


# The Stories Of The SLAVE WRECKS



*Archeologists from Mozambique and Senegal train with National Park Service underwater archaeologists at a shipwreck site at Buck Island National Monument in the U.S. Virgin Islands as part of the Slave Wrecks Project.*



The Slave Wrecks Project seeks to reveal tales of the slave trade that have been long neglected.

By Paula Neely

**When** the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture wanted an authentic piece of a slave ship to use in an exhibit about the trans-Atlantic slave trade, its curators surveyed maritime archaeologists and historians around the world, and they searched the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database for leads on wrecks, but to no avail. It became apparent to them that excavated slave wrecks were incredibly rare, especially ones that were excavated by professional archaeologists, said Paul Gardullo, a curator at the museum and director of its Center for the Study of Global Slavery. Although there were over 10,000 slave ships and 1,000 documented wrecks spanning three centuries, very few of the wrecks had been identified and excavated. "There had been more studies of [ships] in bogs in Ireland at that time and... Civil War ships, and Viking ships," according to marine archaeologist Stephen Lubkemann of George Washington University. "The neglect of this made no sense," he said. "There was a huge gap in our field."

As part of his search, Gardullo connected with Lubkemann, who with fellow marine archaeologists Dave Conlin of the National Park Service (NPS), and Jaco Boshoff of the Iziko Museums of South Africa, had formed an innovative project several years prior dedicated to searching for shipwrecks from the most horrific and extensive trade of humans in world history. These connections led to the formation the Slave Wrecks Project (SWP), an international and interdisciplinary network of researchers and organizations that provides a comprehensive approach to exploring and sharing this history. "Our work is bigger than just a search for shipwrecks," Gardullo said. "It is about transforming the field and the way we talk about the slave trade and its connection to our world and ourselves."

According to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, between 1501 and 1866, an estimated 12.5 million Africans were kidnapped and loaded onto ships destined for the Americas. About one million died from disease, starvation, and other causes during 40,000 journeys, the average of which lasted about sixty days. By searching for and studying slave ships and the histories and legacies associated with their voyages, the SWP's researchers seek to highlight the humanity of the enslaved people aboard those ships.

"Archaeology is uniquely positioned to tell those stories. They are not written, not part of history books, and they were suppressed at the time they were happening," Conlin said. The slave trade was one of the most closely managed systems of trade in the world, as it was deeply embedded in global economies and finance, and consequently it was well documented. But those documents omit the voices and stories of the Africans who were traded. "No one wanted to tell stories about people being beaten, raped, or murdered. They were treated like draft animals," according to Conlin. "Archaeology helps us get to those hidden histories," Gardullo added "and it helps us get to the stories of the resistance and resilience of those who were treated as less than human."

The SWP is also working to increase diversity in archaeology, anthropology, and other related professions, and to



Members of Diving With A Purpose and the National Park Service teach students how to map shipwrecks at Biscayne National Park in Florida.

train people to develop practical ways to sustain, interpret, and protect shipwrecks from vandals and looters, according to Lubkemann, who codirects the project with Gardullo. “We are committed in all countries to develop a way for people to speak their own history,” Conlin said. Currently, they are involved with research in the U.S., Cuba, Brazil, Mozambique, South Africa, Senegal, Angola, Portugal, and Denmark.

Lubkemann, Conlin, and Boshoff convinced their respective institutions—George Washington University, the NPS, and the Iziko Museums of South Africa—to partner with the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, and Diving With a Purpose, an international organization of mostly African American scuba divers, to formalize the SWP. The partners collaborate with national, regional, and local institutions and researchers in the areas where slave wrecks are located. The Smithsonian, which serves as the SWP’s host organization, expanded the scope of the project to include more public engagement and interpretation, according to Gardullo. The idea is to tell the story of enslaved Africans in a way that involves the people who were directly affected by the slave trade.

With seed funding from the Ford Foundation, the SWP began in South Africa with a search for the *Sao Jose-Paquete de Africa*, a slaver that wrecked off the coast of Cape Town in 1794. Over 500 men, women, and children who had been

captured in Mozambique were shackled and packed head to toe in the 130-foot ship bound for Brazil, where they were to be sold. But when the ship rounded the coast of Cape Town, it was caught between reefs and ripped in half. The captain’s legal deposition about the wrecking event stated that 212 of the captives died in the turbulent sea; the others were rescued, only to be sold in South Africa a few days later.

Starting with the *Sao Jose* was a logical choice since the Iziko Museums are located there and Lubkemann has twenty-five years of experience working in South Africa and Mozambique. They identified the *Sao Jose* in 2015 through a study of archival documents and an analysis of the wreck. It is thought to be the first recovered remains of a ship that sank while transporting human captives. “We usually rely on circumstantial evidence to identify a wreck,” said Conlin. In the case of the *Sao Jose*, several lines of evidence such as archives, materials from the site, and analysis of recovered items, were used to identify the wreck. The researchers recovered structural timbers from the hull, wood carried as cargo, shackles covered with concretion, and a number of small remnants such as copper plating. Some of the most telling objects were a dozen of the more than one-thousand iron ballast bars that were listed on the ship’s manifest. These bars were used to counterbalance the weight of humans who were packed below decks.



Two divers use sign language to communicate as they determine which feature to measure.

Kamau Sadiki, a lead instructor with Diving With a Purpose, assisted archaeologists with the underwater survey of the *Sao Jose*. When he dived the site for the first time, he noticed a large piece of timber lodged between rocks and he reached out to touch it. “I could feel the vibrations. The screams and the horror flashed into my head,” he said. “It’s very emotional, especially when you see the actual material.”

The iron ballast bars, wood, and a pulley recovered from the *Sao Jose*, which are on loan from South Africa, are now on display in the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture. The dark, haunting exhibit is filled with readings of firsthand accounts of voyages told by enslaved people and others, according to Mary Elliott, a curator of slavery at the museum. A sister exhibit at Iziko’s Slave Lodge Museum contains more artifacts from the wreck. These exhibits, along with ongoing work in Mozambique, Brazil, and Portugal, help tell an interconnected story of global slavery and its legacies.

The SWP has applied this global approach elsewhere. In the U.S., the SWP has been involved in projects in Florida, Alabama, and St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands. At Biscayne National Park in Florida, marine archaeologists are searching for the wreck of the *Guerrero*, a pirate slave ship bound for Cuba in 1827 with over 500 enslaved people

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crammed on board. It was pursued by the HMS *Nimble*, a British navy ship, that was employed in the interdiction of illegal slavers after the international trade was banned in 1808. The ships exchanged fire, and both ran aground on a reef. The *Nimble* was refloated after its crew threw its cannons and other heavy items overboard. The *Guerrero* sank, killing forty-one enslaved people. Its crew captured one of the ships that came to its rescue, loaded some of the surviving slaves onto it, and continued to Cuba. Most of the other survivors were eventually returned to Africa.

“Intense interest in the sites of Biscayne and ongoing looting of many shipwrecks in the area makes finding *Guerrero* and bringing this story to light a priority for NPS and our partners,” Conlin said. Magnetometry surveys encompassing twenty-seven square miles of the southern portion of Biscayne Bay—the most likely location of the *Guerrero* wreck according to archival information—have revealed over a thousand magnetic anomalies caused by ferrous materials. Divers are investigating each anomaly, and for the most part they’ve found items such as discarded televisions and lobster traps. But they have also found some anchors, a small cannon, cannon balls, and copper sheathing that could be from the *Nimble*.

Lubkemann noted that there are twenty-five other British shipwrecks on that reef that date to the same time period



as the *Guerrero*, so identifying items from the *Nimble* could help them identify the *Guerrero* wreck. “You have to do an analysis of the whole field of wrecks before you can come to any conclusion,” he said. Since 2005, members of the National Association of Black Scuba Divers have assisted in the search for the *Guerrero*.

Near St. Croix, two slave ships, the *Mary* and the *General Abercrombie*, which sank in 1797 and 1803 respectively, wrecked on reefs near Buck Island National Monument, an NPS property. The NPS conducted a magnetometry survey around the island and snorkelers and divers investigated over 300 anomalies, according to NPS archaeologist Meredith Hardy. Though many of these anomalies were not fully investigated because of their proximity to coral reefs, the

researchers found anchors that date to the late 1700s and early 1800s, but they haven’t yet found the wrecks. Nonetheless, the SWP researchers were able to use those sites to conduct international training and exchange exercises in 2017 with their partners from Mozambique and Senegal, who participated in underwater and terrestrial sessions on site mapping, preservation, and other key techniques. Having learned those skills, the SWP’s partners then applied them to the investigations of shipwrecks and terrestrial sites in their home countries.

The SWP is also examining terrestrial archaeological sites at St. Croix, which, along with St. John and St. Thomas, the U.S. purchased from Denmark in 1917. Over 50,000 Africans arrived there, where they were sold to work on the

**Students measure the timbers of a nineteenth-century shipwreck at Biscayne National Park.**



enslaved and free Africans throughout the Caribbean. The artifacts reflect the cosmopolitan nature of Christiansted, where the enslaved Africans interacted with people from all over the world, according to Hardy. She added that the enslaved people who worked and lived in the government complex and other urban areas had better lives, generally speaking, than their counterparts who toiled on the cotton and sugar plantations.

Michelle Gray, an NPS archaeological technician, is studying samples of the ceramics from the Christiansted complex to determine where the clay was sourced, which will provide information about where the pottery was made. Because Christiansted was a major Caribbean port, she believes the ceramics found there will also speak to the inter-island trade of Afro-Caribbean colonowares. Understanding inter-island trade is important because it demonstrates how plantation colonies were interconnected and interdependent upon one another. Slavery could not have succeeded on St. Croix were it not for the support of other colonies. “This research highlights the importance of Afro-Caribbean colonoware as not just a tool for food production and storage,” Gray said, “but as a major part of an inter-island economic system that was owned and controlled by enslaved and freed Blacks.”

**These** vessels were manufactured in St. Croix and possibly other Caribbean islands, often using traditional African techniques. The variations in the shapes of these vessels could reflect “different traditional methods and styles that were introduced during the African Diaspora as enslaved persons from different regions and ethnic communities were brought to St. Croix,” Gray said. “The study of (Afro-Caribbean) ware provides so much potential to address the ways in which these individuals took charge of their situation by generating a product that could be sold, bought, and traded outside of the oppressive colonial government, but also a product that allowed the continuance of African foodways, and thus perseverance in the maintenance of African identity through food.”

The ceramics and other artifacts will be featured in an NPS exhibit about slavery and freedom in St. Croix that is being developed with assistance from the Smithsonian and its SWP partners for a permanent display in the Danish West India & Guinea Company warehouse in Christiansted.

Elsewhere on St. Croix, there is an investigation by members of the Society of Black Archaeologists (SBA) in collaboration with the SWP at the Estate Little Princess, a plantation now owned by the Nature Conservancy. Archaeologist Justin Dunnivant of UCLA, who is president of the SBA, is exploring the impact of slavery on the environment. The Danes forced enslaved people to clear the land, mine coral, construct buildings, and engage in large-scale irrigation projects in preparation for plantation agriculture. The investigation revealed that the same colonial practices that enslaved and degraded people also led to increased erosion, soil degradation, and damaged coral reefs. (Even today, St. Croix is suffering as a result: the island is susceptible to shoreline erosion,

island and other places in the Caribbean and North America. To learn more about the lives of the enslaved people, NPS archaeologists have been excavating the former Danish government complex on the waterfront at Christiansted National Historic Site that includes a colonial fort, a customs house, the Danish West India & Guinea Company buildings, and surrounding structures where they lived and worked after the Danes took control of the island in 1733.

The archaeologists found the remains of some original structures in the complex, including the foundations of slave dwellings. Within these dwellings they discovered bone buttons, button blanks, and a variety of ceramic fragments including European pottery and Chinese porcelain. They also found Afro-Caribbean colonoware, which was made by



An image of the *Clotilda* (misspelled here) is painted on a sidewalk in Africatown to keep the memory of the slave ship alive.

and the lack of mangroves and forest canopy leaves buildings more vulnerable to hurricane damage.) This research confirmed that enslaved Africans were tasked with building and maintaining every aspect of the colonial empire.

The archaeologists are excavating in and around the foundations of three slave quarters made of coral blocks. They have unearthed European ceramics as well as Afro-Caribbean colonoware, which shows the enslaved had access to a wider variety of ceramic goods than previously thought. Local high school students participate in this investigation as part of the SWP's efforts to engage the community and encourage participants to pursue a career in archaeology, anthropology, and related fields. "They get a personal connection with their history," Hardy said

**In** Mobile, Alabama, the SWP helped with the search for, and investigation of, the *Clotilda*, the last known ship that brought slaves from Africa to America. The *Clotilda* arrived in 1860, and though slavery was not outlawed in the U.S. until five years later, the importation of slaves was banned in 1808. After the *Clotilda* unloaded the slaves onto a riverboat in a hidden channel of the Mobile River, it was intentionally burned to the waterline by its captain and sunk to destroy evidence of its illegal journey.

A few years ago a local journalist found a wreck that he thought could be the *Clotilda*, but upon further examination, a team of experts including members of the cultural resource management firm SEARCH, Inc., concluded it was not. However, the media coverage of this event rekindled interest in finding the *Clotilda*, and the Alabama Historical Commission hired SEARCH to continue the hunt for the wreck. The SWP supported the effort and also helped with magnetometry surveys, side scan sonars, and sub-bottom profiles that penetrate the riverbed. Sadiki, of Diving With A Purpose, assisted archaeologists in assessing the wreck and examining anomalies.

The researchers found the outline of a schooner along with burned material, and they discovered a removable centerboard lying beside the wreck that was a feature of the *Clotilda*. They got the dimensions of the wreck, and examined fasteners, nails, and other items they recovered from it. Based on that evidence, SEARCH, the SWP, and their partners concluded it's the *Clotilda*. "It was a very hazardous dive site," said Sadiki. The river was murky with strong currents, and the wreck had sharp edges and protrusions. "Visibility was less than six inches," he said. "We had to move at a snail's pace."

Africans who arrived on the *Clotilda* were freed when slavery was abolished. They couldn't return to Africa, so they purchased land on the outskirts of Mobile and established Africatown, where they spoke their native language and continued their traditional practices. Some descendants of the Africans who arrived on the *Clotilda* still live there.

In partnership with the SWP, Dunnivant will be working next year with the community surveying the Old Plateau Cemetery which dates to 1876, and possibly excavating the sites that once held the homes of Peter Lee and Cudjoe Lewis, Africans who were onboard the *Clotilda*. "We hope to get a sense of the early foundations of Africatown and what life was like for the early founders," Dunnivant said. The community will be involved in discussions about research questions and how sites will be investigated. The SWP, in partnership with Archaeology in the Community, a nonprofit that aims to increase awareness of archaeology and history, will create school-based archaeology programs and teacher training, building upon experiences in St. Croix and elsewhere. "It's important to engage the community in tandem with the shipwrecks," Mary Elliott said. "We need to see what they want done and bring their voices to the story."

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