



Guiding 'Spirit'

Ancestor of South Carolina tall ship found buried in silt near Southport, N.C.

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On a July day in 1912 on North Carolina's Cape Fear River, the captain of the schooner Frances Elizabeth went below to start the engine.

The old, wooden pilot schooner had been built in Charleston and sailed in Charleston Harbor for about 25 years. It was bound from Southport to Wilmington and had been fitted with a new 100-horsepower gasoline engine the year before.

Boom. Leaking gasoline exploded into a fireball that reportedly sent one captain 20 feet in the air and fatally burned the other.

The boat sank on the spot.

Ninety-two years after its fiery death, the Frances Elizabeth's charred hull was found under about 2 feet of silt in shallow water near Southport, N.C. by underwater archaeologist Richard Lawrence.

"There's heavily burned charcoal and melted brass and glass," Lawrence said by phone from his office in Kure Beach, N.C. "There was a hot fire there. We feel pretty confident that this is the Frances Elizabeth."

Lawrence knew the schooner would be of interest to Charlestonians because the Frances Elizabeth is the ancestor of the tall ship, the Spirit of South Carolina, which is being built on Ansonborough Field.

Tri-Coastal Marine used Frances' plans, found in the Smithsonian Institution's archives, to design the tall ship. The Spirit is planned as a training vessel for young people. It will be almost twice the size of the Frances Elizabeth and reach 12 1/2 knots under sail.

Shipwright Mark Bayne and his crew laid the keel in 2001 and started building, only to stop in the summer of 2003 for lack of funds. The S.C. Maritime Heritage Foundation, which started the project, has reorganized and is raising money. About \$4 million will finish the job, foundation officials say.

For now, the boat is just a keel, a bowstem, a sternpost and 35 live oak frames sticking up like dinosaur ribs over the green fencing of its makeshift shipyard on Concord Street.

CHARLESTON FAMILY TIES

Although the Frances Elizabeth's bones now rest in North Carolina, its life started in Charleston Harbor.

It was built and launched in 1879 by Samuel J. Pregnall & Brothers Shipyard on the Cooper River waterfront within hailing distance of the Spirit of South Carolina's current shipyard.

Samuel Pregnall's great-grandson, Wally Pregnall, 44, has a photograph of his ancestor as an older man, in an odd pose with a fish on a string in one hand and a white cat in the other.

Pregnall said his great-grandfather bought a fish at the wharf every day for this favorite cat.

"He looks like a crazy old man," he said, laughing.

Sam Pregnall named the boat after his wife, Frances Elizabeth Richardson of Sullivan's Island.

The Frances Elizabeth was designed along the lines of the America, a racing yacht built to beat the British in 1851 for the prize of a large silver ewer. The America beat the British badly, and the silver ewer became known as America's Cup.

The America had been designed around the lines of the fast pilot schooners of the mid-19th century.

Speed was key to harbor pilots in those days, said retired Charleston harbor pilot Randall Swan Jr., 67.

"(Pilot schooners) were really the first seagoing boats designed for speed that didn't have to carry any cargo, so there was no (design) compromise there," he said.

"Back in that era, pilots didn't have an association," Swan said. "The first pilot to 'speak a ship,' or hail a ship, would get the job. They had to have fast, seaworthy boats."

His great-grandfather, George Henry Swan, was the Frances Elizabeth's first captain.

Randall Swan is glad to know where the Frances Elizabeth lies.

FINDING THE SCHOONER

Finding the boat was a matter of chance and circumstance.

In 1993, Lawrence and his team of underwater archaeologists were surveying the Cape Fear River for shipwrecks in advance of dredging when they got a call on the radio from a passing ferry boat captain.

Capt. John "Tookie" Potter told him that the wreck of a wooden boat lay at that spot. Potter remembered seeing it as a boy.

Lawrence trawled the area with a magnetometer and found three "targets." He probed the sand over one and found a structure. He did some research and found newspaper accounts of the explosion on the Frances Elizabeth.

Two years ago, he got a phone call from Charlie Sneed, a director of the S.C.

Maritime Heritage Foundation, who told him about Charleston's tall ship project.

Lawrence told Sneed he thought he'd found Frances' skeleton.

"We periodically would talk to Charlie," Lawrence said. "We kept saying 'We're going to get back there and take a look.' "

Lawrence went back to the site in July, stepped out of his boat and waded around.

"We finally felt something with our toes sticking out of the bottom and brought up a brass stuffing box," he said. "The next day we went back with a small hand-held dredge system and took an overall length. It corresponded to the Frances Elizabeth."

The wreck likely was salvaged of its valuables in 1912, Lawrence said.

So far, his divers have pulled up copper fasteners (nails), copper hull sheathing, a copper tack, the stuffing box, which ensures water tightness where the rudder passes through the hull, and a bronze elbow fitting.

Sneed said he hopes those pieces will be lent to the foundation's maritime heritage display.

Or maybe, he said, one of the old schooner's copper nails, driven into the boat 125 years ago, could be hammered into the new tall ship, and a piece of the Frances Elizabeth could find its way back to Charleston harbor.

WANT TO HELP?

The [South Carolina Maritime Heritage Foundation](#) is researching the life and times on the Charleston peninsula's waterfront from post-Civil War until the early 1900s. It seeks information, art, photographs and artifacts. If you can help, call the foundation at 722-1030.

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