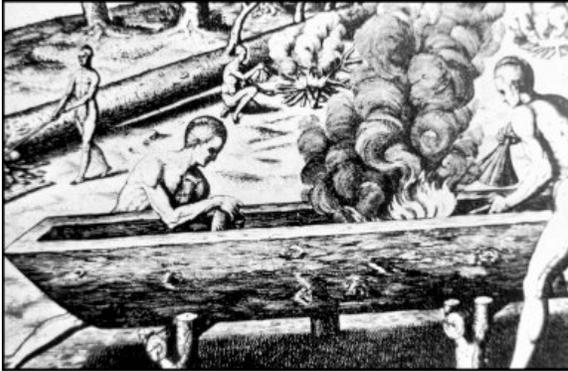


## Underwater Archaeology — A Link to the Past

Throughout the centuries the people of North Carolina have lived in close contact with the waters of the state. Before the arrival of Europeans the Indian inhabitants relied upon



the rivers and sounds as a source of food, and a means of transportation and trade. The Indians built wooden dugout canoes and developed a variety of ways to catch fish. During the winter many tribes would camp along the coastal sounds living off the readily available supply of oysters and other shellfish.

Early European settlers used these same avenues of water as a means to explore and settle the interior of the state. Gradually settlements grew to port towns such as Edenton, Bath, New Bern, Beaufort, Brunswick, and Wilmington. In addition, smaller communities and plantations had their own landings along the waterways. Down these rivers traveled the products of the new land: lumber, naval stores, tobacco and cotton. In exchange, ships from the other colonies, the West Indies and Europe brought to the major ports manufactured goods and other materials needed by the colonists.

During the nineteenth century paddlewheel steamboats came into use on the rivers of the state. Carrying passengers and cargo, often with a barge in tow, the steamers made their way well into the interior of the state on major rivers and their tributaries such as the Cape Fear, the Neuse, the Tar, the Roanoke, and the Chowan. With the coming of the twentieth century, railroads and highways gradually replaced the rivers and sounds as a means of transporting goods. Today Wilmington and Morehead City serve as the state's major overseas shipping ports.



There is abundant evidence of North Carolina's rich maritime heritage buried in the mud and sediments throughout the waterways of the state. In the waters adjacent to the former camps, villages, settlements, and landings underwater archaeologists have located and studied deposits of artifacts lost, discarded or abandoned. Often times, due to modern development on land, these underwater sites preserve the only evidence of the early activities of these past people.

In addition, numerous shipwrecks and abandoned vessels have been located and studied. These include everything from dugout canoes, ferries, and fishing boats to coastal schooners and river steamboats. These vessels from the past serve to trace the

development and evolution of ships used in North Carolina waters as man's needs and technology changes over the years.

Coupled with this active maritime heritage, the unique and hazardous geography of the North Carolina coast has earned it the reputation as "Graveyard of the Atlantic". Stretching eastward into the Atlantic, the Outer Banks of North Carolina form a series of treacherous capes, shoals, and inlets along the western edge of the cold Labrador and warm Gulf Stream currents. Historical sources indicate that from the earliest period of European exploration to the present over 1,000 vessels have been lost off the North Carolina coast. Sometimes portions of these vessels wash up or are uncovered along the ocean beaches. By carefully measuring and photographing these vessel remains the archaeologist can learn a great deal about how ships were designed and built in the past. Much of this information on ships' construction is not available in historical records or may have never been recorded by the builder in the first place. Thus these shipwreck sites, both along the coast and in the sounds and rivers, represent a vast storehouse of information not to be found elsewhere.

Naval warfare in the waters of the state has also left a legacy of shipwrecks and other underwater archaeological sites. This is particularly true of the Civil War. Along the southeastern coast of North Carolina underwater archaeologists have investigated the remains of 29 Civil War period shipwrecks. Most of these wrecks were blockade-runners attempting to evade the Union ships and enter the Cape Fear River. Wilmington, situated 20 miles up the river, served as the last major Confederate port open to blockade runners and the valuable cargoes they brought to the south. In addition to the blockade-runners, divers have located the remains of four Union warships and two Confederate gunboats.

In the central and northern coastal areas other reminders of the Civil War have been found. In 1977 a survey and recovery project was conducted in Roanoke River adjacent to Fort Branch, a Confederate earthwork fortification near Hamilton, North Carolina. The project resulted in the recovery from the river of four cannon and hundreds of smaller Civil War period artifacts. This material has been preserved and is on display at the Fort Branch Museum in Hamilton.

The Underwater Archaeology Branch (UAB) was created by the General Assembly in 1967. The UAB is charged with "conducting and/or supervising the surveillance, protection, preservation, survey and systematic underwater archaeological recovery of" shipwrecks and other underwater archaeological sites throughout the state. By working with individuals, dive clubs, educational institutions and others the Underwater Archaeology Unit is compiling an inventory of underwater archaeological sites throughout the state.

In addition, the UAB is active in conducting both historical and on-site research. If you have any questions regarding North Carolina's Underwater Archaeological Program or have site information you wish to report please contact:

**Underwater Archaeology Branch**  
1528 Ft. Fisher Boulevard South  
Kure Beach, NC 28449

Tel: (910) 458-9042

Fax: (910) 458-4093

E-mail: [uab@ncdcr.gov](mailto:uab@ncdcr.gov)