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## The Patuxent's Hidden Treasure

Archaeologists Hope to Excavate Shipwreck That Dates to War of 1812

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Aboard a pontoon boat chugging past the marshland of Maryland's upper Patuxent River on a recent Saturday, Ralph Eshelman pointed to the spot where the muddy brown water hides a shipwreck nearly two centuries old, part of the American flotilla that defended the Chesapeake Bay when the British burned Washington during the War of 1812.

Nearly 30 years ago, Eshelman helped direct a team of marine researchers who discovered the wreck, one of the war's most significant artifacts.

After a limited, month-long excavation of the site east of Upper Marlboro in 1980, the wreck was reburied under four feet of mud and sediment to protect it from decay. The hope was that archaeologists with more funding could one day return to excavate the 75-foot vessel, tentatively identified as the Scorpion, flagship of Commodore Joshua Barney's Chesapeake Flotilla. Now, supporters are hoping the time is ripe.

The Navy, which still owns the flotilla, is considering whether to excavate the site and possibly raise the vessel as part of its plans to commemorate the bicentennial of the War of 1812.

"It's on the agenda to be discussed," said Capt. Patrick Burns, director of Navy commemorations, who is leading the Navy's plans for remembering the war with a three-year-long series of events beginning in 2012. "There are a lot of ideas being bantered about."

No funding has yet been allotted, but Navy archaeologists have done preliminary site work and are intrigued by what might be found.

"It's an important part of history," said Robert Neyland, head of the Navy's Underwater Archaeology Branch at the Naval History and Heritage Command at the Washington Navy Yard.

In July, archaeologists with the office surveyed the site with a magnetometer and thought they identified the wreck's exact location. "We found a strong magnetic anomaly where the site is presumed to be," said underwater archaeologist Alexis Catsambis.

The vessel, which is under about five feet of water, "very well could be intact," added George Schwarz, a Navy archaeologist who participated in the survey. "There's a lot of the wreck that could be buried."

If funding can be found, archaeologists might build a coffer dam around the site, which would allow water to be pumped out and excavation to be done in a dry environment, said Neyland, who directed the recovery of the Confederate submarine Hunley from South Carolina's Charleston Harbor in 2000.

Marine researchers think the nearby marshland may hold other flotilla boats, which were sunk to avoid British capture but are likely no longer in the Patuxent because of changes in the river's course over the years.

"It's very likely that more vessels are buried under marsh like this, and if so, their preservation could be spectacular," Eshelman, co-author of a forthcoming guide to the War of 1812 in the Chesapeake, said during a tour of the site Sept. 5.

In the summer of 1813, Barney, a Revolutionary War naval hero, proposed building a flotilla of shallow-draft gunboats and barges that could harass the British, whose far-larger warships controlled the Chesapeake Bay and who were raiding plantations and small towns at will. After being assembled in Baltimore, the flotilla set sail in the spring of 1814, clashing with the British at St. Leonard's Creek in June and escaping up the Patuxent.

The British advanced up the Patuxent in August 1814 and landed an invasion force, trapping Barney's flotilla in the river's upper reaches. Under orders from the Secretary of the Navy, Barney scuttled the fleet with rigged explosives just ahead of the British. He escaped with most of his men and cannons to defend Washington, and they played a heroic but ultimately futile role in trying to stop the British, who captured the city and burned the Capitol, the White House and almost all other government buildings.

"Not only did an army of invasion lay their boots on American soil, they burned our capital, and this fleet was trying to stop it," said Marine archaeologist Donald G. Shomette, author of "Flotilla," a history of the Patuxent naval campaign. Shomette also helped lead the flotilla search three decades ago. "Here we have the presumed flagship 16 miles from the White House, in shallow water. In terms of historical value, this is extremely significant."

"We think we have the Holy Grail," said J. Rodney Little, chief historical preservation officer for the state of Maryland, which wants to partner with the federal government to assess the site.

This month, the Department of Defense Legacy Resource Management Program turned down the state's request for about \$300,000, leaving the state and the archaeologists to hope that the Navy or another federal agency will support the project.

The cost of the project would depend largely on its scale, with an attempt to raise the entire vessel far costlier than a more limited excavation. Moreover, the price of conserving what is raised would likely be significantly more than the excavation, so without guaranteed funding, the flotilla should be left alone, archaeologists said.

The 1980 excavation raised more than 150 artifacts, many of them well-preserved and unique. Some of the pieces, including medical equipment and a cook's tin grog cup, point to the vessel being the flagship.

After the artifacts were preserved, most were kept at the Calvert Marine Museum in Solomons, Md., which co-sponsored the search. Last year, asserting ownership, the Navy took possession of most of the pieces, leaving about 30 on loan with the museum.

At the Navy's underwater archaeology laboratory at the Navy Yard last week, Schwarz and Catsambis displayed the artifacts, many of them pieces of everyday shipboard life often not recorded in history books: the tools the flotilla men used, buttons from their clothes and pharmaceutical vials that once held their medicine.

"What's interesting about pieces like this is that there's a human element to it," Schwarz said. "It gets you thinking."

By all indications, they said, the artifacts raised nearly 30 years ago represent only a small fraction of what lies in the Patuxent mud.