

Along The Robeson Trail

by Dr. Stan Knick, Director, UNCP Native American Resource Center

Now that we have looked at some of the laws which protect archaeological resources (thus protecting the heritage of the past) on dry land, it is time to look underwater. First, what kinds of archaeological resources could be underwater?

When we think of underwater archaeology, we almost automatically envision shipwrecks with ancient treasures of pirate's gold and silver. A few such vessels have indeed been documented. More often, the materials recovered by underwater archaeologists are not nearly so romantic and economically rewarding.

Most of the artifacts brought up from the deep are redeemable only in terms of the information they impart about the past. Among other things, they tell us about patterns of trade, cultural and technological developments, and the everyday lives of merchants, sailors and ordinary men and women. But there is more involved in underwater archaeology than the things found on shipwrecks.

Underwater archaeologists working in North Carolina's lakes and rivers have recovered numerous dugout canoes made by Native Americans centuries before Columbus. For example, the canoe found in 1985 in the Lumbee River was made approximately 1,000 years

ago (it is now housed here in the Native American Resource Center). Ancient Native Americans also built fishing weirs of stone in many rivers, some of which have been documented by underwater archaeologists. Some other prehistoric archaeological sites are now underwater due to changing sea level, or due to flooding of some areas by man-made lakes.

There are also other kinds of underwater historic resources. In North Carolina there are many collapsed piers, landings and docks along the waterways. There are also remains of water-powered grinding mills, locks and bridges. Occasionally other items are found underwater as well, such as the historic cannon recovered from the Roanoke River.

How are these and other underwater archaeological resources protected from looting and destruction? One way is by the provisions of the Abandoned Shipwreck Act (Public Law 100-298). This federal law claims title to virtually all shipwrecks in United States waters, although the U. S. government turns the ownership of most shipwrecks over to the appropriate State government for protection of the resources.

North Carolina also has its own law concerning underwater archaeological resources. It is called Salvage of Abandoned Shipwrecks and

Other Underwater Archaeological Sites (N. C. General Statutes, Chapter 121, Article 3). This law states that all shipwrecks, vessels, cargoes and other underwater archaeological artifacts that have been abandoned for more than ten years in navigable waters belong to the State.

This means that any artifact more than ten years old which is found in the State's larger streams, rivers, lakes and ocean waters (within three miles of the Atlantic's extreme low watermark) is the property of the State. Most people are not aware that it is illegal to collect or disturb underwater archaeological resources in North Carolina without a permit approved by the Underwater Archaeology Unit of the Office of State Archaeology (a branch of the State Historic Preservation Office, Department of Cultural Resources).

All of the laws concerning underwater archaeological resources, and all of the efforts of professional archaeologists who conduct underwater research, are aimed at preserving for all of us the human record of the past.

For more information, visit the Native American Resource Center in historic Old Main Building, on the campus of The University of North Carolina at Pembroke (our Internet address is www.uncp.edu/nativemuseum).

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5/18

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