

The Mepkin Abbey Wreck

By Drew Ruddy

In the 1960s, some folks just didn't bother with a scuba diving certification course. They strapped on their gear, proceeded to the river, and swam around until they felt like they knew what they were doing. So it was with R. D. Densler, Jr., affectionately known as "Captain Bob" by the early South Carolina diving community.

By 1970, Captain Bob was the senior diver for the North Charleston Volunteer Rescue Squad. As the water was warming that year, he took a fellow rescue squad member, Don, on an "indoctrination dive" in the Cooper River near Mepkin Abbey. Although Don had never been underwater before, all was proceeding quite well as they reached the bottom of the anchor line. To maintain contact with the boat, the two held onto the anchor line and drifted down stream as the anchor bounced gently along the hard marl. Don apparently maintained some semblance of comfort in this new environment until Bob changed the game plan.

Spotting an abandoned anchor line laying lazily on the bottom, Bob suddenly ventured away from the security of the link with the boat in hopes of recovering some fisherman's lost anchor. Bob followed the line into the "ribs" of an old wooden wreck. Meanwhile, Don's heart beat faster as he saw Bob leaving their anchor line, and suddenly he could take no more. In his panicky effort to follow Bob, Don managed to fin Bob in the face, flooding his mask. In the minutes that ensued, both divers made it safely back to the boat where Don recovered from the experience of his first and, as far as I know, last dive.

Later, Bob phoned and told me of their escapades and about the wreck he had touched for only a moment. The following Saturday morning, we were out at the crack of dawn to return to the site. Along for the occasion were Julian "Muck" Muckenfuss, who was Bob's longtime diving buddy, and Bob's father, R. D. "Papa D" Densler, Sr., as boat tender. When we arrived at Mepkin Abbey, Bob carefully sighted landmarks to anchor us over where he calculated the wreck to be. I enthusiastically geared up and proceeded down the anchor line to see if we were on the wreck. As I descended I could tell that the Cooper River was in its prime. Visibility was good and the current was minimal. As I neared the bottom, the anchor line carried me directly to the port side of the wreck. I could not have kicked more than two strokes when I encountered a beautiful stoneware jug. With the almost surrealistic exhilaration of discovery, I retraced the route up the anchor line to bring the jug to the surface. In moments, Bob, Muck, and I were canvassing this approximately 50-foot long sailing vessel. It seemed to be loaded with a cargo of assorted lumber of various shapes and sizes. In a short time, Muck located another jug and a "black glass" bottle toward the impressive mast step near the bow section.

Meanwhile, as I proceeded down the starboard side of the wreck, I could hear a scream from Bob as if he were in trouble, although I could not see him. As I moved to investigate his plight, I found him amidships on top of the wooden cargo, pulling stoneware jugs from the rubble. I assisted in swimming them to the surface as he continued to discover them. At the end of our dive we had recovered two bottles, a hammer, and nine stoneware jugs. Subsequently, we returned to the wreck and Bob retrieved two more jugs, bringing the total to eleven.

I'm sure that it is quite evident that our approach to diving this wreck was anything but an archaeological endeavor. In fact, at that time, the state did not have an underwater archaeologist. The first law governing the recovery of underwater antiquities had only been passed about two years previously. The whole state of underwater archaeology might best be described as being in its embryonic stages.

Sensing that the Mepkin Wreck was of significance, I reported the finds to Dr. Robert L. Stephenson, then director of the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology

and one of the nicest men I have ever met. The information remained dormant for several years, when in 1978 Alan Albright, Ralph Wilbanks, and Darby Erd from SCIAA and myself returned to the wreck. It was a privilege to watch them scientifically map the wreck, as is evidenced when one reads Ralph Wilbanks' exceptional report. During this project, the stern post and rudder, which had dislodged, was salvaged and taken by the state for conservation and study.

Today, more than 25 years since its initial discovery, I'm sure many divers have enjoyed observing the impressive features of this relic of our state's past, and perhaps felt the ambiance of its proximity to the beautiful banks of Mepkin. It is my hope that divers in the future may continue to enjoy this site as we continue to respect its historic significance. I would like to think that this story is an illustration of some of the benefits which can be derived when recreational divers and SCIAA work together.



Figure 1: Drew Ruddy, Julian Muckenfuss, Bob Densler, and R.D. Densler, Sr. with stoneware jugs recovered from the wreck (Photo courtesy of Drew Ruddy).



Figure 2: Brother Stephen Petronek with pot from the Mepkin Abbey wreck (Photo courtesy of Drew Ruddy).