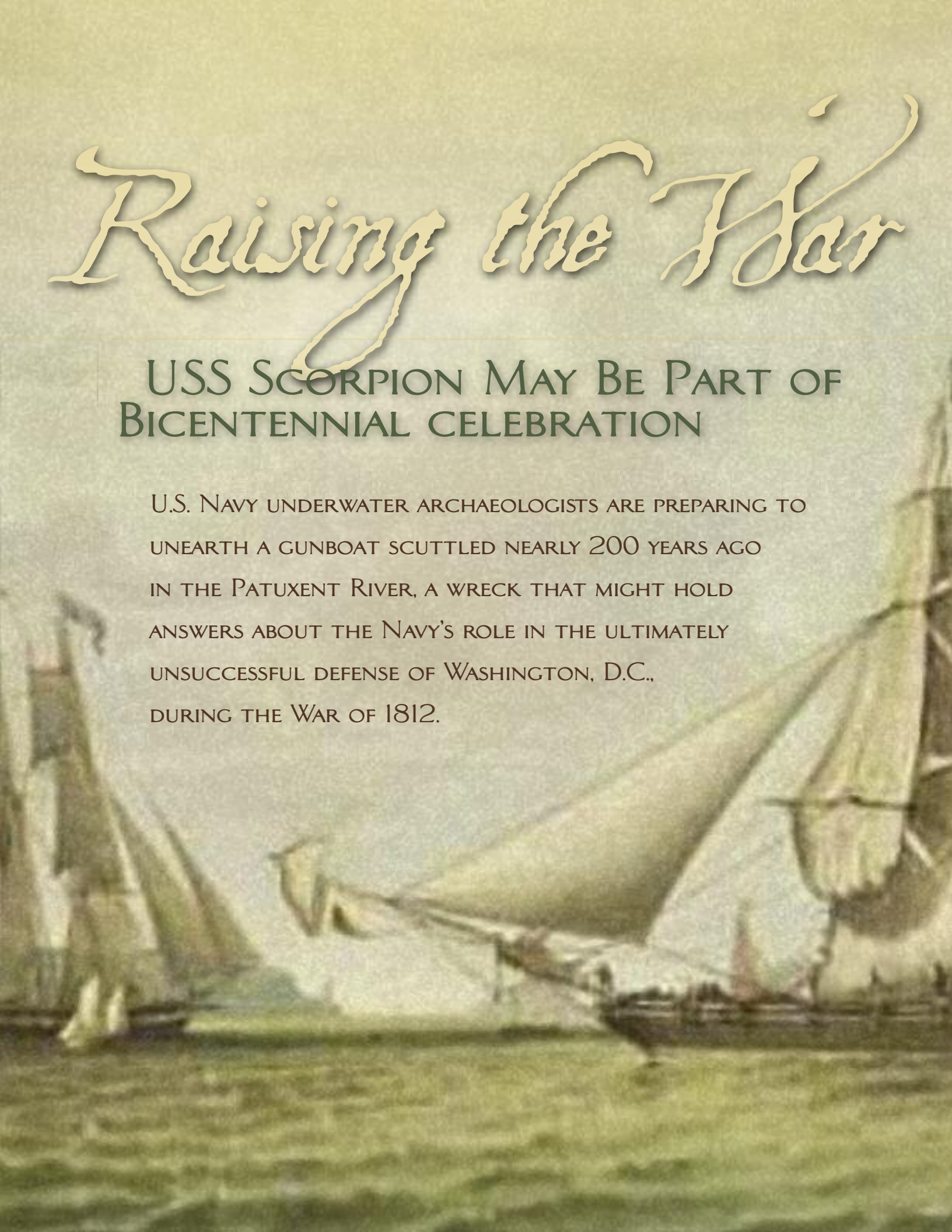
Raising the War

USS Scorpion May Be Part of Bicentennial Celebration

U.S. Navy underwater archaeologists are preparing to unearth a gunboat scuttled nearly 200 years ago in the Patuxent River, a wreck that might hold answers about the Navy's role in the ultimately unsuccessful defense of Washington, D.C., during the War of 1812.



# of 1812

It is possible that the wreck, discovered in 1979 in a forgotten turn of the Maryland river's murky waters, is that of USS Scorpion, the flagship of a scrappy, outgunned American flotilla commanded by Commodore Joshua Barney that doggedly harassed the British Navy in a bid to break up a blockade that threatened Eastern Seaboard cities in 1814.

Officials are hoping to determine the boat's identity as part of the bicentennial celebrations of the War of 1812.

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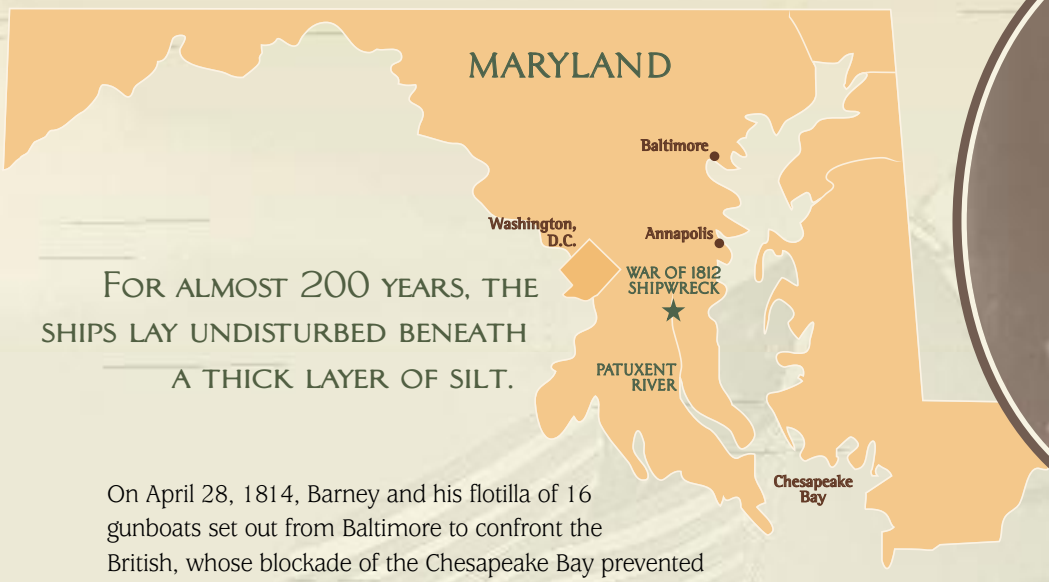
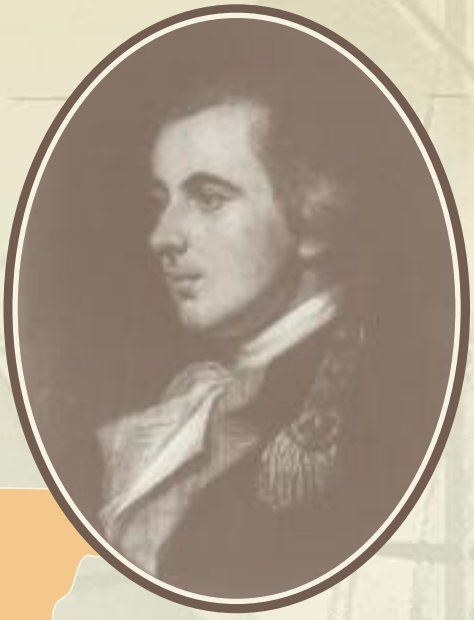
"Finding Barney's sword," joked George Schwarz, head conservator and an archaeologist at the U.S. Navy's Underwater Archaeology Branch at the Naval History and Heritage Command (NHHC), "or the name Scorpion painted on the side would be nice."





Commodore Joshua Barney.

FOR ALMOST 200 YEARS, THE SHIPS LAY UNDISTURBED BENEATH A THICK LAYER OF SILT.

On April 28, 1814, Barney and his flotilla of 16 gunboats set out from Baltimore to confront the British, whose blockade of the Chesapeake Bay prevented the U.S. Navy from defending against raids on Baltimore, Norfolk and Washington, D.C. Throughout the summer, Barney and his crew baited the British, attacking and then retreating into the shallow waters of the Patuxent River.

Barney's flotilla did not stop the invading forces, but they did divert resources and buy time for Washington to prepare its defenses.

At the end of the summer, facing overwhelming odds and imminent capture, Barney disembarked his men from the flotilla and marched to the defense of Washington, D.C, and the Battle of Bladensburg.

Left behind on the Patuxent, Lt. Solomon Frazier followed Barney's last orders and scuttled the flotilla rather than be captured. When British Rear Admiral George Cockburn arrived at the scene, he was just in time to describe 16 ships from this "formidable and so much vaunted flotilla" as they were "in quick succession blown to atoms."

For almost 200 years, the ships lay undisturbed beneath a thick layer of silt. As the waters shifted over time, some vessels likely disappeared beneath the surrounding marshlands, while others faded into the riverbed.

Then, in 1979, the Patuxent River Submerged Cultural Resources Survey team discovered a wreck and, on board, a series of artifacts that suggested it might be Scorpion:

- A set of surgical scissors that might have belonged to the surgeon of the flotilla hospital, likely located on Scorpion.
- A grog cup with the initials "C.W." stamped on one side, perhaps belonging to Caesar Wentworth, an African American cook in the flotilla.

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THE BASICS ABOUT THE SUNKEN MILITARY CRAFT ACT

The U.S. Constitution grants the U.S. government property rights to all sunken military craft, regardless of age, unless the Navy expressly gives up its rights to the craft. Divers should be aware that although diving on military sites is permitted, disturbing a sunken military craft or removing its contents can have significant penalties.

The 2005 Sunken Military Craft Act reinforces indefinite government ownership of U.S. sunken military craft. Specifically, the Act protects sunken ships and aircraft from "any activity directed at sunken military craft that disturbs, removes, or injures any sunken military craft." The Act protects craft wherever they are located (even internationally). NHHC administers a permitting regime that allows applicants to conduct research or other activity on sunken military craft when there is sufficient academic, historical, and educational value.

Artifacts recovered from the 1979 archaeological investigation include ceramic bowls, a tooth key, a pair of surgical scissors, a gunner's pick, a clay pipe and stem, a grog cup and a sounding weight.

Detail of a grog cup with the incised letters "CW" which archaeologists believe may be the initials of USS Scorpion's cook Caesar Wentworth.

Iron block before conservation treatment, likely part of the ship's ballast, recovered during the 2011 field investigation.

Iron surgical scissors recovered during the 1979 field investigation (left) and the 2011 field investigation (right).

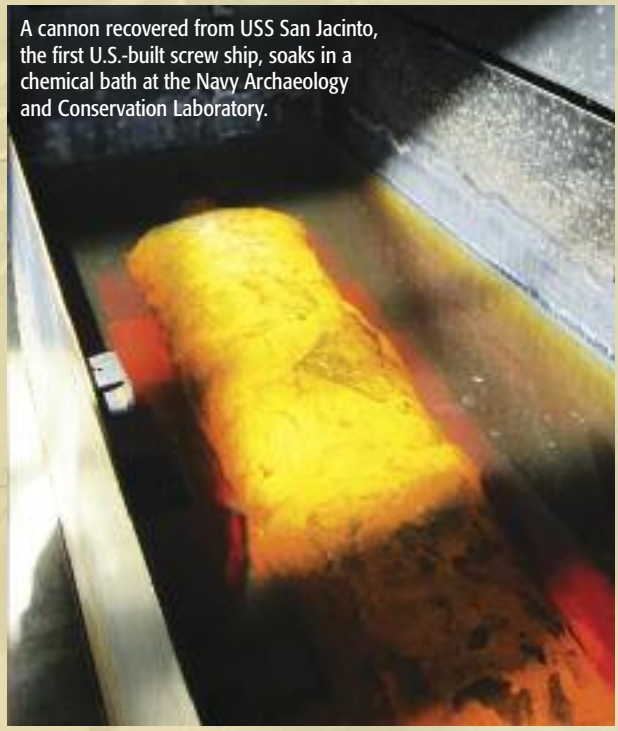
Glass pharmaceutical vial recovered during the 2011 field investigation (center, foreground) with similar glass vials recovered from the 1979 field investigation.

Ceramic vessel recovered during the 2011 field investigation.

The Basics About the
NHHC Archaeology and Conservation Laboratory

In a dusty warehouse of crates and metal boxes, with a whiteboard welcome sign announcing the entrance, underwater archaeologists at the laboratory are preserving and protecting Navy history.

The Naval History and Heritage Command's Underwater Archaeology Branch (UAB) manages a database of more than 3,000 shipwrecks and 14,000 sunken aircraft worldwide. It's a daunting job for the small staff of archaeologists, conservators, and semester-long undergraduate and graduate interns.


A cannon recovered from USS San Jacinto, the first U.S.-built screw ship, soaks in a chemical bath at the Navy Archaeology and Conservation Laboratory.

State and Federal agencies, volunteer diving organizations, and Navy dive teams all partner with the UAB to locate and identify Navy wreck sites.

"If you have the chance to find a shipwreck, to see a bit of Navy history up close, who wouldn't want to be a part of that?" said Dr. Robert Neyland, Director of the UAB.

Once U.S. Navy wrecks are located and excavated, the Archaeology and Conservation Laboratory preserves and studies recovered artifacts, incorporating their analysis into the archaeological interpretation of the site.

Shelves, cabinets, tables, and display cases are filled with artifacts. Rusty surgeon's scissors, a dental tooth extractor, cannon balls, shells, bells, fasteners, anchors, muskets, ceramic plates and bowls, mugs, locks and keys soak in Tupperware containers carefully filled with chemical compounds designed to stabilize the metals after more than a century of corrosion. Other items lie muffled in bubble wrap and Styrofoam, awaiting analysis and final preservation.

A 150-year old cannon from San Jacinto, the first U.S.-built screw ship and a veteran of the Civil War, soaks in a chemical bath in a rusted metal box. (Note: A screw ship is a ship that is driven by a screw propeller.) On the bottom shelf of a wooden cabinet sits the blue and white porcelain toilet bowl from the infamous Confederate raider CSS Alabama, complete with its original flushing mechanism.

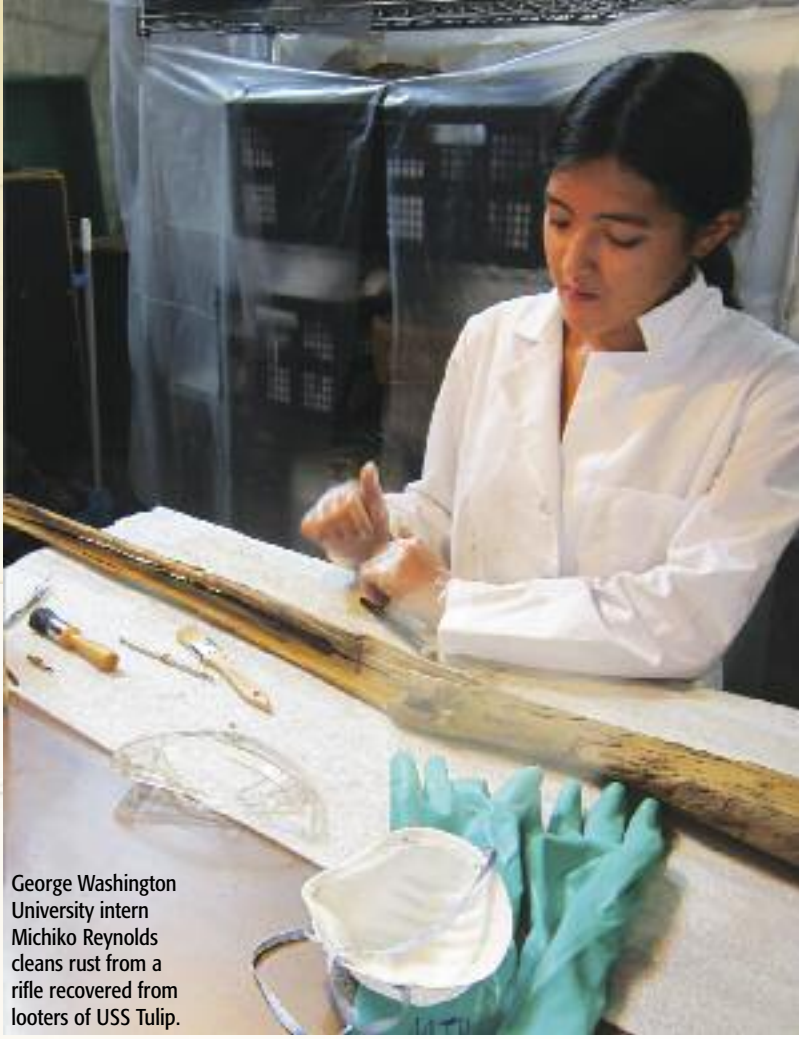
All together, the laboratory curates more than 2,500 artifacts and manages an international museum loan program of 6,200 artifacts. But not all artifacts are lucky enough to end up at the Archaeology and Conservation Laboratory.

Many recreational scuba divers don't know or don't care about the laws protecting military wrecks. (See our sidebar entitled, "The Basics About the Sunken Military Craft Act.") In the 1960s, sports divers discovered the wreck of the Civil War steamer USS Tulip and quickly stripped more than 1,500 artifacts from the site. Worse, they disturbed the last resting place of the 49 men who died on Tulip when its boilers exploded on November 11, 1864 and whose bodies were never recovered. Worldwide, more than 18,000 sailors and airmen died in the wrecks managed by the NHHC, and many of their bodies remain at the sites.

"It's important to remember that many of these sites are war graves," says Neyland, "and to give them the respect that they deserve."

Michiko Reynolds, an undergraduate intern from The George Washington University, has first-hand experience with the harm looting does to the preservation of artifacts. Sitting at a makeshift table in the UAB warehouse, Reynolds manually cleans the rust and corrosives from the wooden stock of a Civil War rifle recovered from looters of the Tulip. If the rifle had been treated as soon as it was recovered, it might have been in pristine condition. Now it's crumbling.

Navy archaeologist George Schwarz holds a metal and wooden dead-eye fastener recovered from the Patuxent wreck.



George Washington University intern Michiko Reynolds cleans rust from a rifle recovered from looters of USS Tulip.

"It's already dried out," Reynolds demonstrates, "so we won't be able to extract the salt, which means we won't be able to preserve it perfectly."

Artifacts from shipwrecks hold particular importance because they are often in pristine condition. Kate Morrand, Assistant Conservator, is cleaning and conserving a brass lantern from Tulip whose glass Fresnel lens is completely intact.

"It's not uncommon for artifacts from wrecks to be preserved intact," Morrand explains. And the metal and glass of this lantern have been particularly resistant to damage. "There's a bit of corrosion, but it's a lovely piece to work with."

Photos by Anne Siders.

Navy conservator Kate Morrand cleans a Civil War era lantern from USS Tulip that has remained perfectly intact for 200 years.

Underwater archaeologist Bradley Krueger examines a pair of surgical scissors recovered from the wreck.

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- A set of carpentry tools may have belonged to Charles Fleming, the flotilla's carpenter who served on Scorpion.

By law, all shipwrecked Navy vessels remain property of the U.S. Navy in perpetuity. So, in 2011, underwater archaeologists from the U.S. Navy, the Maryland State Highway Administration, and Maryland Historical Trust dived again at the site, working in low visibility conditions to map out the dimensions of the wreck, assess its condition and stability, and perform preliminary excavations.

NHHC underwater archaeologist and principal investigator Dr. Robert Neyland hands a wooden artifact to NHHC underwater archaeologist Heather Brown.

Among the artifacts recovered were a second pair of surgical scissors, a stoneware jar still partially sealed with the original cork stopper, and the end of a corn cob. These seemingly mundane items tell archaeologists how Sailors lived and served on early Navy vessels. The stoneware jar may still contain trace amounts of its original contents, while a crude metal spiral is a vivid reminder of the early stage of dentistry at the time.

> As soon as artifacts leave the water, they face immediate danger.
>
> —George Schwarz

"The more artifacts we find, the more we can piece together a picture," Navy archaeologist Dr. Alexis Catsambis said.

Artifacts may be the key to identifying the Patuxent wreck and understanding the lives of these early Sailors, but they are also extremely vulnerable.

"As soon as artifacts leave the water, they face immediate danger," warned Schwarz. Exposure to air begins deterioration of materials that have survived two centuries underwater.

As soon as artifacts are found on the site, they are catalogued and sent to the NHHC Underwater Archaeology

Maryland State Underwater Archaeologist and principal investigator Dr. Susan Langley monitors surface screens for any artifacts dredged up from the site.

NHHC underwater archaeologists Dr. George Schwarz (left) and Dr. Alexis Catsambis prepare to dive on the shipwreck.

Barge components and equipment are pushed up the Patuxent River to the shipwreck site.

NHHC Underwater archaeologist Dr. George Schwarz and Richard Ervin, Maryland State Highways Administration, prepare to take measurements of the wreck.

Branch (UAB) where they can be treated and preserved for public display. Conservators at the laboratory examine, clean, document, and stabilize artifacts to prevent further deterioration through a combination of chemical procedures and extensive manual cleaning.

The value of the Patuxent wreck, whether it is or is not Scorpion, lies not only in the personal belongings believed to be on board, but also in the structure of the wreck itself. Commodore Barney developed the structural concept of the gunboat barges that would serve in his flotilla, and even Scorpion, a Navy sloop, was re-designed and re-built for flotilla duty. As a result, no final design for Scorpion exists.

"We don't have much information on how these gun boats were built," Schwarz said. "Other wrecks exist, but none are as well preserved as this one."

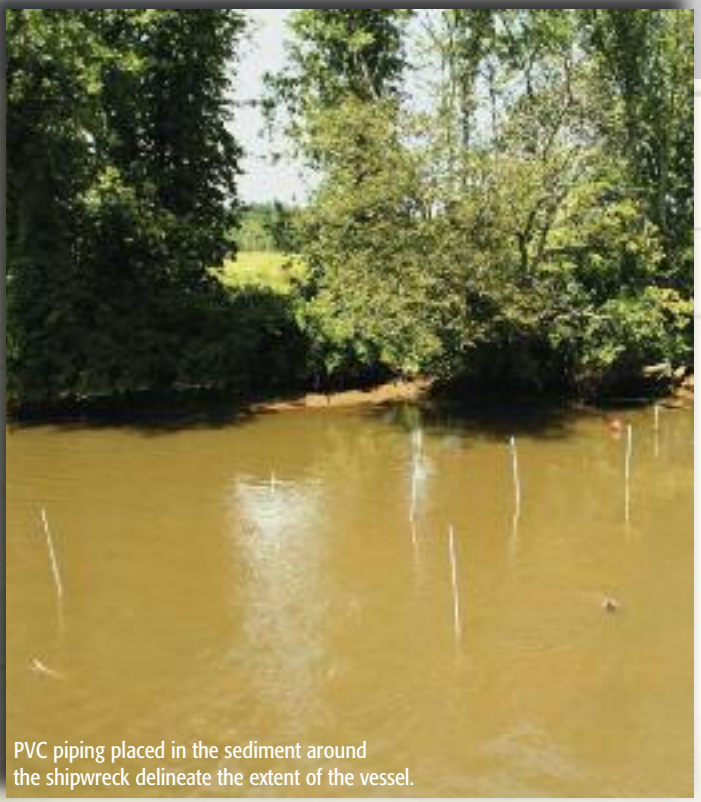
ONCE THE SHIP IS EXCAVATED, IT WILL BE CAREFULLY REBURIED TO PRESERVE ITS TREASURES FOR YEARS TO COME.

In preparation for the bicentennial celebration of the War of 1812, scheduled for 2012-2015, the NHHC's Underwater Archaeology branch and Maryland state officials are preparing for an elaborate reinvestigation of the fight. They are designing a cofferdam (a temporary watertight enclosure) to erect around the wreck to drain water away from it, excavating the site dry. This style of excavation will not only allow archaeologists greater access to the interior hull of the ship, but also open up the site to public viewing.

For More Information

For more information about NHHC, visit http://www.history.navy.mil.

A stretch of the Patuxent River near Upper Marlboro, MD in which is located the archaeological site of War of 1812 Chesapeake Flotilla shipwreck believed to be USS Scorpion.



PVC piping placed in the sediment around the shipwreck delineate the extent of the vessel.

Once the ship is excavated, it will be carefully reburied to preserve its treasures for years to come.

For more information, follow the search at http://scorpionarchaeology.blogspot.com. ⚓

Photos courtesy of NHHC UAB, Department of the Navy.

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