

Recording of Another Dugout Canoe!

By Lynn Harris

A diverse collection of prehistoric and historic period canoe hull forms are scattered around South Carolina. These ubiquitous and utilitarian water craft are displayed in museums, private homes, gardens, and even restaurants. Others are still embedded in riverbanks, beaches, and oyster beds, or submerged in the muddy rivers and estuaries of the Lowcountry. Similarly to other examples of local material culture, vernacular watercraft are likely products of a creole culture combining indigenous, African, and European traditions of boating and building skills. The dugout canoe-style hull is the most representative example of this southern tradition. Fragments of historical information about the value and use of canoes to the South Carolina community are scattered amongst travelers diaries, plantation journals and correspondence, newspaper advertisements, artwork, commissioners reports, and legislative statutes. The SCIAA *Notebook* series, dating to the 1980s, contains a number of short articles listing canoe recoveries by staff and the members of the public who discovered and reported these water craft.



Figure 1: Interior view of Russell Canoe (SCIAA photo).

Walter Wilkinson, a member of the SCIAA Archaeological Research Trust (ART) Board, attended our local Archaeological Society of South Carolina Conference in February where the Underwater Archaeology Division's efforts to compile canoe data were addressed. Shortly afterwards, he noticed an interesting example of a dugout canoe on the banks of the Waccamaw River. It was beautifully displayed in a private garden belonging to the Russell family of Pawleys Island, SC. The canoe had been given to them many years ago after it was uncovered from the shifting sands of Myrtle Beach. With the Russell's permission, we spent a morning documenting the design of the canoe. It was probably made during the historic period based on the use of gauge holes in the manufacturing process. Europeans, Africans, or Native Americans may have been the makers. It is the first example of a canoe that we had encountered in South Carolina with a little mast step for a sail near the bow, and a double-ended hull (pointed at both ends) with a rocker shape (like a banana). The stern features indicate that it may have had some kind of steering arrangement like a steering oar or a light tiller. It was most likely a sailing canoe used offshore for fishing or coastal work.



Figure 2: Carl Naylor measuring the Russell Canoe (SCIAA photo).

Perhaps it was even used for longer ocean or coastal expeditions. In Florida, early traveler William Bertram described how "Indians have large handsome canoes...some of them commodious enough to accommodate twenty or thirty warriors. In these large canoes they descend the river on trading and hunting expeditions, to the seacoast, neighboring islands and keys,...and sometimes cross the gulph, extending their navigation to the Bahama Islands and even to Cuba."

A disastrous incident in 1701 that involved the Sewee people also hints at the maritime use of Native American craft. When gentleman explorer, John Lawson, encountered a community of Sewee he was told a story about their attempts to undercut the English deerskin trade whom they regarded as "no better than cheats" in their business relationship. The Sewee, after consultation amongst their heads, and without a dissenting vote, agreed themselves to find the English markets across the ocean. Boat builders in the community were employed in building the biggest and best canoes they were capable of making. These canoes had mat sails and sufficient crew for a "Voyage of Discovery to Europe." According to Lawson, the Sewee attempted to form a kind of "naval fleet." He described how "the affair was carried out with a great deal of secrecy and expedition, so in a small time they had gotten a navy, loading and provisions, and hands to set sail, leaving only the old, impotent and the minors at home 'till their successful return." Some of this fleet of Amerindian adventurers were reportedly lost in a storm at sea, while others were captured by English ships and taken as slaves. The attrition of men in the community resulted in the Sewee widows wandering over to the Wando people with whom they intermarried. By 1716, the remaining Sewee were taken as slaves by the French settlers living along the Santee River where by the mid-1800s they were building large plantation sailing dugouts like the *Bessie* displayed in the Charleston Museum courtyard by the mid-1800s. Whether the boats and the seamanship skills of the Sewee were inadequate for this type of ocean-crossing endeavor, or whether they simply had a misfortune and might have succeeded are unknown. Nevertheless, the incident suggests that they probably had past experience using traditionally built canoes on the ocean and thought they could undertake such a voyage. We would like to thank Walter Wilkinson for informing us about this canoe and the Don Russell family of Pawleys Island for their hospitality and their permission to record the canoe.