SEARCH FOR... The Chesapeake Flotilla

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Note: This issue of the “Bugeye Times” is dedicated to CMM’s newest exhibit “War on the Patuxent: 1814.” The history of the Chesapeake Flotilla’s unsuccessful attempt to protect the Bay from superior British Naval forces is summarized, as well as, CMM and Nautical Archaeological Associates search and excavation for the scuttled flotilla in the Patuxent River.

The exhibit “War on the Patuxent: 1814” is the culmination of three years of research, excavation, preservation, and interpretation. Matching funds from the Maryland Committee for the Humanities helped make this exhibit and a catalog of artifacts possible.

Calvert Marine Museum Press will publish this summer, Shomette’s scholarly work on this history. Titled “Flotilla: Battle for the Patuxent,” this 240-page book will sell for $12.50. Pre-publication discount at $11.25 is now available; contact CMM for details.

Artifacts recovered from the ill-fated Chesapeake Flotilla, 1814.

THE CHESAPEAKE FLOTILLA

Eight months after President James Madison opened hostilities in America’s “Second War of Independence” with Great Britain, known to history simply as the War of 1812, a fleet of Royal Navy warships entered the Chesapeake Bay and commenced a campaign of looting and burning against the residents of the Maryland-Virginia Tidewater. The United States Navy, blockaded in Baltimore and Newport News, was unable to provide protection for the beleaguered farms and villages. After spending the initial months of the war aboard the privateer schooner Rossie, Captain Joshua Barney returned to his home port of Baltimore and prepared a plan for the defense of the Chesapeake. Barney’s plan, submitted to Secretary of the Navy, William Jones, on July 4, 1813, called for a flying squadron of light draft gunboats and barges armed with two heavy long guns or carronades.

By August 1813 the Department of the Navy had approved of the plan, and Barney was appointed acting master commandant of the Chesapeake Flotilla headquartered in Baltimore. Barney had to assemble his flotilla “from scratch.” He was assigned eight barges being built in Baltimore under federal contract plus the block-sloop Scorpion and gunboats Nos. 137 and 138 from the Potomac Flotilla. Over the objections of the citizens of Baltimore, he purchased the row galley Vigilant and three barges which were being built privately for the protection of Baltimore Harbor. Contracts were let to firms in both Baltimore and St. Michaels, Maryland, to construct additional barges. After experiencing much difficulty in recruiting seamen, Barney was finally able to activate his force in the spring of 1814.

On May 24, 1814, Barney sailed from Baltimore with a force of thirteen barges, Scorpion, a row galley, gunboats 137 and 138, and a lookout boat for a raid on the British naval supply depot on Tangier Island. On the morning of June 1, 1814, the Chesapeake Flotilla encountered superior enemy forces between the mouths of the Patuxent and Pote- mac Rivers. After a brief engagement, the flotilla was obliged to retire into the mouth of the Patuxent.

The flotilla remained behind Drum Point until June 7 when the arrival of large reinforcements for the British obliged him to retire into the shallow fastness of St. Leonard’s Creek.

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Though the Royal Navy dispatched wave after wave of armed barges and schooners into the creek to destroy the flotilla on June 8, 9, and 10, they were soundly rebuffed each time. Barney resolved on a breakout. On June 26, assisted by shore batteries on the bluff overlooking the mouth of the creek, he launched an aggressive pre-dawn surprise attack which succeeded in driving the British frigate forces downriver to Point Patience, and permitted his own tiny squadron to escape upriver to the town of Benedict. Two gunboats, both of which had been slow and unmanageable, were left behind and scuttled to prevent capture.

For the next two months Barney retreated slowly upriver, first to White’s Landing, and then to Nottingham. After their defeat, the British seemed unwilling to hazard another engagement, but contented themselves with burning and pillaging the shores of the lower Patuxent. In early August the British forces on the river were augmented by a major invasion force from Bermuda under Vice Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane and Rear Admiral Sir George Cockburn. Their objective was the capture and destruction of Washington, D.C. Their route was to be up the Patuxent, using the flotilla as a pretext for moving up, and then overland to the capital.

On August 19 the main invasion force reached Benedict and an army under General Robert Ross was landed. Acting under direct orders from the Secretary of the Navy, Barney retreated upriver from Nottingham to Pig Point, now Bristol. Barney was directed to take his flotillamen and proceed to the defense of Washington. Lt. Solomon Frazier, his second in command, and 120 seamen were left with the barges in the vicinity of present day Wayson’s Corner with orders to destroy the squadron should the British attack.

On the morning of August 22, under the command of Admiral Cockburn himself, a large force of British armed barges moved up to attack the Chesapeake Flotilla. As the British rounded Pig Point, they were astonished to see the orderly line of ships extending upriver before them blown up in quick succession by the flotillamen. Sixteen of Barney’s vessels sank into the mud of the Patuxent, along with a number of merchantmen. The British managed to capture only one barge and five merchant schooners.

Within months of the destruction of the flotilla, salvage activities were underway. A local landowner, John Weems of Richards, Maryland, contacted the Department of the Navy indicating that he had already recovered twenty-five cannons with prospects of locating six more. All the salvaged government property was moved to Mount Pleasant Landing and eventually transported to warehouses in Baltimore. In late June 1815, the Department of the Navy instructed Navy agent James Beatty in Baltimore to auction off much of the salvaged equipment. In the Patuxent, however, the remains of the Chesapeake Flotilla slipped deeper into the mud and oblivion.

THE PATUXENT RIVER SURVEY

In late 1977 the Calvert Marine Museum of Solomons, Maryland, and Nautical Archaeological Associates, Inc., of Upper Marlboro, Maryland, began planning an effort to locate and examine the remains of the Chesapeake Flotilla.

The following spring an intensive research project was initiated which resulted in the documentation of the flotilla’s history, and the probable position in which its remains rested. In 1979, with a matching grant from the U.S. Department of the Interior’s Heritage, Conservation, and Recreation Service, administered by the Maryland Historical Trust, a comprehensive remote sensing survey of the conjectured loss site area was carried out.

Ironically, on June 26, 1979, the 165th anniversary of the American victory on St. Leonard’s Creek, a line of “hits” nearly two miles in length was registered. Examination by scuba divers at one such site revealed the tops of two frame members, or “ribs,” of a sunken vessel projecting up through the sandy river bottom. Only a single item was retrieved, however - a battered turtle shell. The site was dubbed, for want of a more appropriate title, the Turtle Shell Wreck.

CMM Hosts Conference

This past May the museum hosted the Seventh Annual Museum Smallcraft Conference. Forty-five museum representatives were present including folks from the Maine Maritime Museum, the Canadian National Museum in Ottawa, and the Hampton Mariners Museum in Beauford, North Carolina.

Technical sessions included underwater archaeological interpretation of smallcraft, history of boatbuilding in Southern Maryland, and exhibit interpretation of smallcraft. A field trip through beautiful Southern Maryland included smallcraft displays at the Harry Lundeburg School of Seamanship, St. Mary’s City, and Francis Goddard’s “Dee of St. Mary’s” skipjack.

The conference was not all work and serious discussion, however. Catered dinner aboard the Tennison one night and a beer - crab feast held at board member Dan Barrett’s house highlighted the three-day meeting.

In the words of Joyce Royer, associate curator of smallcraft at Mariners Museum, Newport News, Virginia, “the program was good, the field trips were great, and your hospitality was superb!”

SELECTED ACQUISITIONS

Paneling from the 18th century Hinman Store which served sailing vessels at the Port of Lower Marlboro, Donated by PERRY VAN VLECK.

Watercolor of the Baltimore Clipper Rossie donated by the artist, MELBOURNE SMITH.

Watercolor “Schooner Ida May at Solomons” by Louis Feuchter; exchange from Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum.

Figurehead and builder’s plaque from the bugeye Colonel R. Johnston Colton, built at the M.M. Davis shipyard, Solomons, in 1886, (purchase). Of interest, before this acquisition, the vessel’s place of construction was unknown.

Figurehead from the bugeye Col. R. Johnston Col- ton, built at Solomons, 1886.
EXCAVATION

In 1980, with the aid of another HCRS grant, and extensive month-long effort was planned to excavate and survey a representative section of the site. A large, shallow-draft, floating operations platform was assembled at Patuxent River Park, downriver from the site during the early spring, and at the end of May was towed upriver and anchored over the wreck. A small temporary coffer dam was constructed over the site to permit the excavation of a test pit. Testing of the site was deemed necessary to determine the lie of the wreck, its relative condition, and the depth below the river bottom sediments in which it lay. On June 6, after two days of excavation by divers wielding a large suction hose in near zero visibility conditions, the wreck was reached under nearly five feet of silt. Sections of a deck and bulkhead beam were encountered, and the first artifact, a musket flint, was recovered.

The construction of a larger coffer dam, 28 feet long and 15 feet wide, was then undertaken. Upon completion of this structure, full excavation of approximately a third of the site was begun. It was soon apparent that excavation was not progressing through the disassembled mass of collapsed timbers as expected, but was, in fact, progressing into the very hold of a relatively intact ship.

Within a short time, a veritable treasure trove of archeological materials was being discovered, most of which were in an excellent state of preservation owing to the oxygen free environment beneath the river muds in which they had been immersed. Medical instruments probably belonging to the flotilla's surgeon, Thomas Hamilton, were located within the crumbling remains of his field kit. Apothecary items such as medicine bottles (some with medicine still inside), mixing bowls, pill tiles, and mixing spatulas were located nearby. Domestic items such as dishware, waterjugs, a sandstone lantern, replete with wick, was recovered from the ship's intact stowage compartments. Though the ship's artillery had undoubtedly been salvaged in 1814, smaller items of a military significance remained. An empty munitions box with the inscription "No 3 D," perhaps indicating the firm of Christopher Deshon, the flotilla's munitions supplier, was found upside down in the hold. There were musket flints and cannonballs, a small swivel gun arm, and a gunner's pick. And there was a soldier's bayonet frog. Of great interest was a small swivel shot with a piece of wood impacted around it. This item was believed to have struck the ship in battle and lay for more than a century and a half with the wood it carried away with it still compressed around it.

There were carpentry tools, possibly belonging to flotilla carpenter Thomas Fleming, and mariner's equipment. A sounding lead, a pulley block, and a variety of other items of similar import were discovered, though only a few were recovered.

All artifacts which were removed form the site were transferred to the museum's historic Lore Oyster House at Solomons where a specialized conservation laboratory designed specifically to treat waterlogged artifacts had been established. There, the laborious task of stabilizing, mending, and cataloging was carried out.

The evaluation of the architecture of the vessel was an important objective of the survey. She proved to be a small craft, only 48'7" in length, and approximately 16' abeam, and 3' deep in hold. Entry into the hold was facilitated by a small, portable companion ladder, which was discovered lying intact within the wreck. Propulsion was by oars, as indicated by the presence of an oarsman's bench, uniquely contoured to fit the human posterior, and probably by sail as well. She was double ended and her bow section had been torn apart by an explosion.

Though only a small section of the Turtle Shell Wreck, without question one of Commodore Barney's Chesapeake Flotilla vessels, could be examined during the survey period, and artifact recovery was necessarily limited, much has been learned from those items which were retrieved.

Skipjack Prints at Ship's Store

Prints of skipjacks Lady Katie and Elsworth by John M. Barber may be ordered through the museum's Ship's Store. The 32"x22" prints sell for $40 plus shipping and sales tax. Samples exhibited at the store.

CMM receives Chapman Award donation

Through the kindness of the McQueen family, a $1,000 award to the late James R. McQueen, was donated to CMM. Given annually by the National Marine Manufactures Association, this 1980 Chapman Award will be used to help defray expenses for the Patuxent Small Craft Guild's next project, a double ended crab skiff.
## SUMMER CALENDAR AND PROGRAM SCHEDULE

All programs begin at the Museum at 7:45 p.m. unless otherwise noted. Programs are free to members; $1.00 to non-members unless otherwise noted. For additional information call Dorothy Ordiein 326-4162.

**John Olsen Chapter American Shipcarvers Guild:** suspended during summer months - resumes Sept.

**Solomons Island Model Boat Club:** First Wednesday of each month, 7:30 p.m.

**Patuxent Small Craft Guild:** Every Saturday, 10 a.m.

**Fossil Club:** Fourth Wednesday, 7:45 p.m. (Field trips planned for daytime hours).

**CMM Canoe Club:** First Saturday, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. (call 586-0767 for specific locations).

### JULY WEEKLY WEDNESDAYS:

- **8, 15, 22, 29:** varied programs includes workshops or classes for:
  - 8 sessions: woodcarving and model-making
  - 2 sessions: knots, ropework, nets
  - 2 sessions: canoeing for beginners
  - 2 sessions: pottery from local clay
  - 2 sessions: Creek Critters (estuarine)
  - 2 sessions: fossils (collect, identify)
  - 2 sessions: beachcombers' crafts

(Specific dates to be scheduled as persons enroll)

Sessions are from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. every Wednesday. Cost to members: $1.50 per session or $10.00 full time; Cost to non-members: $2.00 per session or $15.00 full time. To enroll: 326-4162 or 326-2128 (give name, phone number and classes desired).

**8-16 LADY KATIE CRUISES:** two- and three-day cruises ($50 a day). Pick up brochure at CMM or send stamped, self-addressed business envelope. Reservations MUST be made in advance.

**12 OFFICIAL FACE No. 4, Model Boat Club:** Lore Oyster House, Solomons, 1 p.m.

### AUGUST WEEKLY WEDNESDAYS:

**5, 12, 19:** see July calendar.

**9 OFFICIAL RACE No. 6, Model Boat Club:** Lore Oyster House, Solomons, 1 p.m.

**13 WATER QUALITY IN CALVERT COUNTY:** slide lecture by Richard Klein, Coordinator Maryland Save-Our-Streams Program, Department of Natural Resources.

**22 MEMBERS APPRECIATION NIGHT:** evening of entertainment for members only. Movies, live music, Tennison Cruise, candlelight tour of Drum Point Lighthouse. Bring picnic supper; drinks and dessert provided. Festivities begin 6 p.m.

**23 RAIN DATE FOR MEMBERS NIGHT**

**23 OFFICIAL RACE No. 7, Model Boat Club:** Calvert Marine Museum, Solomons, 1 p.m.

**25 THRU LADY KATIE CRUISES:** see July calendar.

### SEPT. 3

**AQUARIUM TOUR:** registration deadline (see September 23).

### SEPT.

**5 NATIONAL AQUARIUM TOUR:** bus trip to Baltimore and entrance fee for members $12.00; non-members $15.00. Registration due by August 31. Send check for total cost to: CMM Programs; include name, address, phone number with each reservation.

**23 THE CHESAPEAKE COLONISTS:** lecture by Thad W. Tate, Director, Institute of Early American History and Culture, College of William and Mary.

### OCT.

**1 MOVIE NIGHT:** Birth of a Bugeye; The Sailing Oysterman; Chesapeake (Bay Ecology)

**23 CRABS IN EAST COAST WETLANDS:** illustrated lecture by Dr. Austin Williams, of the Systematics Laboratory, National Marine Fisheries Service.

### WANTED

For copying or as a gift, a photograph of Stanley Adams' ferryboat *The Miss Constance*, which operated between Solomons and Millstone in the late 1930's.

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The BUGEYE TIMES is the quarterly newsletter for members of the Calvert Marine Museum. Named for the traditional sailing craft of the Bay, the bugeye was built in all its glory at Solomons, the "Bugeye Capital of the World." Membership dues are used to fund special Museum projects, programs, and printing of this newsletter. Address comments and membership applications to: Calvert Marine Museum, P.O. Box 97, Solomons, Maryland 20688. (301) 326-3719.