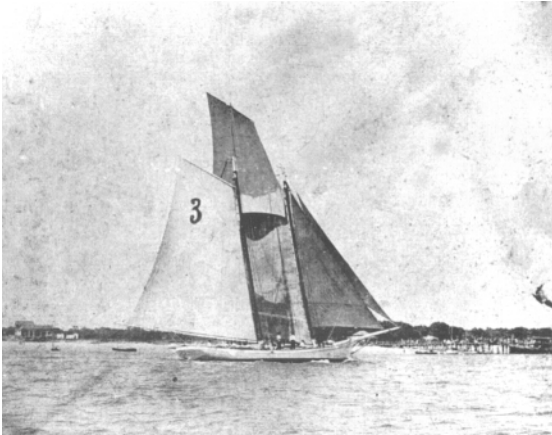


The Fiery Death of the Frances Elizabeth

Reported by Charlie Sneed – South Carolina Maritime Heritage Foundation

The sunken remains of the historical ancestor to the *Spirit of South Carolina*, pilot schooner *Frances Elizabeth*, have been positively located in North Carolina. Thanks to four years of research, perseverance, luck, and the cooperation, assistance and goodwill of others, the sunken wreck of the *Frances Elizabeth* has been located by North Carolina Underwater Director Richard Lawrence and his dive team. The historical vessel is buried under two to three feet of sediment in relatively shallow water on the Cape Fear River, just north of Southport.



Frances Elizabeth racing in 1889 pilot regatta.
Picture courtesy of the Amelia Island
Museum of History

Built by the well known Samuel J. Pregnall & Bros. shipyard and launched in Charleston in 1879, the *Frances Elizabeth* served as a working pilot schooner for some thirty four years. This is an amazing feat for a southern wooden vessel and a testament to her construction and fastening technology. Sailed by the Charleston Harbor pilots for approximately fifteen years, she was sold to pilots in Fernandina Beach Florida, in 1894. After sixteen years service in Florida, she was once again sold to three harbor pilots in Southport, North Carolina in 1910.

As new motor power technology was proliferating, working sailing vessels were quickly becoming a relic of the past. In keeping with the new times, the Southport pilots purchased and installed an expensive Globe marine gasoline engine (valued in 1911 at \$5,000).

Tragedy struck in July, 1912 when, according to The Morning Star (Wilmington) newspaper account, the *Frances Elizabeth* was destroyed.

*“ Captain Bertram Adkins, son of Captain J.J. Adkins, was horribly, probably fatally, burned Sunday afternoon, when gasoline leaking from the tank of the pilot boat **Frances Elizabeth**, bound*

from Southport to Wilmington, caused an explosion of the engine and tank about two miles this side of Southport, setting fire to the craft, which was consumed by the flames.”

This summer, almost exactly 125 years after the *Frances Elizabeth* was proudly launched in Charleston, Richard Lawrence and his underwater archaeology dive team located the charred remains, almost exactly where local lore suggested it would be. After a day’s work of measuring the vessel, the team recovered several artifacts including: copper alloy fasteners, the bronze stuffing box, a bronze 90 degree elbow (probably from the engine), and a piece of copper sheathing which covered the ship bottom.



Richard Lawrence shows stuffing box



Copper alloy fasteners



Copper sheathing and copper tack



Bronze fitting

It appears the engine and other valuable artifacts had already been salvaged at some earlier date.

Richard and his team are planning to dive on the vessel’s remains again soon to take more detailed measurements and examine the construction more closely. Hopefully they will find a few more interesting artifacts, some of which Richard has agreed to return to Charleston when there is a permanent exhibit facility.

Many thanks to all those maritime enthusiasts who have assisted in discovering this fascinating chapter of South Carolina’s maritime history.