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A Preliminary Historical and Archaeological Survey of the SS *Robert Martin* (1853)

Introduction

In 1989 a local diver, Miller Ingram, reported a wreck in the Pee Dee River near the town of Cheraw to the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology (SCIAA). Historical and archaeological evidence indicated that it was the site of the steamship, *Robert Martin*, wrecked when one of its boilers exploded in 1853. Staff archaeologists conducted a preliminary investigation of the site and an assessment of artifacts recovered by sport divers in proximity to the wreck. This project was directed at providing some insight into the construction of the vessel, the composition of the cargo, and the history of steamship trade on the Pee Dee River.

Steamboat Trade on the Pee Dee River

During pre-Civil War years the Pee Dee River was considered a very important inland travel inland route for steamboats. A local newspaper article comments.

The Pee Dee is considered the best navigable river in the two Carolinas, and although extremely serpentine, Steamboats have performed trips from this (Cheraw) to Georgetown in four days, a distance by water of 486 miles. This demonstrates what great advantages merchants and others in the interior may derive by making this the channel to forward their products to market, and to receive from Charleston or elsewhere, their merchandise. (*Cheraw Intelligencer [CI]*, 5 June 1823:3).

With the construction of the Carolina Central Railway between Charlotte and Wilmington after the Civil War, it was no longer necessary to ship supplies inland (*Cheraw Chronicle [CC]*, 4 September 1980, B:1).

Cheraw was the last inland stop for steam boats on the Pee Dee. The strategic location of this town enhanced its status as an important economic center for in-coming and out-going cargoes for settlements in both North and South Carolina. Not surprisingly Cheraw, rather than the larger port of Georgetown, monopolized steamboat revenue. Goods were shipped directly to and from Cheraw to Charleston, the latter being South Carolina's international port of entry, at the virtual exclusion of Georgetown. Most steamships were also built and owned by merchants in Cheraw or Charleston. Georgetown's failure to profit from steam boat trade was also due to some extent to an apparent lack of interest on the part of the local merchants and investors in operating Georgetown-based boats (Bridwell 1982:44).

Cargoes shipped from Cheraw consisted of agricultural products such as cotton, tobacco, corn, wheat, and oats. Much of this came from the Yadkin Valley in North Carolina (*CI*, 5 June 1823:3). Incoming cargo consisted predominantly of building supplies and hardware necessary for the growth of new settlements, in addition to luxury goods like liquor and fabrics. (Freight Record Log).

The SS *Robert Martin*: Construction

The SS *Robert Martin*, a 247 12/95 ton sidewheel steamer, with a length of 129 ft. 6 in. and a beam of 29 ft. 4 in. was built in 1849 in Charleston (NARS, Record Group 41, Permanent Enrollment #11, #12 and #14). Although the *Robert Martin* is described in local advertisements as having a "light draft," the vessel drew 7 ft. 2 in. This was quite surprising considering how far inland it travelled (*Charleston Mercury [CM]*, 16 November 1853:3). Newspaper reports also describe how most inland steamboat trips took place in the winter and spring after the rains when the river were fuller. The vessel is described as a cotton boat which ran freight between Charleston and Cheraw. Shortly after arriving at the landing in Cheraw on 19 November 1853, one of the boilers exploded, scattering wreckage, machinery, and bodies in the river and onto the river banks (*CM*, 23 November 1853:3; *Pee Dee Gazette [PDG]*, 23 November 1853:2).

Ingram located two structural sections of the wreckage and a drive gear. One section, partially embedded in the riverbank, consisted of part of the keelson several frames and the outer hull planking. Judging from the location of the chine on one intact frame, this is probably a bow section. It is unlikely to be an aft section. The documentary information on the construction of the vessel indicates that it had a rounded stern. Samples from timbers, including the keelson, indicate that the vessel was constructed with soft woods like pine and cypress. Red lead, serving as a sealant and an anti-foul, was found between the seams of the planking, and the vessel had lead sheathing. The other structural section was a piece of the decking, with 8 in. by 1/2 in. thick planking. *Robert Martin* had a flush deck with no galleries. Both the decking and the keelson timbers had metal fastenings.

The gear shaft, originally serving to connect a missing paddle wheel, was made of wood with reinforcing longitudinal strips of metal running between two metal bands. One band was octagonally shaped and provided an attachment area for the gear wheel spokes (Figure 1). Holes, 1 in. diameter, held bolts to wheel the reinforcing structure from slipping when the gear turned. This feature contrasts to that wheel shaft recorded on the SS *Bertrand* (Petsche ca. 1974:82) which had fitted keys. No evidence of steam machinery has been located yet, although part of the boiler and large chunks of coal were found scattered around the site. As the vessel was wrecked in an accessible location in proximity to Cheraw, it is probable that much of the machinery may have been salvaged at the time.

Site Mapping and Transformation Processes

The layout of the site was mapped using triangulation. In addition to plotting the locations of the structural wreckage, the relative locations of areas where concentrations of artifacts previously recovered by sport divers were recorded. The diver who reported the site to SCIAA was included in all phases of the project. This is one of the informal means of sport diver education in the state. One of the problems with the collecting/licensing program in South Carolina is that artifacts are frequently removed from shipwreck sites by sport divers resulting in the loss of valuable contextual information. This issue is addressed in the proposed 1991 amendments to the state's underwater antiquities legislation.

Although the Pee Dee River is associated with high energy fluvial processes, it became evident during the mapping operation that there was a distinct distribution pattern for groupings of similar artifact types such as galley items, cargo items, and personal items. This suggests that these artifacts were in situ. A similar transformation process is described on the site report on the CSS *Chattahoochee* (Watts et al., 1990:38-39). Most artifacts on the *Robert Martin* site were buried or eroding from a river bank where thick deposits of mud and silt act as a protective buffer. Even small buttons and coins likely to be washed away or distributed around the site were found in discrete areas.

Cargo Composition

Artifacts from the site fall within the correct time period for the *Robert Martin* (Table 1). Early date ranges were associated with ceramic assemblage. Saltglazed stonewares comprised the highest percentage of the wares found on the site. Other ceramics recovered were earthenware, polychrome creamware, and blue and white transfer whiteware. Although earthenware, stoneware, and creamware are usually associated with 18th-century or early 19th-century sites, these wares have been found on several other late 19th-century shipwreck sites in South Carolina, particularly the blockade runners. It is possible that Europe might have been shipping out-of-date warehouse ceramics to the colonies, or alternatively it could extend the dates of manufacture of these wares up until as late as the 1860s (Stanley 1990, pers. comm.).

Both U.S. and Spanish coins are included in the collection and date to the latter part of the 18th and early part of the 19th century. Some of the Spanish coins had holes drilled through them and were probably used as jewelry. Other more personal items were a tiny keepsake watch key and a urethral syringe. Various types of 19th-century buttons were found on the site, many with decorative floral designs, a popular Victorian fashion in Europe during that time period.

The hardware carried aboard the vessel included period locks, nails, and furniture parts and large quantities of brick. Although the locks and furniture parts were imported judging from the patent marks, it is likely that bricks were made locally in South Carolina.

Conclusion

The preliminary survey of the SS *Robert Martin* provided a small, but useful, amount of information on the riverine steam boat trade. To date, no archaeological research has been conducted on steam boats or steam boat commerce in South Carolina. As this type of vessel played an important role in the state during the 19th century, this will provide important comparative data for future projects.

Acknowledgments

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TABLE 1

DATE RANGES FOR ARTIFACTS FROM THE SS *ROBERT MARTIN*

| ARTIFACT TYPE | DATE RANGE | NUMBER |
|----------------------------------|-------------|----------------|
| Earthenware | 1720-1820 | 1 |
| Stoneware | 1690-1775 | 12 |
| Creamware | 1775-1840 | 3 |
| Whiteware | 1820-1900 | 4 |
| CROCKERY | | |
| Three-legged iron pots | 1775-1900 | 3 |
| CUTLERY | | |
| Fork handle | 1800's | 1 |
| PIPES | | |
| Kaoline ribbed bowl | 1820-1900 | 1 |
| Kaoline pillar moulded bowl | 1800-1830 | 1 |
| BUTTONS | | |
| Stamped brass, sunken panel post | 1830 | 5 |
| Brass, soldered eye | 1815-1830 | 34 |
| Spun back, brass wire eye | 1760-1785 | 4 |
| HARDWARE | | |
| Cut nails | 1850-1830 | 16 |
| Furniture tacks | 1800's | 1 |
| Padlocks | 1800-1900 | 8 |
| COINS | | |
| Spanish (Zacatecas mint) | 1808-1833 | 1 |
| Spanish (Guatemala mint) | 1786-1821 | 1 |
| Spanish (Guatemala mint) | 1759-1788 | 1 |
| US one cent | 1817 | 1 |
| US one cent | 1830 | 1 |
| BRICKS | -mid 1800's | approximate 50 |

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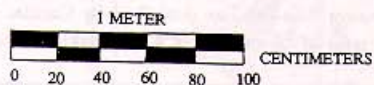
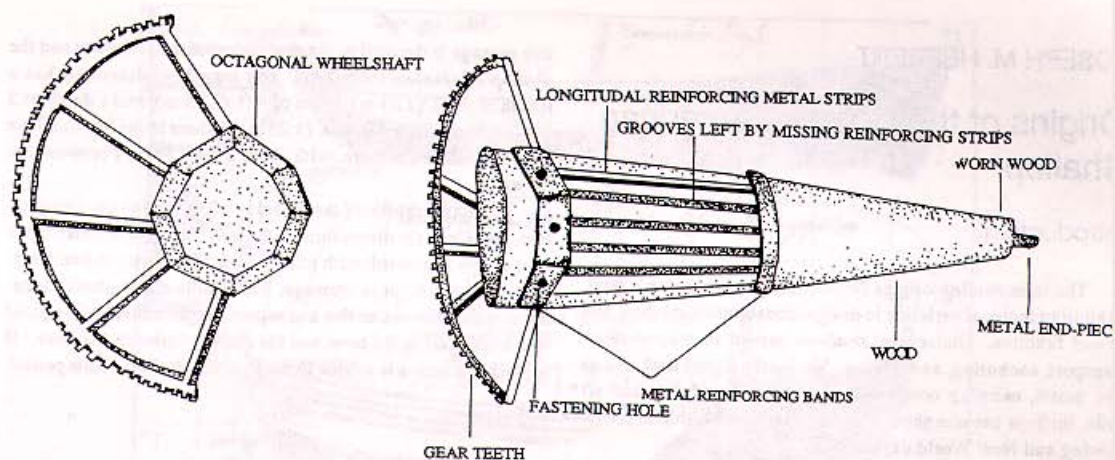


FIGURE 1. Drive Gear.

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NATIONAL ARCHIVES RECORD SERIES

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FREIGHT RECORD LOG

Freight Record Log, 1852-1853, Cheraw Lyceum.

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