

Museum Around the Corner
Georgetown County Museum

Brown's Ferry Vessel ©

In 1971, a dive club took to the murky waters of Black River near the site of a Colonial ferry and landing known as Brown's Ferry. Divers spent the day leisurely exploring and began to find a few artifacts such as an intact Renishware mug and 18th century bottles. Many times that day they crossed over a mound of bricks at the base of the landing. Little did they know of the treasure that lay below them. The Brown's Ferry Vessel would become the oldest vessel ever recovered in American waters.

In 1974, Hampton Shuping and diving friends came across the remnants of a vessel in the Black River at Browns Ferry buried under the mud with a few inches of its hull visible. They began to dig the mud away and soon uncovered a Davis Quadrant, a wooden instrument used for navigation. Being cognizant of conservation requirements, they reburied it for retrieval at another time. Other artifacts came to light such as a slipware cup and a broken delft bowl. These finds were all reported to the newly created South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology (SCIAA). Months later, Mr. Shuping was joined by Dr. Newell Wright of Coastal Carolina University to take a serious look at the vessel's structure. It was buried under a cargo of about ten thousand 18th century bricks. In the final tally, finds included a lead seal with the coat of arms of the city of Amsterdam, coins, a sword, and 8,000 to 10,000 bricks.

With the artifacts found earlier, together with the hull of a very interesting vessel, it was decided to initiate recovery efforts in the summer of 1976. With all volunteer divers and SCIAA underwater division, the project took 6 weeks and was done on a shoestring budget. Local businesses helped fund the efforts. The hull of the Brown's Ferry Vessel emerged from its 200 hundred year resting place at the bottom of Black River on August 28, 1976 to the delight of over 8,000 observers.

The vessel was trucked to Fort Jackson where it was kept under a sprinkler system for several months. Renowned ship reconstructionist, Dick Steffy, joined the project to build a model based on measurements of the vessel and hypothesized what the rigging and hull had been. Dick surmised the vessel was double ended with a pointed stern. From 1977 to 1983, the vessel was submerged in a farm pond near Columbia awaiting construction of a facility in which it would be immersed in a treatment of polyethylene glycol. In 1990, the treatment process was completed. The vessel could now be exposed safely to air and could be reexamined and studied. It was now thought that the vessel had a square stern.

The vessel could be brought back to Georgetown in July of 1992. Contractors removed part of the roof of the Kaminski Building on Front Street and a crane was used to hoist it into its new

home on the third floor. SCIAA staff under the direction of State Archaeologist, Dr. Jonathan Leader, reconstructed the vessel. She was now ready for her public debut on July 31, 1992.

In his study published in 1979, Dick Steffy concludes: "In my opinion, it is the most important single nautical discovery in the United States to date. In the first place, it establishes primary evidence for American shipbuilding nearly fifty years earlier than previous discoveries. More importantly, this was a merchant hull, built without anxiety, bureaucracy, and inefficiency often associated with vessels of war. As such, it defines everyday technology in a competitive atmosphere. Additionally, this was a local type – important to any maritime scholar – representing a period and area in which far too little maritime information has been forthcoming."