



Office of the Dean

Thomas Harriot College of Arts and Sciences

East Carolina University • 1002 Bate Building • Greenville, NC 27858-4353

252-328-6249 office • 252-328-4263 fax

OLD SPARTA VESSEL UNCOVERED IN TAR RIVER

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
lg/August 8, 2008

CONTACT: Lacey Gray
(252) 737-1754
grayl@ecu.edu

Greenville – This summer, East Carolina University’s Program in Maritime Studies was awarded a \$25,000 grant, which currently is funding preliminary archaeological research of a vessel discovered eroding out of the banks of the Tar River near Old Sparta.

Dr. Brad Rodgers, professor in Thomas Harriot College of Arts and Sciences and primary investigator on the project, is leading a team through assessment of the Old Sparta Vessel, which is located in shallow water next to the Highway 42 Bridge at Old Sparta. The site, which is highly visible from the highway bridge during times of low water levels, has been creating excitement within the community for several years, according to Rodgers.

With the assistance of two graduate student technicians, Liz Wyllie and Theresa Hicks, Rodgers and his team are creating a detailed map of the site, carefully searching through historical documents, and analyzing the hull structure and artifacts discovered in the vessel.

Rodgers and his team lay face down in the river with masks and snorkels, recording the wreck on plastic sheets that float near their workstations. The information recorded on these “floating desks,” is later transferred to a main site plan.

“This is a pre-disturbance survey with no excavation and only recovery of diagnostic artifacts,” says Rodgers. “We have been working both in the archives and on site for about six weeks.”

Preliminary analysis, performed in previous years by Maritime Studies alumnae Dave Moore and Sam Newell, tentatively identified the vessel as a possible Pole Boat of the early 19th century, a rare vessel type never before studied in archaeological context. Rodgers says the fasteners of this vessel, nails and treenails, would tend to verify the early date of this wreck.

“The wreck is a fairly large vessel for this far up the river at 85-feet long by 14-feet in beam,” says Rodgers. “Virtually no historic mention is made in any of the area newspapers and histories of an early vessel wrecking near Old Sparta from the first half of the 19th century.”

According to Rodgers, the mystery intensified when coal, cinders and bricks were located within the wreck. The suspicion that this was a steamboat was confirmed by the location of cylinder timbers, only used to support the paddle wheels of steamers. However, to complicate matters, the fasteners and diagnostic artifacts indicate early construction, says Rodgers, while the hull demonstrates a sophisticated steamship design used for very shallow rivers, a design not developed until later in the century.

“So researchers are faced with a conundrum, a basic contradiction of evidence – early fasteners within a later more sophisticated hull type. So research continues,” says Rodgers.

Rodgers and his team have invited the public to visit the Old Sparta Vessel site this Monday, August 11, and Tuesday, August 12. Visitors should wear tennis shoes and shorts that they do not mind getting wet. To access the site, which is approximately 20 miles outside of Greenville, take Highway 43 to Old Sparta Road. Turn right on

Old Sparta Road (Route 42), go over the bridge and turn right at the landing. Rodgers and his team will be visible from the landing.

Rodgers specializes in nautical archaeology, conservation science, ship construction and the transition of sail to steam, wood to iron hulls, and Great Lakes history and archaeology.

For more information about the Old Sparta Vessel, please contact the Program in Maritime Studies at 252-328-6097 or email Rodgers at rodgersb@ecu.edu.

###