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North Carolina's Lost Ship A Quest For Pirate Treasure

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The North Carolina coast curves eastward into the Atlantic Ocean and is fringed by thin sandy barrier islands called the Outer Banks. This stretch of real estate is as well known for its violent storms as it is for its lovely beaches. The Outer Banks shape creates dangerous shoals and shifting sands that have claimed many ships, galvanizing its reputation as the Graveyard of the Atlantic. Recently, a ship that resurfaced after nearly three centuries beneath shifting sands of Beaufort Inlet, N.C., is believed to be the remains of a long-lost pirate ship. The Queen Anne's Revenge, the flagship of Blackbeard's pirate fleet, has presumably been discovered in 24 feet of murky water within sight of a nearby beach. It is being meticulously studied, recovered and restored by teams of highly trained divers, archaeologists and scientists working for the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, the Maritime Research Institute and licensed by the State of North Carolina.

The wreck site – designated OSA site #31CR3 – is off limits to anyone without proper permits. Fortunately, the North Carolina Archaeology Branch of Cultural Resources in partnership with Carteret County Dive Operators offer an educational program that runs several times a year to inform the public about this historic wreck and to provide scuba access to small groups of recreational divers.

In November 1717 English pirates captured the French slave-ship *La Concorde* near Martinique. Led by Blackbeard, the pirates converted *La Concorde* into their flagship and renamed the vessel *Queen Anne's Revenge*. After spending the winter attacking vessels in the Caribbean the pirate fleet consisting of the *Queen Anne's Revenge* and three smaller sloops, blockaded the port of Charleston in May 1718. Afterward, Blackbeard continued up the coast. He lost his flagship while attempting to enter Beaufort Inlet. Five months later he was killed in a bloody battle at Ocracoke.

The *Queen Anne's Revenge* ran aground on a sandbar just off Beaufort Inlet, and disappeared into the shifting sands. The wreck has eluded searchers ever since. Then, on Nov. 22, 1996, Intersal, a private salvage firm, stumbled upon wreckage while searching for a long-lost sunken Spanish fleet. The wreck was identifiable only by an anchor fluke protruding above the seabed. Subsequent excavations revealed many cannons, anchors and other artifacts, and the identity of the wreck began to take shape.

Although a single, definitive piece of evidence has yet to be found that identifies the wreck as that of the *Queen Anne's Revenge*, hundreds of thousands of pieces of evidence and painstaking research suggest that it is. Nothing found contradicts this theory so the wreck is generally presumed to be that of the infamous pirate ship. If so it would be only the second pirate shipwreck ever located; the first being the wreck of the *Whydah* off Cape Cod, Mass.

"Dive Down" was conceived to provide a limited number of recreational divers access to this truly historic site. The two-day program is a fascinating immersion into underwater archaeology, marine geology, salvage, restoration and maritime history. Students learn how the shifting coastline off Beaufort Inlet can account for the wreck being more than a mile offshore when in 1717 the ship wrecked close to shore. Students also learn how evidence is piling up in

favor of this wreck being that of the Queen Anne's Revenge. Archaeologists and historians feel they could "win a conviction in court" despite the lack of an artifact to identify the wreck beyond any doubt.

The program combines a classroom lecture, student participation and diving. Students even sift through sediment from the wreck site in search of lead shot, flakes of gold and other interesting items. The culmination is an actual dive on the site.

Although only 24 feet deep, the shallowness should not be taken lightly! Because of its close proximity to shore, bottom conditions can be extremely poor and at times a bit dangerous with stiff currents and heavy surges. Surges are the key concern. If not careful, divers can get bumped around and even hurt when rolling swells propel them into sharp edges of the wreckage or into the hundreds of sea urchins that inhabit the sea floor.

The encrusted wreckage transports divers back 300 years. They soon see that this is truly a working archaeological site. Accordingly, great care must be taken not to disturb the survey lines that scientists and recovery divers use to orient themselves on the wreck.

Divers are escorted to the main survey line called the baseline. From here they are taken to the main archaeological pile, consisting of three anchors (Anchor 1, Anchor 2, and the Grapnel Anchor) and ballast rocks. If they are lucky, divers will also be able to see cannons buried under centuries of encrustation. What battles did these cannons engage in? How many people met their demise at the hands of these weapons? Following the baseline north, divers encounter the ghostly silhouette of "Anchor 3" protruding from the sand. At the south to the end of the line divers can actually dig for buried cannons!

The Dive Down program gives participants a genuine appreciation of the wreck and provides a rare opportunity to visit a unique piece of maritime history. In addition to the classroom experiences, hands on participation and the actual dives, students receive a PADI "Heritage Awareness" distinctive specialty certification.

Blackbeard was a very colorful historical figure. Little is known of this man some call Edward Teach, but his real name and much of his background are in doubt. His fearsome reputation, however, has persisted to this day and in many ways he was truly the iconic pirate. The fact that his long-lost flagship is likely now been recovered gives everyone a chance to learn more about pirate life in the 1700s and to connect with this period of American history. And what better addition to a diver's logbook is there than a dive to an authentic pirate shipwreck from the 1700s? To learn about the QAR Project and the Dive Down Program at www.qaronline.org. ■

Michael Salvarezza and Christopher P. Weaver have documented a world of adventure topside and underwater through their Long Island, N.Y.-based business Eco-Photo Explorers. Learn more at www.ecophotoexplorers.com.

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