

Wreck of the Golden Spike

By Lynn Harris

Julian Weston of Mount Pleasant noticed some unusual spikes and nails protruding from the mud as he walked along the bank of the Wando River at low tide earlier this year. He inspected these items more closely and excitedly concluded that he was looking at part of a large shipwreck. He immediately contacted the Underwater Archaeology Division Field Office in Charleston. After an initial site assessment, SCIAA staff members Lynn Harris, Carl Naylor, and Joe Beatty returned to the site with Weston to conduct some preliminary recording. Mike Ameika, College of Charleston internship student, and a participant from our recent public field training course, Barbara Merchant, accompanied by her two sons James and Robert assisted with the project.



Figure 1: Julian Weston marks extent of wreck site for mapping (SCIAA photo).

The wreckage (38CH1931) lay on a small beach adjacent to a new subdivision currently under construction. Exposed timbers consisted of a keelson, keel, outer hull planking, and floor timbers extending 13.30 meters (43 feet 8 inches) out of the muddy river water. The outer hull was sheathed with Muntz, an alloy of copper and lead that was first used in the mid-1800s. The fastenings were comprised of a high concentration of brass spikes and long copper drift bolts. The floor timbers were situated very closely each other, and butting against each other on the keel. Numerous other metal concretions lay on the site. We are currently waiting for the results of the samples taken off the wreck to determine what types of woods were used.

We came across some interesting and possibly pertinent information when doing background research on vessels wrecked or salvaged in the vicinity of Charleston. On May 10, 1929, the dredger Hallendale, while working in the harbor, accidentally encountered the wreckage of a submerged vessel. Henry F. Rivers, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers employee



Figure 2: Mapping the remains of the wreck site (SCIAA photo).

and supervisor of a dredging operation executed on Town Creek, wrote a description of the discovery in his logbook.

"Its ribs were 12' X 12' mahogany timbers, butting each other on the keel. They were solid but as usual when sunken timbers are exposed they dry rot in a short time...Beautiful handmade brass spikes & long copper drift bolts hold the hull together."

Rivers concluded that these were the remains of a ship dating back to the Civil War—the Confederate receiving ship—*CSS Indian Chief*.

"The *Indian Chief* was a 3-mast schooner of heavy timber construction sheathed with Muntz metal. Appearances indicated it to be 150' long. Removal completed July 7, 1929," Rivers noted in his logbook.

We are not suggesting that this wreckage is the remains of the *CSS Indian Chief*, but it has some similar construction details. There is a possibility that it is of the same vintage and may be associated Civil War activity in the general area.

Between July and August of 1929, the U.S. Corps of Engineers found three more wrecks. These were identified as former Confederate navy vessels *CSS Palmetto State*, *CSS Chicora*, and *CSS Charleston*. Rivers describes the *CSS Chicora* as 150 feet long, 35 feet in beam and a 12 foot depth of hold. Armor: two layers of iron plating laid upon a 22 inch backing of oak and pine. Plating was continued below the waterline and also covered the ram that was a strong elongation of the bow. 500 tons of iron used in her armor and she was propelled by an engine with a 30-inch diameter cylinder and 26 stroke driving a three bladed

screw eight feet in diameter. Battery: 2-9 inch smooth bore guns and 4 rifles, 32-pounders each.

Historians believe there were probably more trained seamen in the *Charleston* squadron than any other. Many were enlisted foreigners. In contrast to the other Confederate squadrons, three African Americans served aboard the ironclad CSS *Chicora*. The crews of the *Charleston* squadron had a reputation of being well trained, very disciplined and having a respect for their officers. The vessels were known as the cleanest and of great credit to the Confederate navy.

There are a number of associations between these vessels and the *H.L. Hunley*. In October 1863, the *H.L. Hunley* practiced numerous dives under CSS *Indian Chief* for training purposes. The *H.L. Hunley* sank, resulting in the death of the crew and inventor Horace Hunley, although the submarine itself was recovered. In November of the same year, Lieutenant George Dixon, commander of the *H.L. Hunley*'s last mission, obtained permission from General Beauregard to ask for volunteers for the submarine from the crew of CSS *Indian Chief*. Despite the fact that only a month before these sailors had witnessed the fatal sinking of the *H.L. Hunley*, there were volunteers. Two other confederate vessels, CSS *Chicora* and CSS *Palmetto State* also supplied volunteers for the earlier crews of the *H.L. Hunley*.

By February 1865, the Confederate forces were unable to defend the city any longer and evacuated. Military equipment that could not be carried, as well as any excess munitions stores, was destroyed so that they would not fall into the hands of the Federal troops. Out in the harbor, anything that might be of value of the occupying army was also scuttled. Among the ships sunk were CSS *Chicora*, CSS *Palmetto State*, CSS *Charleston*, and CSS *Indian Chief*.

In his journal, Rivers also provides information about the recovery efforts: "Congress appropriated \$25,000 for the removal of The *Charleston* alone; by use of a clamshell bucket, with manganese steel teeth and plenty of dynamite, we removed all four wrecks for \$15,00."

The artifacts recovered included pieces of the ship structures, shells with "blunt ends, some with conical points, and some with pyramid shaped points," and an amber-colored whiskey flask indented to make it comfortable to hold in one hand.