 reveal that he owned a schooner called the Baker, valued at 2,600 pounds and crewed by four slaves. This boat plied between Mepkin plantation and his wharf in Charleston. This site is close to a monastery. Please be considerate of the residents who often wander down to the water's edge for meditation. Enjoy the sound of the ringing church bells and the view of the unusual anchor-shaped cross on the steeple.

Mepkin Dock

A submerged rectangular wooden structure, resembling a log cabin without a roof, is currently a home to many river fish in the bend river near Mepkin Abbey. It is an example of a typical wooden dock structure historically used by early riverside residences in South Carolina. A dock or wharf served as a platform to load and unload plantation boats. Interlocking palmetto logs were used to construct a crib which was weighted down and sunk in the river. The logs are attached by means of long wooden guide posts visible at the bottom of the cribbing structure. In addition to the cribbing forming the sides of the rectangle on the Mepkin dock, a layer of cribbing was added to the middle of the rectangle dividing it into two compartments. This provided extra stability and strength for the structure.



Figure 2: Attaching signage to mooring buoy block at the Mepkin Boat site (SCIAA photo).

Diving Advice

Underwater slates with the maps and history of each site will be sold through interested dive stores. Divers have the option of diving through a local dive store or charter business, or as individuals. It is recommended that they at least purchase the underwater maps. The best time to dive on these sites is during the incoming tide which counteracts the natural

outflow of the river thereby lessening the strength of the current. Consult local tide tables for times of tides. Generally, tides in the trail area run about three and a half hours behind the listed times for Charleston harbor. Divers should descend down the mooring line to the monument which is equipped with signage that identifies the dive site and sponsors. A guide line is attached on the monument that leads to the site. Please do not anchor on or near the wreck. Use the mooring buoy.

Diving on historic wooden wrecks requires careful personal and equipment control to avoid damaging these fragile structures. All gauges, hoses, and other gear should be situated as to avoid entanglement. Avoid pulling on the structure to move about the site. During periods of heavy current, divers should remain on the periphery of the site to lessen potentially adverse contact with the structure. When visiting each trail site, please take only photographs and memories and leave only bubbles.

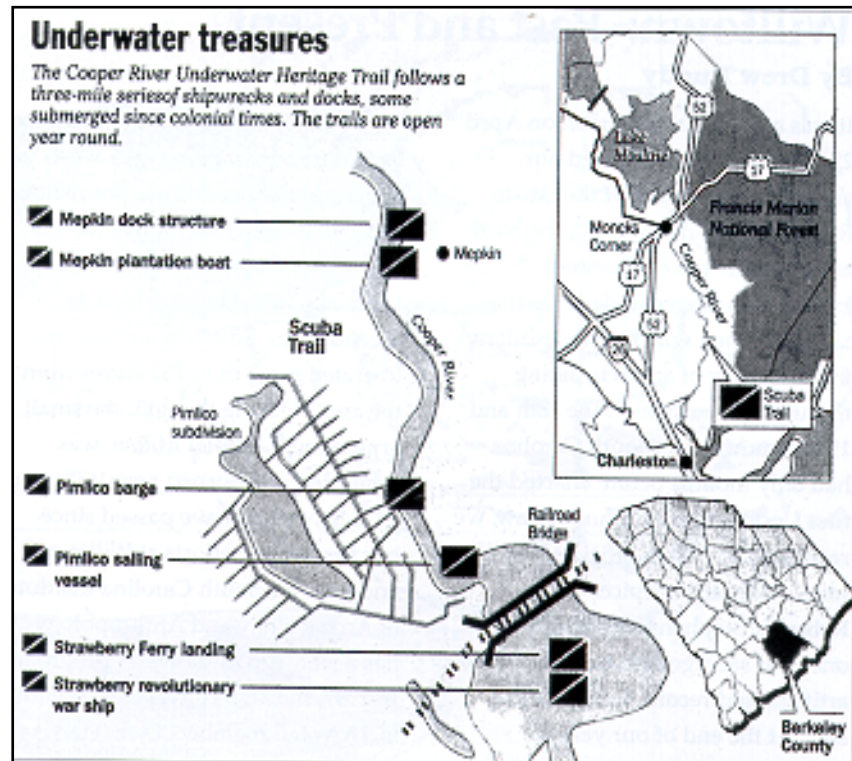


Figure 3: Map of the Cooper River Underwater Heritage Trail (Used with permission of the "The State").

To participate in an organized charter contact a local scuba diving store. To report any damage to the site or mooring system contact SCIAA at (843) 762-6105. Please help by clearing the weeds on the mooring line and wiping mud off the monument plaque.

Diving in South Carolina rivers is not for the inexperienced diver. Divers should use accepted safe diving practices, including the buddy system, the divers-down flag, and standard open water diving equipment, i.e., gloves and a sharp dive knife to cut monofilament line. Lights are also essential to illuminate these dark water dive sites. During the warmer months divers should be aware of the presence of alligators and snakes in the vicinity.

Many sport divers participated in the construction of this trail. Assistance was also provided by Hightower Construction, Berkeley County Public Works Department, the BCD Council of Governments, East Coast Dive Connection, and Charleston Scuba. This Underwater Diving Trail was sponsored in part by the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology of the University of South Carolina, the National Recreational Trails Program in cooperation with the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism, and the Federal Highway Administration of the US Department of Transportation.