

THE ST. JOHN'S BAHAMAS WRECK: LESSONS BEING LEARNED

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Excavating a one-meter grid unit, St. John's Bahamas Wreck, 1992.
Photo Dylan Kibler/MFMHS

The St. John's Bahamas wreck is what remains of an as yet unidentified mid-16th century Spanish sailing ship. This vessel met its fate in 5 meters of water on the southwestern edge of the Little Bahama Bank, approximately 37 kilometers north-northwest of West End, Grand Bahama Island. This area is located along the eastern edge of the Gulf Stream current as it passes between Florida and the Bahama Islands.

The site was discovered in July of 1991 by the Florida based marine salvage corporation St. John's Expeditions during their survey of an area leased to them by the Bahamian government for the right to explore the remains of sunken ships. When this particular site was discovered, archaeologists and historians familiar with colonial-era ships and shipping, including this author, were consulted for an assessment of the wreck. All concluded that the site dated from the 16th century and could work toward a better

understanding of the early colonization of the Americas.

In December of 1991, after exploring a variety of options for their discovery, St. John's Expeditions made the decision to ally with the Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Society (MFMHS) to conduct an archaeological examination of the wreck. Under the agreement, all materials from the site that are apportioned to St. John's Expeditions by the Bahamas will be housed at the Key West facility as a permanent collection open to both the public and interested researchers. To ensure that it would be a structured study, an excavation plan was formulated around a list of wide-ranging questions about the ship. The wreck has since been examined through a system based on one-square-meter units from which all wreck-related materials are recorded. The unusual alliance, which has allowed the wreck to pass from the private realm to the public, continues to thrive.

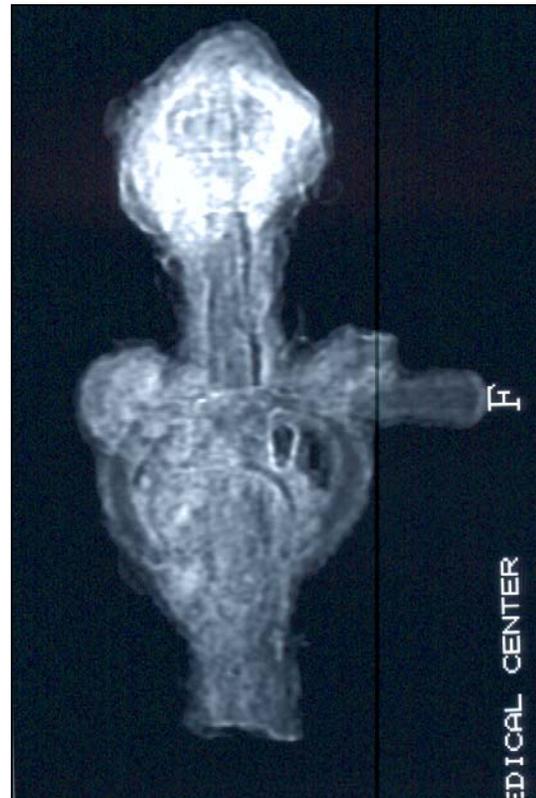
Since its formation, five periods of excavation have been conducted, and it is these expeditions that have been the basis for the insight into the long-lost ship, and the era it represents.

Much of the data collected during the excavation of over 200 units awaits analysis, but it has become evident that most of what remains of this ship and its contents has been preserved in an undisturbed context. In general, artifacts appear to have moved little since their initial deposition and are able to provide significant insight to the internal arrangements and loading practices used onboard the ship. The location of the galley, the stowage strategies for various classes of arms and artillery as well as the storage of various supplies are being revealed. Lamentably, the wreck was damaged during earlier, undocumented explorations by treasure hunters, most significantly to areas of the lower hull structure where the ballast is concentrated most heavily. Fortunately, the absence of a “treasure” on the site has kept the incentive for any such exploration at a low level, and can help to account for the relative lack of disturbance that has been observed.

The wooden remains of the ship itself are quite fragile. They have generally been found in their original context, but are quite soft and abraded from their long immersion. This structure has been recorded through drawings and photographs before being reburied as it was found. What has been examined is, for the most part, exterior hull planking which is sporadically intersected by badly degraded framing components. These are joined by combinations of iron fasteners and wooden dowels. Additionally, a small section of what is thought to be the keel, or some closely related component, has been found at the western edge of the site. The contiguous structure that has been encountered, runs a length of 12.9 meters. The current interpretation of the evidence shows the vessel to have rolled onto its starboard side. It is hoped that by combining the additional data of the stone ballast, rigging components, and individual fasteners, with the existing structure, enough information will be provided to better determine the original size and design of the ship.

Over one thousand individually tagged artifacts have been recovered, along with thousands of earthenware olive jar body sherds and hundreds of iron spikes and iron barrel hoop fragments. Such a large and varied collection, shows the ship to have been a community with a

complex infrastructure necessary to ensure a successful voyage. If the site is placed in a more firm context, these items should become a basic



X-Ray Image of Encrusted Sword.

reference point for anyone interested in colonial maritime affairs or the mechanics of Spanish-America. Weapons, including a battery of three *bombardetas* and eight *versos*, as well as nine crossbows, a variety of pole arms, and swords provided the crew with a variety of military options. The many types of ceramics seen from this site reflect not only functional categories such as tableware, drug containers and those for food storage and preparation, but the changing aesthetic tastes of colonial Spain and trading patterns of the times. The remains of over one hundred olive jars along with various Spanish and Italian majolicas, and a variety of lead-glazed wares, brown Cologne stoneware, unglazed *bizcocho* wares and a type of burnished ceramic, believed to be of Aztec origin, form the major part of this group. Other artifacts include a number of iron rigging components, pewter wares, a horseshoe, glass vials, a bronze enema syringe, lead cloth seals, clay pipe fragments, an iron helmet and the femur of a young crocodilian. Significantly, the combination of

assayers' marks stamped on two small silver coins, which were minted in Mexico City, could have been found on the ship only if it had sailed sometime after 1554. A small, stamped nugget of Peruvian silver has also been recovered. It is quite interesting to note though, that no obvious cargo has been identified from the site.



Fragment of Aztec Bowl, Two Views.
Photo Dylan Kibler/MFMHS

So, what can be said about this long-lost wreck? What major themes are showing through the data? It is safe to say that this ship wrecked within a decade or two after 1555, based on the temporal evidence provided by the coins and a large collection of medieval artifacts which were nearing the end of their popularity. The presence of a variety of American goods indicates it had made contact somewhere in the New World. The wreck is located along the edge of the northward flowing Gulfstream current, the major maritime “highway” for the return voyage in the circular *Carrera de Indias*. Most likely this ship was an intercontinental trader, serving to transport not only people and goods, but ideas and cultures to places where they could be newly recombined. Archaeology, obviously, focuses the measure of such change through material remains, and the evidence provided by this site is strong. Spanish, Italian, German and Aztec ceramics have been discovered, as well as pewter wares most likely to be of English origin. European

adaptation to the American practice of smoking tobacco is seen. New World silver in the pockets of sailors was destined to be spent in European ports. The presence of the Old World, domesticated animals horse, pig and cow on the ship shows that, by this time, these creatures were making their mark on both sides of the Atlantic. A small crocodylian was, for whatever reason being taken to Spain. It is clear that the concept of a material, if not cultural, “melting pot” is a valid one even for this early period of colonization in the Americas.

The St. John’s Bahamas shipwreck project is very much a work in progress. The conservation and analysis of recovered materials is well underway, but far from complete. As artifacts are being cleaned, recorded and researched, work is being done in Spanish archives to assemble lists of ships lost in the area of the Little Bahama bank during the third-quarter of the sixteenth century as well as to locate their manifests. These will be compared against the archaeological evidence to identify the wreck and place it in a specific context. Progress reports are being written. Though none have been formally published, a newly created Internet site will soon contain these, as well as any new information, making them easily available around the world. Bi-monthly updates are provided to members of the MFMHS through a newsletter. Currently, portions of the collection are on display in the Key West museum and the remainder of the collection is available for study by appointment. The MFMHS has a strong commitment to public education, and plans are to create a large touring exhibition that will take the story of this ship to places where marine archaeology and shipwrecks are unusual concepts. A major written report will coincide with the display. Ultimately, the materials will be permanently housed in both The Bahamas and Key West.

Through large amounts of patience, desire and cooperation, an important archaeological resource is being allowed to flourish and reveal to us its long-held story. Lessons are being learned from the study of this wreck, but everyone involved is still very much “in school” and will probably remain so for the next few years. At the end of this period, when the full story is told, it can be closely compared with the growing number of related sites, and prevailing theories confirmed, refuted or refined to, some day soon, reach the point where we can finally

stop repeating the mantra “we just don’t know

enough about these wrecks.”