

## MARINE ARCHEOLOGY IN TEXAS



One of the 1554 Spanish fleet ships sails in the Gulf of Mexico.

367-mile arc of the coast, encompassing about 3,800 square miles of water in the Gulf of Mexico alone. When navigable streams are added in, the total water area in Texas grows to more than 5,200 square miles. Almost all these waters are considered to be publicly owned, and by law all historic properties and archeological sites in public waters belong to the state. The THC is the state agency that bears the responsibility of protecting these resources for the benefit of the people of Texas.

Marine archeology is an essential part of the THC's mission because the Gulf of Mexico and our bays, bayous, and rivers have figured prominently in Texas history. Prehistoric groups and European colonists alike settled along the waterways, which provided a reliable source of fish and shellfish, as well as readily accessible transportation corridors for people and goods.

But those waterways could be treacherous. Thousands of boats and ships now lie quietly submerged in Texas, including every type of craft from dugout canoes to keelboats, sloops to square riggers, and river steamboats to coastal steamers. Along with the cargo they carried, these vessels constitute a significant part of our heritage.

In 1554, three ships returning to Spain laden with gold, silver, and other New World plunder sank during a storm near Padre Island. About 400 years later the state of Texas challenged treasure hunters for ownership of artifacts looted from one of the three shipwrecks, the *Espíritu Santo*, an action that ultimately led to the establishment of the Texas Historical Commission (THC) marine archeology program.

### WHAT LIES BENEATH THE WATER

The territorial waters of Texas are vast. They extend approximately 10.4 miles offshore along the

Though they are certainly important, boats and ships are not the only archeological resources in Texas waters. The gradual rise in sea level over the last several thousand years has inundated human campsites and settlements that were previously on dry land. Archeologists believe there is a good chance these submerged sites, the only evidence of prehistoric occupation of that land, may still be preserved under layers of protective sediments.

One thing is clear: Our underwater archeological resources, whether wrecked vessels or submerged settlements, deserve to be safeguarded.

### FROM 16TH-CENTURY SHIPS TO THE ANTIQUITIES CODE

The state law that protects archeological sites, the Antiquities Code of Texas, was enacted in direct response to the looting of the *Espíritu Santo* in the 1960s. Even today, the Antiquities Code remains one of the strongest state laws in the United States for the protection of shipwrecks. It declares all pre-1900s wrecks and their contents to be State Archeological Landmarks and therefore protected by law. Shipwrecks that occurred more than 50 years ago also are protected by the Antiquities Code. Penalties for disturbing historic shipwrecks without a THC-issued permit include fines and even jail time.

The State Marine Archeologist, assisted primarily by select members of the Texas Archeological Stewardship Network (TASN), is the person charged with overseeing the THC's program to locate, record, and protect submerged historic resources. The TASN, founded in 1984, is a group of highly trained and motivated avocational archeologists who work for the THC as unpaid volunteers. The stewards' efforts in preservation, education, and research are an essential part of the THC's archeology program.

Of the approximately 100 TASN members, a few, classified as marine stewards, are experienced scuba divers with special training in investigating historic shipwrecks. Other volunteers, usually members of an organized group interested in marine archeology, sometimes assist the State Marine Archeologist and the marine stewards.

### EXTRAORDINARY DISCOVERIES

Since the Antiquities Code became law, THC archeologists have investigated some of the most important historic shipwrecks in the world. In the early 1970s, they excavated the *San Esteban*, one of the three 1554 wrecks near Padre Island. The artifacts from the *San Esteban*, now housed in the Corpus Christi Museum of Science and History, demonstrate the impact of Spanish colonialism on the New World better than almost any artifact collection anywhere. The exhibits explore not only the ships and artifacts, but also the people associated with them and the times in which they lived.



ROBERT CLARK

In 1996, a giant cofferdam was built around the *Belle* and the water inside pumped out, allowing an almost dry-land excavation. This photo shows the shipwreck as it was just beginning to be uncovered from the muddy bottom of Matagorda Bay.

Perhaps the best-known THC archeology project was the 1996–1997 excavation of the *Belle*, a small 17th-century ship lost in Matagorda Bay by French explorer Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, when he attempted to set up a French colony on the Gulf Coast. Archeologists recovered approximately one million artifacts from the vessel, representing every kind of item necessary to establish a colony thousands of miles away from the home country. The excavation and accompanying archival research shed new light on the events surrounding La Salle’s expedition and answered many questions about 17th-century shipbuilding. Furthermore, the innovative methods used to excavate the wreck set new standards for marine archeology investigations.

Most THC marine projects receive less public notice than the *San Esteban* and *Belle* excavations. One of the State Marine Archeologist’s responsibilities is to compile and maintain a list of shipwrecks in Texas, which currently includes nearly 2,000 vessels. A valuable management tool, this database helps the THC protect known wrecks from damage during development projects such as channel dredging and oil-well drilling. And it helps archeologists decide which wrecks to investigate next—possibly to discover another sunken vessel of international significance.

#### FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

If you need archeological assistance, contact:

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