



Archaeologists excavate suspected War of 1812 vessel

Ship was scuttled in Patuxent to keep it out of British hands



Water, debris and possibly artifacts are pumped from the Patuxent River. This is the last day for this year that archaeologists are working on the site to a shipwreck in the Patuxent River. They believe they have recovered parts of the Scorpion, a block sloop in the command of Joshua Barney, that was scuttled and burned as the British approached during the War of 1812. (Kim Hairston, Baltimore Sun / August 6, 2010)

By Michael Dresser, The Baltimore Sun

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For months in the spring and summer of 1814, Commodore Joshua Barney and his ragtag flotilla of gunboats had harassed the mighty British navy on the [Chesapeake](#) Bay and its tributaries. But

outnumbered and outgunned, Barney and his miniature fleet were bottled up in the Patuxent River with no escape and enemy forces approaching.

So following orders from Washington, Barney's men scuttled the estimated 17 vessels — including his flagship, the USS Scorpion — near a place known as Pig Point.

Almost 200 years later, a team of archaeologists have been combing the bottom of a stretch of the river separating Prince George's and Anne Arundel counties in search of artifacts from what they believe is the wreckage of the Scorpion.

With a storm approaching, Susan Langley emerged from the murky waters of the Patuxent on a recent afternoon last week and climbed aboard a cluttered barge floating above the presumed resting place of the Scorpion.

"Visibility is a pretty grim right now," the chief archaeologist for the Maryland Historical Trust reported as she and her colleagues from the historical trust, the State Highway Administration and the Navy neared the end of three weeks of underwater excavation efforts. The team wrapped up Monday but hopes to be back next year to resume the mission to uncover a long-buried piece of Maryland's history in time for the bicentennial of the War of 1812 campaign that ended in the successful defense of Baltimore.

Archaeologists have suspected the presence of Barney's flagship in this spot since 1980, when Nautical Archaeological Associates researchers Donald Shomette and Ralph Eshelman performed a magnetometer survey of the river bottom and found artifacts they believed came from the Scorpion. But lacking the funds and facilities to preserve what they might uncover, they decided to conserve the wreck in place — leaving its excavation for another time.

That time didn't come until this year — and only in a limited way.

"It's all about the money," said Julie Schablitsky, chief archaeologist for the highway administration, which is involved because it is Maryland's center of expertise in archaeology. (Federal and state laws require the agency to protect historical resources that might be in the way of road projects.) Much of the funding for the project comes from federal transportation programs administered by the state.

Ship Excavation

A team of divers and archeologists have just wrapped up work at the site of what is believed to be the wreckage of the U.S.S. Scorpion, scuttled in 1814.



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Schablitsky said the state and federal governments were able to put together \$200,000 to finance this summer's explorations, which were intended to pinpoint the dimensions of the wreckage to allow its excavation in future years.

"It truly is a literal time capsule, and 200 years would be a perfect time to open this time capsule," Schablitsky said. "This is a prime opportunity to garner support and enthusiasm for what we believe will be a very symbolic object to the entire state of Maryland."

The events that put the Scorpion on the bottom of the Patuxent are part of a heroic but little-known chapter in American history involving an all-but-forgotten hero of the early Navy.

Barney, born near what is now [Dundalk](#), was a veteran of the Revolutionary War who re-entered naval service after war with [Britain](#) broke out in 1812. The summer of 1814 found him in command of the Chesapeake flotilla, a makeshift fleet of shallow-draft barges that did a surprisingly effective job of delaying and annoying the British. Barney's flagship was the estimated 50-foot Scorpion, with two long guns and two carronades.

In 1814, the British dispatched a fleet and army to the Chesapeake Bay region, where they raided coastal settlements. Barney's ships were forced to flee to the sanctuary of the shallow St. Leonard Creek near the [mouth](#) of the Patuxent, where British warships could not pursue them.

Barney's sailors and a detachment of Marines staged a breakout at the Battle of St. Leonard Creek that allowed the flotilla to reach the Patuxent. Barney took his fleet as far north as he could, to a spot near present-day Waysons Corner.

After the fleet was scuttled, Barney led his sailors and Marines overland to join [the Army](#) at Bladensburg, where U.S. forces were routed Aug. 26 despite the stubborn stand made by his men. Barney was badly wounded and taken prisoner in the battle, which preceded the British capture of Washington.

Barney died in 1818, possibly as a result of his wounds.

Only now, said Bill Pencek, executive director of Maryland's War of 1812 Bicentennial Commission, through the excavation is Barney getting his due.

"It's very exciting because it brings attention to the most important and inspirational figures of America's forgotten war, Joshua Barney," Pencek said.

Rodney Little, director of the historical trust, said the Scorpion — if that is in fact what it is — could turn out to be the best-preserved wooden ship ever found in Maryland waters. He said the vessel was sunk quickly — without much opportunity to remove objects that would now be valued artifacts — and silted over within a few years by a series of storms. The silt, he said, has acted as a preservative.

"What we have here is a vessel that appears not to have collapsed. Its structural integrity appears to be reasonably intact," he said. Little said the funding for future work isn't 100 percent certain but added that

the team has "fairly strong" commitments of about \$4 million — enough to pay for most of the work being planned right now.

Schablitsky said the investment in archeology could pay off by generating tourism as people visit the excavation site.

To excavate the wreck, Schablitsky said, the team will need to install a device known as a coffer dam, which would section off part of the roughly 10-foot-deep river and pump out the water to expose the bottom. Her hope is that by 2012, the team will be able to erect viewing platforms from which visitors can observe the work being done within the confines of the coffer dam.

For now, Schablitsky said, there are no plans to raise the ship because the money is not available to conserve it — a venture she estimated would cost \$7 million. Like Shomette and Eshelman before them, the Scorpion team may have to recover what they can and move on.

"Sometimes you have to leave something for the future," she said.

michael.dresser@baltsun.com



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Kate Morrard, conservator, Naval History and Heritage Command, holds a piece of charred timber believed to have come from the Scorpion, a warship from the War of 1812.