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Artifacts from Civil War blockade runner will be restored

BY JAY PRICE - jprice@newsobserver.com

KURE BEACH–There are hundreds of shipwrecks along North Carolina's treacherous coast, and some, like those of the ironclad USS Monitor or the Blackbeard flagship Queen Anne's Revenge, are famous.

But that of the hapless Civil War blockade runner Modern Greece, which sits just beyond the surf near Fort Fisher, is in many ways the most important.

The wreck, which was excavated 50 years ago, led to the creation of the state underwater archaeology unit that studies the other wrecks. It led to a state law to protect historic wreck sites from pilfering. It yielded such a large trove of artifacts that many have been used in experiments that advanced the tricky science of how to preserve historical treasures found underwater.

As the first of about 30 blockade runners sunk along the coast near Wilmington while trying to bring arms and vital commodities to the
Confederate states, the Modern Greece has an iconic status in North Carolina and maritime history.

And this week - just in time for events marking the 150th anniversary of its sinking - thousands of artifacts from the Modern Greece were recovered from underwater.

For the second time.

A team of East Carolina University graduate students and UNC Wilmington interns sponsored by the Friends of Fort Fisher waded into the muck of half-century-old storage tanks at the Department of Cultural Resources' Underwater Archaeology Branch facility on the grounds of the historic fort. Their job: Pull out the artifacts, clean and catalog them and put them in indoor tanks where they could finally begin to receive modern preservation treatment.

"It was just the right time to do this," said Mark Wilde-Ramsing, deputy state archaeologist and head of the Underwater Archaeology Branch. "There are a lot of reasons, but the bottom line is it would be a bit irresponsible to just leave it there. We don't even know what we have there."

In June, the state plans a seminar on the Modern Greece and other blockade runners. It also will throw open the labs at Fort Fisher so the public can see the artifacts and what it takes to preserve them.

New signs on the beach and roadside pointing out the wreck site are planned, and a researcher working with the state is seeking a federal grant to perform a full survey of the 30 blockade-runner wrecks off Wilmington, as well as facilities on land to put it all in proper context.

And the archaeologists are planning a modest spring expedition to use the latest gear to examine the Modern Greece site and create a proper record of it.

Broadly, all the activity is aimed at bringing more attention to the local blockade runners, Wilde-Ramsing said. They represent the largest collection of wrecks in the world dating from an unusually interesting period in naval architecture, and they have a central place in Civil War history.

Many are likely to be deteriorating quickly, but the state doesn't have a full picture of their location and condition.

**Ship stranded, shot**
The creation of the state's underwater archaeology and conservation lab - which state officials think may have been the nation's first - began, in a sense, on June 27, 1862.

The Modern Greece, a 210-foot English ship loaded with hundreds of tons of rifles, gunpowder and other goods, was creeping along the coast, making for the Cape Fear River and Wilmington, when it was spotted in the murky light just before dawn by two Union blockade ships.

They gave chase, and the heavily loaded ship ran aground, apparently while trying to get close enough to Fort Fisher for protection by the Confederate artillery there.

The passengers and crew escaped by lifeboat as both sides shelled the ship to keep the other from getting the valuable cargo.

According to historical accounts, some of the cargo was salvaged and brought ashore, though apparently part of a liquor shipment got no further than the Confederate soldiers on the beach.

Eventually, the sea claimed the rest.

Then, almost precisely 100 years later, in the spring of 1962, Navy divers stumbled on the wreck just off the beach while visiting the area essentially as tourists.

A violent storm had just cleared the thick bed of sand from the remains of the ship. The divers were startled to find much of the remaining cargo exposed, intact and all but begging to be pulled up.

State officials got wind of the find and asked the Navy to allow the divers to recover the cargo on behalf of the state.

By summer, 11 divers were working off a borrowed Coast Guard barge anchored over the site. Eventually the divers retrieved 11,500 pieces of cargo and other artifacts from the ship.

The challenge was what to do with the artifacts after they were brought ashore.

The glitzy part of maritime archaeology is the discovery of wrecks or the lifting of flashy artifacts like cannons from the sea.

**Artifacts in the tank**

But there's seldom enough money to cover the cost of storage tanks and buildings and the years of labor in cleaning away corrosion and accumulation of marine life. The years of care it can take to carefully leach
the salt out of a cannon doesn't make for the kind of exciting television coverage the cannon gets when it breaks the surface.

After the Modern Greece's cargo was brought up, some was treated and eventually sent to several museums and other places for display. But much was dumped first into temporary tanks on Navy property, then into tanks at Fort Fisher.

The tanks were initially covered by plywood, as there wasn't money for proper lids, said Leslie Bright, who was hired in 1964 as assistant at the lab and later ran it.

The plywood rotted away, and the water in the tanks filled with leaves from surrounding oaks, turning the water a swampy black.

In retrospect, Bright said, the rotting leaves may have been one of the best things that could have happened to the artifacts, as it leached the oxygen out of the water and slowed the deterioration.

Bright, who retired 13 years ago, dropped by this week to watch the students pull out the artifacts.

As he watched, he reminisced about having to learn how to preserve artifacts essentially from scratch, since there were few established techniques and every material has to be handled differently.

"No one was doing that sort of thing," he said. "We were trying anything our minds could come up with."

Also standing quietly nearby watching the students this week was Stan Register. Fifty years ago, he was 13 and working at a hot dog stand on the beach when the Navy divers showed up.

They were staying at a hotel across from the hotdog stand and one day invited him to come out on the barge and watch what they were doing. Register can remember seeing the outline of the wreck and the men working on it. He remembers the four buckets of bullets they let him take a few from, and the small cannon and the banded cases of rifles.

"I had no idea of the historical significance of what they were doing that day," said Register, who is now the chief of police on the Fort Fisher historic site and essentially guards the stuff he saw brought up that day. "I was just a kid then, so it was just more of an adventure than anything else."

**Dirty work**
Before the students arrived Monday for three days of work, most of the water was pumped out of the tanks, leaving a three-foot layer of mostly rotted leaves and muck to keep the artifacts wet.

It also kept the students wet.

Dave Buttaro, an ECU graduate student in maritime studies who was up to his knees in muck Tuesday handing artifact out to the other students, looked up at Nathan Henry, the assistant state archaeologist who oversees conservation.

"Man, you guys have left this alone so long that we're now engaged in habitat destruction," joked Buttaro.

The work was a kind of treasure hunt, with the students never quite knowing what they would pull up next.

There were British-made Enfield rifles that were a mainstay of the war on both sides, many of them fused together in bundles the shape of the boxes that had held them.

There was tableware. There were wicked-looking antler- and ebony-handled Bowie knives, some still in the remnants of scabbards. There were bayonets, cinder-block-sized stacks of tin sheets, ax heads and chisels.

The students processed the artifacts assembly-line style, hosing them off at a grilled table setup on sawhorses, then taking them to another table covered in white plastic where they were tagged and photographed and logged in a laptop.

Finally, the items were placed in tanks of clean water in a nearby building.

By Tuesday night, nearly everything was out of the last tank, and Henry, who had been down in the morass, decided it was time to call it a day.

"Well," he told the students, "I think you've got enough to keep you busy for awhile."

Maybe even another 50 years.

Price: 919-829-4526

**To learn more**

UNC Wilmington will host a public symposium on the Modern Greece on June 26. It will feature presentations by historians, archaeologists and divers with firsthand knowledge of the ship. Labs containing artifacts from the wreck also will be opened to the public for tours.
East Carolina University graduate student Nicole Wittig cleans artifacts from the shipwrecked blockade runner Modern Greece. She was part of a larger group from ECU's Maritime Studies spending a few days at Fort Fisher.

Civil War-era rifles sit in a tank of water and sodium carbonate after being pulled from the outdoor tank. It can take years to leach salt from artifacts.
Severe weather ahead? Students know the drill
By SHANNON KEITH
Thursday, March 8, 2012

ECU sophomore Tyler Moore forgot it was Severe Weather Awareness Week.

He got a “sudden reminder” at 12:10 p.m. Wednesday when the university fired up its outdoor notification speakers.

“They told us about the test but I forgot about it,” Moore, 19, said. “I remember now.”

The outdoor notification speakers are part of the ECU Alert system, which is designed to notify students and faculty of severe weather or emergency situations like a campuswide lockdown.

The university tested the system Wednesday as part of Severe Weather Awareness Week drills being conducted statewide.

Pitt County Schools also drilled staff and students. Officials said a rash of deadly tornadoes last week and an April 2011 outbreak that killed 24 in North Carolina underscore how important the tests are.

“We’ve conducted tests of our ECU Alert system in the past but not in conjunction with Severe Weather Week,” said Tom Pohlman, environmental manager in the Department of Environmental Health and Safety. “Because
of last year’s tornadoes that passed through eastern North Carolina, we thought it was a good idea to use this week to test the outdoor speakers and to remind people to be prepared.”

Students at many Pitt County middle and elementary schools practiced emergency procedures during class Wednesday morning.

“The high schools are in the middle of ACT testing this week,” Mayo said. “They will be conducting drills on Friday.”

Last year’s tornadoes, like the one that damaged homes in Farmville and destroyed Greene County Middle School on April 16, demonstrate the need for emergency drills.

“It’s been less that a year since the tornadoes in Greene County,” said Mayo. “And Pitt County certainly gets its fair share of tornado warnings and watches. We are constantly reminded of why we hold these drills and why we need to be prepared.”

Pohlman said the focus of ECU’s drill was to test speakers on east and west campuses. Forty-one were installed in 16 locations in 2009 with funds provided through the UNC General Administration safety initiative. The university has added 19 more in the past two years through internal funding sources. The newest have been placed based on feedback on where it was hardest to hear messages during last semester’s lockdown, Pohlman said.

Wednesday’s test began with a tone followed by a verbal message. Emails, text alerts and plasma screens carried a test message as well.

“All of the speakers are sounding off as they should,” Pohlman said. “We only had a minor problem in synchronizing all of the speakers, which we are working on right now.”

The speakers are “far more effective” than sirens because voice messages inform students of the nature of the emergency, Pohlman said. “It’s so much better to have a system in place where you can give the students specific information ... It makes a big difference.”

March, April and May are the deadliest months for tornadoes in North Carolina, said Tom Lonka, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Newport.

“March is a transitional month where you have the potential for severe weather,” Lonka said. “Tornadoes tend to peak in April and May.”
However, the forecast through the next few weeks looks good, Lonka said. “We have a front coming in this weekend, but we are not predicting any severe weather,” Lonka said. “After that, the next few weeks look like they will be pretty dry, so we look like we are in good shape right now.”

Contact Shannon Keith at skeith@reflector.com or 252-329-9638.
Editorial: Study feeds public safety debate
Thursday, March 8, 2012

Greenville elected officials have traditionally been quick to separate the community’s struggle with crime between the level of recorded criminal activity and citizens’ perception of public safety. While annual reports show a steady drop in the number of crimes committed, few longtime residents of this community would agree that they feel safer than even five or 10 years ago.

At tonight’s City Council meeting, officials will hear otherwise. A recent study by the East Carolina University Criminal Justice Department found relatively little fear of crime among residents and a general satisfaction with law enforcement. While that seems to contradict a running narrative in the public debate on this issue, it offers a new perspective that will be compelling for citizens and officials to digest.

Greenville is only months removed from a municipal election that reinforced public safety as the community’s top priority. Both first-term members of the city’s leadership, Mayor Allen Thomas and At-Large member Dennis Mitchell, struck repeatedly on the issue during the campaign, and joined returning members of the council by ranking it again among officials’ top goals at a January planning session.

The resignation of Police Chief William Anderson last month rekindled a debate about crime statistics, one this community has endured before. The departing chief touted the department’s success in reducing crime under his leadership, pointing to a 17.5 percent dip from 2010 to 2011 and a 27 percent drop in the number of crimes reported since 2007. That led to allegations from some corners that the figures did not match perception and were out of kilter with citizens’ views.

Now comes the East Carolina study, commissioned as part of the city’s crime task force, that found 92 percent of respondents harbored little or no fear of crime in their neighborhoods. Researchers conducted phone interviews with 386 residents to solicit their views and contend that sample is statistically significant enough to reflect public opinion. Again, this seems an instance where the conclusions do not align with opinions commonly expressed in the public discourse.
There are times when the common wisdom does not accurately reflect reality, and this may well be one of those instances, despite the statistical evidence to the contrary. Certainly all desire a city free from fear as well as crime, but it seems that significant work is required for Greenville to reach that goal. Perhaps tonight’s study claims otherwise, but a healthy dose of skepticism is warranted.
Dogwoods are under attack by blight and mildew. But one survivor became the basis of a hybrid line.

**NCSU produces hybrid dogwood that can withstand disease**

BY JOHN MURAWSKI - jmurawski@newsobserver.com

North Carolina's state flower is sick.

The native dogwood tree and its iconic spring blossom are under attack by two diseases, one of which goes by the ominous Latin name destructiva. It's an apt description for a fungal blight that has wiped out entire dogwood groves in the Appalachian Mountains.

Down here in the lowlands, Triangle homeowners may have noticed a powdery mildew coating the leaves of their backyard dogwood trees. This disease, which appeared in this state less than two decades ago, stunts, deforms and sometimes kills native dogwood saplings.

Now, a decade of research into potential solutions has yielded a bulletproof dogwood that not only repels diseases but produces larger, showier flowers. Samples are being distributed to growers around the state for testing, and the tree could be available at local nurseries - and in local gardens - as soon as 2014.
"It's an exceptional tree," said N.C. State University horticultural scientist Thomas Ranney, who has been testing it for years. "This will represent the state-of-the-art in that species."

The flowering dogwood, Cornus florida, which grows in about a third of this country, remains one of the most popular flowering landscape trees for gardeners and developers. It's a cash crop for North Carolina growers, reaping between $5 million and $6 million in annual retail sales, nearly 10 percent of the nation's total dogwood sales.

If NCSU's newly developed dogwood variety lives up to its promise, it could yield up to $20 million in sales for North Carolina growers within 10 years, said Ross Williams, executive director of the N.C. Nursery and Landscape Association in Raleigh. Those sales would come not only from the clones of the select line, but also from hybrids carrying its superior genes.

**Trees' secret names**

Ranney has already started crossing his peerless tree with nine Asian dogwoods. His goal is to create red-flowered evergreen dogwood shrubs and other combinations of those unusual qualities.

"There's a real potential to reinvent the dogwood," said Ranney, a researcher at NCSU's Mountain Horticultural Crops Research and Extension Center near Asheville.

To boost the marketing potential of the master plant, the association will coin an alluring name in the coming months, putting the moniker through its paces before a focus group. Potential names for this tree, which could unlock its economic potential in the garden market, are a tightly-guarded secret.

"The name can impact marketing," Williams said. "We need a million-dollar name."

For now the tree is known as NCJAM6, and its origin will remain murky. It was found growing wild somewhere in the Pisgah National Forest, thriving in a wasteland of lifeless dogwood trunks and carcasses that were wiped out by the dogwood anthracnose, or Discula destructiva.

**Hybrid investments**

NCJAM6 was one of 50 blight survivors Ranney and fellow researchers discovered in Western North Carolina during four years of searching the region, and it proved superior to the others by every measure.

Research into the genetic potential of NCJAM6 has been aided by a $100,000 grant from the landscape association to promote the creation of the
new hybrids. The N.C. Biotechnology Center kicked in $100,000 of its own to develop a method of micropropagation that will enable labs to mass-produce millions of clones from tissue samples, measuring just one-sixteenth of an inch, sliced from a mother plant.

Panther Creek Nursery in Willow Spring, 15 miles south of Raleigh, has been testing five other dogwood varieties for Ranney. It expects to receive its first specimens of the yet-unnamed plant this spring for testing. Dogwoods are the fifth best-selling crop for the wholesale nursery out of about 200 varieties sold, manager Alan Erwin said.

Panther Creek, which has seen dogwood sales increase year after year, has been selling other varieties billed as disease resistant, but Ranney said nothing on the market can compare to NCJAM6.

Murawski: 919-829-8932

**Hybrid plants bred at NCSU**

N.C. State University scientists have introduced hundreds of hybridized or selected plant varieties for agricultural and landscape use. Here are some examples of NCSU’s horticultural creations:

- **Merlot redbud**: A more compact and drought-resistant variety
- **Galletta strawberry**: Ripens 7 to 10 days before Chandler, the most widely grown strawberry in this state
- **Dwarf butterfly bushes**: Dwarf varieties (2-3 feet tall) that are less than half the size of standard specimens
- **Double Take flowering quince**: A thornless, nonfruited ornamental with double flowers

Source: N.C. State University
Watch your favorite rock stars for credit

By Daniel de Vise

We’re seeing a trend in higher education toward increasingly ambitious online courses. Instructors seem to be responding to the promise of a mass audience by bringing their most adventurous course offerings online. Why teach an inspired course to 50 students at Harvard when you can tape it for download by a worldwide audience of thousands?

Today, the online extension of Berklee College of Music announced a rock history course for the ages. Taught by longtime Boston Globe music writer Steve Morse, Rock History will feature original video footage from George Clinton, Bob Weir of the Grateful Dead, Mike Mills of R.E.M., Joe Perry of Aerosmith and an Isley brother, among others.

Here’s Bob Weir on Janis Joplin: “She was a girl who didn’t have much going in life, and she discovered that she had a pretty amazing gift in her voice and her presentation. And it amazed her.”

In another snippet, Ernie Isley tells of watching the Beatles on Ed Sullivan, sitting next to Jimi Hendrix.

Berklee is hosting an online open house tomorrow. The course ain’t free — tuition is $1,200 to $1,400, depending on whether you’re taking it alone or as part of a certificate program.

Then again, the course plays like an online Rock and Roll Fantasy Camp, and those aren’t cheap, either.
USC graduates cast shadows as they stand for the national anthem at the start of the school's 128th commencement ceremony last year. About 167,000 people, or about one-half of 1% of all student-loan borrowers, owe more than $200,000, the New York Fed said in a report, which drew from Equifax credit data. The average balance per borrower: $23,300. (Genaro Molina, Los Angeles Times)

Report on college loan delinquency rate raises alarms

As many as 1 in 4 borrowers was carrying a past-due student loan balance in the third quarter, a much higher delinquency rate than previously thought, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of New York.

By Don Lee, Los Angeles Times
9:42 PM PST, March 5, 2012
Reporting from Washington

Some experts have called the nation's soaring college debt load a "ticking time bomb" — a looming crisis threatening young adults, their families and the broader economy.

A new report raises even more alarms: It's likely that as many as 1 in 4 borrowers was carrying a past-due student loan balance in the third quarter, the Federal Reserve Bank of New York said Monday.

That's a much higher delinquency rate than previously thought. By a more conventional measure, the New York Fed said, 5.4 million of 37 million borrowers with student loan balances had at least one past-due student loan account — a 14.6% rate.

Many educators are concerned about the increasing financial squeeze on
college students and their families and the repercussions for the nation's economy.

W. Norton Grubb, a professor at UC Berkeley's School of Education, is worried that rising debt levels are forcing some students to drop out. Only 40% to 50% of those enrolling at universities such as the California State University schools end up completing their degrees, he said.

Such figures have helped bolster a long-held belief by scholars that America's declining or stagnant college graduation rates have become an Achilles' heel in the competitive global economy.

The New York Fed report concluded that "student loan debt is not just a concern for the young. Parents and the federal government shoulder a substantial part of the post-secondary education bill."

Skyrocketing debts may be pushing some graduates into areas of work that have a bigger immediate payoff, such as finance, as opposed to what they want to do or what may produce more benefits for them and society in the long run.

"The debt levels are distorting what fields people are taking on," Grubb said.

The New York Fed said the past-due balances on student loans amounted to $85 billion, or about 10% of the total owed. The same 10% rate applies on average to other types of consumer delinquent debt, such as mortgages and credit cards.

But Fed researchers said delinquency figures for student loans understate the magnitude of the problem. That's because the calculations don't take into account that federally guaranteed loans, which make up the bulk of student debt, typically don't require repayment while borrowers are still in school and for six months after graduation.

If those who are temporarily exempt from making payments are excluded, the report said, the number of borrowers with past-due balances would jump to 27% of the total. And the outstanding balances that are late would rise to 21%. Both figures are about double the unadjusted rates.

As for private, non-guaranteed student loans, Moody's Investors Service
reported recently that the default rate in the fourth quarter was 5.1%, about the same as a year earlier.

Still, that rate is about double what it was before the 2007-09 recession. Moreover, the Moody's report noted that some private student loan measures indicated that the pace of defaults is rising and that the problem isn't likely to get better any time soon.

"High unemployment will keep defaults high," Moody's said.

Economists, meanwhile, have differing opinions about the strain of student loans to the broader economy. But there's reason to be concerned on this front.

When asked about such risks by a lawmaker in a hearing last week, Federal Reserve Chairman Ben S. Bernanke replied, "Well, student loans are becoming a very large category of loans."

Indeed, the New York Fed put the latest outstanding student loan balance at $870 billion. That's more than the total credit card debt, $693 billion, and car loan debt, $730 billion.

What's different about student loans is that most of the lending is done by the U.S. government. Even so, as Bernanke noted, if federal lending isn't well managed, it could hurt taxpayers.

Bernanke, in his exchange with lawmakers, added a personal dimension to the student loan issue, saying that his son in medical school expects to owe $400,000 when he graduates.

About 167,000 people, or about one-half of 1% of all student-loan borrowers, owe more than $200,000, the New York Fed said in its report, which drew from Equifax credit data. The average balance per borrower: $23,300.

don.lee@latimes.com