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Sunken ship may contain piece of Bladensburg history

Archeologists work to unearth piece of War of 1812 battle

by Daniel Leaderman | Staff Writer

A piece of Bladensburg history may rise again after lying at the bottom of the Patuxent River for two hundred years.

Over the next two years, archeologists will work near Upper Marlboro to excavate the wreck of a ship believed to be the USS Scorpion, part of an American flotilla that clashed with the British Navy just prior to the Battle of Bladensburg in the War of 1812, to coincide with the war's upcoming bicentennial.

"It represents a time capsule of what a War of 1812 ship would have looked like," said Richard Ervin, an archeologist with the State Highway Administration, which is conducting the excavation in partnership with the Navy and the Maryland Historical Trust.

The excavation of the Scorpion and its connection to the Battle of Bladensburg "will help mark Bladensburg as an important part of American history," said Bladensburg Town Clerk Pat McAuley, who serves on a task force planning the commemoration with other Port Towns residents and officials. "We're working on making [it] a real draw for visitors."

Uncovering relics like the Scorpion are essential to generating interest in the area and its history, said Sadara Barrow, executive director of the Port Towns Community Development Corp.

The Scorpion was one of 18 ships in a flotilla commanded by Commodore Joshua Barney, which came face-to-face with the British Navy on June 1, 1814. After the British ships trapped the



*Photo from the State Highway Administration
U.S. Navy archeologist Robert Neyland enters the Patuxent River to examine a wreck believed to be that of the USS Scorpion, a ship that was sunk before The Battle of Bladensburg.*

flotilla in the Patuxent, Barney ordered his men to burn the ships to prevent their capture, Ervin said.

"All would have had guns on them ... that would have been valuable to the British Navy," Ervin said.

Barney and his men then marched to Bladensburg, where American forces were unable to defeat the British before the burning of Washington, D.C., later that summer.

Ervin and his fellow archaeologists completed the first stage of the excavation in August, which involved removing layers of sediment and using magnetic equipment to determine the location and shape of the wreck, which lies about six feet beneath the surface of the river, Ervin said.

This summer's initial phase of the project cost about \$230,000, and was paid for primarily by the Navy and a grant from the federal Transportation Enhancement Program, according to the State Highway Administration. The overall cost of the project could run up to \$4 million, but sources of funding have yet to be determined.

McAuley said Barney's role in the conflict is expected to be a significant part the commemoration of the battle.

The task force ultimately hopes to set up a visitor's center with a selection of dioramas and artifacts as well as a monument to Barney and his men, completing as much as possible during the two-and-a-half-year bicentennial period from mid-2012 to early 2015.

The defeat at Bladensburg proved an important lesson for American forces before their eventual victory over the British in Baltimore, said Edward Day, director of the Riversdale House Museum in Riverdale Park.

"We were trying to stop these seasoned British army regulars and we were trying to fight them with amateur militiamen ... it just didn't work," he said. "They'd learned their lessons when they went back up to Baltimore."

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