

PRITCHARD'S SHIPYARD (38CH1049): INVESTIGATIONS AT SOUTH
CAROLINA'S LARGEST COLONIAL SHIPYARD
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In a family cemetery in the heart of the residential community of Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina lie the remains of Paul Pritchard. Paul, a shipwright by trade, was one of the scores of ship builders who emigrated from Europe to South Carolina during the 18th century. Settling in Charleston he entered a climate of mercantilism and trade and soon established a name for himself as a builder of fine seaworthy ships and boats, eventually purchasing an existing shipyard which was to bear his name to this day. But more about Paul Pritchard and the shipyard later.

From its earliest beginnings Charleston has been inextricably linked to the sea. After its initial settlement in 1670, the city was soon established as a trading port for ships hauling products of trade in and out of the harbor. Located at the western side of the route followed by sailing vessels bound from Europe to North America which followed the prevailing ocean currents and winds, and on the route used by ships heading to Europe from the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico, Charles Towne was a natural stop point where goods could be traded or vessel repaired and crews rested (Coker 1987: 35).

In the early years of the colony, South Carolina conducted a lucrative trade of land-based resources in the form of furs, skins and Indian goods, which were predominantly shipped to England, as well as meat, lumber and naval stores which were also traded with the West Indies for rum, sugar and slaves. Agriculturally based products spurred the growth of plantations throughout the colony's Low Country with rice becoming the colony's first cash crop through the early 18th century, while indigo exports soared through the latter half of the century. Colonists and entrepreneurs pushed westward into the hinterland and by the latter half of the 18th century cotton and tobacco plantations were well established in the upland, Piedmont , areas of the colony (Coker 1987: 42-45).

A vast array of watercraft types suited to a variety of purposes and environments was required to meet the needs of South Carolina's burgeoning trade and transportation network (see Amer et al. 1993:16-33; Amer and Hocker 1995; Harris 1992; Fleetwood 1987, 1995). Many of these vessels were built in South Carolina using traditions, designs and methods brought over from Europe, Africa and the Caribbean and utilizing the readily available timber in the colony - notably live oak, pine and cypress (see Wood 1991). Many small craft were, no doubt, built at plantations and on river banks by their owners and operators. However, the 18th century also saw the development of a shipbuilding industry in the colony spurred on by economic growth. At first sluggish in nature, shipbuilding was stimulated by government subsidies and inducements, which allowed the colony to produce a sizable local merchant fleet in the early years of the century.

During the early years of shipbuilding in the colony it was not uncommon for investors, and shipbuilders to be part owners in several vessels thereby diversifying their

investment and minimizing the risk (Clowse 1981). The shipbuilding boom ended during the 1720s - 30s as local ownership of local and oceanic merchant ships declined. Much of this decline can be traced to the fact that there was more profit to be made from agriculture in the South. For example, a merchant could, for £1,200, have a 200-ton ship built but would have to accept the risks inherent to vessel ownership-storms, pirates and fire. For the same £1,200 the merchant could purchase a 500-acre plantation and more than a dozen slaves (Coker 1987: 47-48).

Shipbuilding experienced a rise during King George's War (1739-1748) when an increased naval presence off the coast and the threat from privateers increased the need for local ship repair facilities and revived the shipbuilding industry. After the war a large number of well trained shipbuilders and artisans came to Charles Town from Europe, attracted by the rising prosperity in South Carolina. Between the years 1735 and 1760, although relatively few ocean going ships built, due to a preference of most South Carolina merchants to charter vessels as they needed them, South Carolina shipyards built over 140 sloops and schooners, mostly for use in the coastal trade(Coker 1987: 48-49).

The two decades before the American Revolution saw increased prosperity for the industry with South Carolina 's shipbuilding ranking ninth in the colonies. Local and overseas investment in South Carolina-built vessels flourished, led by Henry Laurens, a prominent Charles Towne merchant and entrepreneur. In the 1770s alone South Carolina shipyards produced 17 ocean going vessels and 6,141 tons of other craft. Also during that time the South Carolina Navy commissioned private shipyards to build and maintain numerous naval ships and to refit merchant vessels for war, a practice that was to cease in 1780 when the navy purchased Pritchard's Shipyard (Sally 1912: 197). From then until the end of the conflict vessels for the navy were built and maintained predominantly at Pritchard's yard.

The end of the Revolution brought disaster to local shipbuilders. A decimated merchant and naval fleet and economic turmoil helped to depress the shipbuilding industry. In spite of local shipbuilders' petitions to Congress for legislation to raise the shipbuilding industry out of the doldrums, and a brief flurry of shipbuilding activity in the late 1790s due to orders for naval vessels, the industry as a going concern was doomed. Ship repair became the primary occupation of the surviving shipyards. However, before Carolina shipbuilding ceased to be a viable industry in 1865 many fine watercraft were still to be built including ships of war, galleys, merchant vessels, steamboats and ironclads. However, the industry never again achieved the prominence it had once enjoyed.

Throughout the colonial period in South Carolina, shipbuilding was centered around the three trade centers-Charleston, Georgetown and Beaufort. Charleston, alone, supported some 14 shipyards during the period from the beginning of the 18th century up until 1865. Probably the largest shipyard in all of colonial South Carolina was the one started on the south side of Hobcaw Creek in 1753 by two Scottish shipwrights, John Rose and James Stewart.

Rose and Stewart located their yard on a 340-acre tract of land bounding northwest on the Wando River, north on the Wackindaw (Hobcaw) Creek, east on the lands of David Maybank, and south on Molasses Creek. Today this area is known as Hobcaw Point. The property had been granted to Lt. Col. John Godfrey in 1681. In 1682 Godfrey sold the property to Richard Dearsley of Barbados. Dearsley subsequently sold the property to his son, Maj. George Dearsley, in 1701 (Moore 1978: 209-210/PCR 54: 341-346). George Dearsley was also a shipbuilder who was building vessels in the colony perhaps as early as the 1690's. Dearsley's yard was most likely on Shem Creek which at the time was called Dearsley's Creek (Temple 1964: 3). Any records of Dearsley having built ships at the Hobcaw site have not been found.

The property then came into the hands of Benjamin Quelch, brother-in-law of George Dearsley, when the Lords Proprietors granted him the land in 1709. Quelch, by his will dated 17 July 1716, passed the property to his wife, Elizabeth, and eventually to his son Andrew (RMC D-D: 382). Andrew mortgaged the property to Thomas Bolton, a Charleston merchant, in 1748 (RMC D-D:382). When Andrew failed to satisfy the mortgage, Bolton obtained a judgment against Quelch and bought the property at public auction in October 1753 (RMC N-N: 414). Two days later, Bolton sold the property to Rose and Stewart for £2,900 currency (RMC N-N: 426). Rose apparently became sole owner of the yard when Stewart died in 1755.

In 1763 Rose launched the 180-ship *Heart of Oak* (see Coker 1987: 63, illustration). The S. C. Gazette for 21 May 1763 reported that "The fine new ship *Heart-of-Oak*, commanded by Capt. Henry Gunn, lately built by Mr. John Rose at Hobcaw, came down (to town) two days ago, completely fitted, and is now taking in her cargo at Messrs. Inglis, Lloyd, & Hall's wharf; 'tis thought she will carry 1100 barrels of rice, be very buoyant, and of an easy draught." When the *Heart of Oak* was registered, John Rose listed himself as sole owner (Olsberg 1973: 232), however one fourth of the ship was owned by Henry Laurens (Hamer, Rogers 1972:478). In 1766, Henry Laurens valued his one-quarter interest in the *Heart of Oak* at £4,000 (Rogers, Chesnutt 1978: 613).

In 1767, Rose launched the 160-ton ship *Liberty*. According to the S.C. Gazette for 27 April 1767, the *Liberty*, built for the Bristol trade, had a figurehead in the image of William Pitt, "and was intended to be called the *Pitt*, 'till he was created Earl of Chatham; so great a veneration have the Americans for Pitt and Liberty." Both the *Heart of Oak* and *Liberty* were listed in the 25 October 1773 Gazette as being "constantly employed in the Trade between this Port and Europe."

In February 1769, Rose sold the yard to two other Scottish shipwrights, William Begbie and Daniel Manson, along with "all the stages, punts, steamers, fixed pitch kettles, & all tools & utensils for conducting a shipwrights business" (RMC M-3: 240). The new owners were soon busy, launching the 200-ton ship *Magna Charta* for the London trade on 23 November 1770. When the *Magna Charta* was launched, Begbie and Manson already had another ship on the stocks. This was the 200-ton ship, *Carolina Packet*, launched in 1771 (S.C. Gazette: 1/17/1771). These were undoubtedly only two of the many vessels built while Begbie and Manson owned the yard.

On 20 June 1778, Abraham Livingston and Paul Pritchard bought the property from Begbie and Manson for £50,000 currency and changed its name to Pritchard's Shipyard (RMC Z-4: 156-157). Pritchard had been leasing Capt. Cochran's shipyard across the Cooper River on Shipyard Creek until April 1777 when the state began leasing the yard for £1,200 currency per year (Salley 1912: 54-55). The Commissioners of the Navy of South Carolina found the Shipyard Creek site unsuitable and by July 1778 were negotiating with Pritchard over the sale of his shipyard on Hobcaw Creek.

The Navy Board had good reason to be interested in the Hobcaw site. As the Commissioners noted, "there is on the Premises at Hobcaw a great deal of Store room, very Substantial good Wharves and Other Conveniences Sufficient to Heave down Three Vessels at the same time." (Salley 1912: 177). So, on 29 October 1778, Paul Pritchard signed over three-quarters interest in the yard "along with the Negroes and Appurtenances thereon" to the state for the sum of £77,700. At the time there were 15 "Negroes" employed at the yard (Salley 1912: 197).

One of Pritchard's first jobs for the Navy was the construction of a boat for the Brig *Hornet* which he did for £1,000. The Navy Board then sent him the Brig *Notre Dame* to be repaired and made fit for service. They also ordered that "the Large Flatt be Immediately sent to the Ship Yard at Hobcaw, and be altered into a Galley for the purpose of protecting the Inland trade of this State." (Salley 1912: 234, 235) By January 1780 efforts at the yard were in high gear when the Board sent the ships *Bricole*, and *Truite (Trout)*, the Brig *Notre Dame*, and all the galleys to Hobcaw to be "put in good repair for Immediate Service." (Salley 1913: 60). This was only some of the repair and construction work done by Pritchard for the state's Navy.

Sole ownership of the shipyard apparently reverted to Pritchard after the Revolution for in his will, filed in December 1791, Pritchard bequeathed the yard to his son William along with "all the Materials at the Ship Yard at Hobcaw for carrying on the Shipwrights Business, and also all the Timber and Plank in the Said Ship Yard and Vessels on the Stocks." This included 12 slaves listed as ship carpenters and caulkers (PCR 24-C: 963).

Over the next 40 years, William Pritchard built and maintained many naval and merchant vessels, including the revenue cutter *Unanimity*, launched in 1794. In 1831, "Hobcaw Bill" closed his Hobcaw shipyard, having sold his other Charleston shipyard 16 years earlier, selling it on April 4 of that year to John Blackwood for \$1,245 (RMC A-10: 543-545). The property passed to Robert Muirhead who purchased it in November 1853, using much of the land for asparagus cultivation. From Muirhead, the land passed through several owners and was purchased 100 years later by R. M. McGillvary (Temple 1964: 13-14).

Today, most of the original 340 tract has been subdivided into residential areas. However, the 7.5 acre tract fronting Hobcaw Creek on which is located the shipyard is now owned by one family, Pepe and Cyndy Hernandez, who purchases the land in 1991. That property, which was nominated to the National Register of Historic places in 1974,

is currently bordered to the east and west by lakes formed during the 1940s when spring fed streams to either side of the tract were dammed.

Archaeological interest in the site was peaked in 1989 when, in response to a public notice to build a private dock along the foreshore, archaeologists from the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology conducted a reconnaissance level survey of the foreshore and offshore areas to be adversely impacted by the construction. Results of that and a subsequent survey of the creek bottom confirmed the presence of 18th and 19th century materials including, ballast rock, brick and ship frames eroding out of the bank and two distinct areas on the foreshore containing wood cribbing and pilings—the remains of two of the three slipways and a wharf. The third slipway is believed to lie beneath a concrete boat launching ramp. Additional reconnaissance on the property revealed the remains of brick structures including the plantation house chimney and a foundation. Subsequently, the remains of the house were bulldozed to their present location on the property line.

The Hernandez's, who had purchased the property as much for its historic character as for its natural beauty agreed to consult with the Institute well in advance of any proposed development or land altering activities. Furthermore, in order to actively participate in the preservation of the site, the family enrolled in the Underwater Archaeology Division's Field Training Course, and have assisted with all subsequent archaeological activities at the site.

A few months after purchasing the property the Hernandez's invited the Division to test an area of the property that they anticipated selling. A second area tested, the proposed site of their house, proved to be a bit more problematical. City and county ordinances stipulated strict parameters for the location their house. This would involve removal of one live oak tree, which, in itself, would present no problem. The state has a cooperative agreement with the Navy to supply suitable live oak for it's historic ships reconstruction program. The wood from the tree would eventually find its way into the hull of the USS *Constitution* and other historic vessels.

However, on closer inspection we discovered that the tree slated for removal had grown up through a brick structure and was surrounded by wall footings and colonial artifacts. The house location plans were altered several times but the tree could not be avoided by the 5000-square-foot house. We decided to excavate the structure surrounding the tree (hereafter called the “Tree House”) prior to its removal and to test the proposed footprint of the house.

The field crew was made up of staff of the Underwater Archaeology Division and a host of volunteers, including local college and high school students and the Hernandez family. As well as working with us on the site the Hernandez' provided accommodation on their boat, docked at the site, and in their two-bunk tree house, located over the site. They also provided us with three meals a day catered to the site, a luxury few archaeologists experience on archaeological projects.

Salvage excavation of the Tree House was conducted in August 1993 amid a flurry of changing deadlines and under threat that any day the tree could be cut and

uprooted, thereby destroying the integrity of the structure and its colonial contents. The limited objective of the excavation was to attempt to gather enough data to date the occupation(s) of the Tree House and delineate its function within the historical context of the site. During a one-week period we excavated 30% of the interior of the structure, exposed and mapped the site's main features and recorded soil profiles within and without the walls. During that operation some 13,000 artifacts were recovered.

Following excavation the live oak tree was cut down and the root system removed. The track hoe operator graciously assisted us by removing the sediments in the Tree House in quadrants which were carefully screened by the volunteers, bringing the artifact count to over 28,000. Through the next few months the footprint of the Hernandez' house was tested at 4-meter intervals producing a fairly uniform concentration of artifacts but no clearly delineated activity areas. Preparation of the ground and construction of the house was monitored at each stage, including excavation of the footings and utility trenches.

The Tree House consisted of the lower remains of three brick walls forming an approximately 7-meter-square enclosure. Only the south wall remains intact to its 7.35 meter length. While the west wall extends 6.9 meters to the north, the east wall has been all but destroyed, with only the southernmost 2 meters of structure remaining. A large live oak root had deflected along the inside of the once extant east wall, and most of the brick that once comprised this wall is absent. No evidence for a wall enclosing the north side of the structure was found, nor were remains of a builder's trench located, as had been recorded under the other walls.. As heavy machinery and construction components for the dam had once been stored against the north side of the tree, it is likely that the site had been heavily disturbed during that operation. The remains of a brick hearth were found in the structure's south west corner.

Artifacts recovered during the excavation reflect the temporal range of historic occupation and utilization of the site chronicled in archival records. Present in prodigious numbers are pipe stems and bowls, mostly in the 1750-1800 range, ceramics and glass bottles spanning the 18th and 19th centuries, fasteners of wrought iron and brass, and gun flints. Other items include: wound and drawn glass beads, buckles, thimbles, buttons, a horse's bitt, a 1720 Dutch trade token, and plain drawn wine glass stems with a tear drop bubble encased in the stem. The latter wine glasses are often associated with 1750-60s British military sites in North America (Jones and Smith 1985:40, figure 35b). An adz, ax heads, a pair of dividers and a broken chainplate suggest activities associated with a shipyard. Burnt and butchered bones comprise one of the largest assemblages, with animals (mostly pig and deer), bird and fish represented in great quantity.

The artifact collection is currently being analyzed by archaeologists at the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology. After completion of this analysis and interpretation of the Tree House, the collection will be returned to the Hernandez family. We anticipate continued research on both the terrestrial and submerged areas of the site, with the blessing of the Hernandez family.

Archival sources have revealed a continuous 300 year ownership of the property, 78 of those years (1753-1831) as a shipbuilding facility. Features listed in documents transferring ownership of the property in the 1770s include, “houses, outhouses, buildings, storehouses, wharves, gardens, orchards, marshes, pastures, ways, passages, watercourses, trees, lights and easements” (RMC Z-4:155). Archaeological investigations at the site have identified some of these features on the 7.5 acre property on Hobcaw Creek. These include the ways, a wharf, the house, a brick structure probably associated with the shipyard operation, and the avenue of oaks referred to by Paul Pritchard's daughter, Catherine, as “Flirtation Walk”, where couples strolled hand in hand during gala ship launchings. Partially exposed features and artifact distributions throughout the property offer us tantalizing glimpses of the possible layout and operation of South Carolina's largest colonial shipyard. Only by identifying the layout of the entire shipyard can we begin to comprehend its true place in the history of Mount Pleasant.

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