

Wooden Rudder Displayed at Museum

By David Quick, Of The (Charleston) *Post and Courier* staff

EDITOR'S NOTE: The above article ran in the "This Week in East Cooper" section of The (Charleston) Post and Courier for Thursday, November 28, 1996. We also do not condone the intentional retrieval of underwater archaeological material without proper permits.

A nearly whole rudder—from a ship circa late 1700s to 1850—has been preserved in a sugar-and-Lysol concoction for two months and is now on display at the Shem Creek Maritime Museum. The effort took cooperation from a variety of individuals, businesses and the S. C. Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology.

Last August, after two shrimp boat nets had been torn by the rudder, Shem Creek shrimp boat Capt. Junior Magwood vowed to pull in the pesky artifact, located at Dynamite Hole on the south side of the jetties off the Morris Island beach. Magwood pulled the 3,000-pound rudder onto his shrimp boat and hauled it to Salmon's Dredging Corp. in Charleston, where the rudder



Figure 1: Lynn Harris, Jay Devenney, and Lou Edens examine the rudder (Photo by David Quick, Post and Courier).

was hoisted over to land. Magwood called Jamie Edens, whose mother owns the Shem Creek Maritime Museum, and told him he “caught a schooner rudder and that my mama would like it.”

Eden’s mother, Lou, was vacationing in the Cayman Islands at the time, but Jamie knew his mother would be interested in the find. Jay Devenny, a boat builder with his workshop at the maritime museum, told Jamie Edens he remembered seeing a PBS program on preserving old wooden artifacts found underwater but could not recall the formula. They called Lynn Harris, an underwater archaeologist with the state’s archaeology institute, who told them about two methods to preserve the wood: the expensive method using a polyethylene glycol solution or the cheaper method using a solution of sugar, Lysol disinfectant and Dursban insecticide. They chose the cheaper method.

“Thank the Lord,” Lou Edens chimed in as the story was recalled last week. Jamie Edens and Devenny bought the ingredients—which raised some eyebrows at a local Piggly Wiggly. Edens recalled when they bought all the available bags of sugar at the store, some employees were “convinced we were starting up a sour mash still.” But they needed so much sugar—860 pounds in all—that they eventually ended up calling a sugar distributor to deliver a truckload. Shortly thereafter, Lou Edens returned from vacation, got her bill for sugar, and what Jamie called “her birthday present . . . all wrapped up.” Archaeologist Harris kept tabs on the rudder preservation effort, making periodic visits to make sure it was progressing.

After eight weeks of soaking in sugar, Lysol and Dursban, the rudder was put in a water and bleach formula, and after that, kept under plastic and allowed to dry slowly. Last week, the rudder was declared preserved and moved underneath the museum by employees of the Shem Creek Marina.

Based on clues from the materials used for the rudder, Harris said it was from a ship built sometime after the Revolutionary War to the 1850s. Sheathing on the rudder indicated that it was post-Revolutionary War, whereas the use of copper shows that it probably was prior to the 1850s when a cheaper, muntz metal alloy became widely used. Harris said finding a rudder intact is unusual and that she was delighted in the cooperative effort to save it. Because the state has a limited budget as well as limited storage facilities for such artifacts, Harris said, private individuals can help preserve South Carolina’s heritage by taking on efforts such as this.

Harris has written a research paper called “Archaeological Resources in Mt. Pleasant,” in which she documents significant underwater archaeological resources such as ships lost during the Revolutionary War and Civil War naval battles in and near Charleston Harbor.

While hobby divers are required by state law to report artifacts found underwater, Harris said, she encourages anybody who finds something of suspected significance to call the local office at 762-6105. Lou Edens commends Capt. Magwood for taking time to save the rudder, which remains his property—technically on loan to the museum. “He went to a lot of trouble to save it. Not only did he put it on his boat, but he spent a good part of his day getting it and bringing it to land,” she said.