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THE GUNBOAT **AT** GROUND ZERO

Beneath the streets of lower Manhattan, a relic of the Revolutionary War awaited discovery. Dr. Michael Lucas, curator of the Revolutionary War vessel recovered from Ground Zero, told its tale at the annual meeting of the Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance on Aug. 15





A: Michael Lucas recounting the story of “the gunboat at Ground Zero” at the Lake George Battlefield Alliance’s annual meeting on Aug. 15 at Fort William Henry. B: The remains of the gunboat in lower Manhattan. C: Lucas at work on the gunboat. D: The gunboat as displayed at the New York State Museum in Albany. Photo courtesy NY State Dept. of Education.

By Anthony F. Hall

Buried 20 feet beneath the streets of lower Manhattan, the remains of a wooden ship had spent roughly two centuries hidden beneath landfill that eventually became part of the World Trade Center site.

When construction crews encountered its timbers in 2010, archaeologists were given little more than a week to get the vessel out of the ground.

"They did a heroic job," said Dr. Michael Lucas, curator of historical archaeology at the New York State Museum. "The archaeologists in the field, they got everything out of there."

Fifteen years later, the nearly 50-foot vessel has been conserved, reconstructed and placed on exhibition at the New York State Museum in Albany. But one fundamental question remains unanswered: What ship is it?

Lucas traced the vessel's 250-year story during the annual meeting of the Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance, held August 15 at the Fort William Henry Conference Center in Lake George.

Researchers believe the vessel was an American-built Revolutionary War gunboat, probably constructed in the Philadelphia area after 1773 and possibly captured by the British. But Lucas cautioned that the evidence has not produced a definitive identification.

"There's a theory that this fits what is known about gunboats and it certainly had some type of military function," Lucas said. "But whether or not this specific boat was one of the original

gunboats, we do not know for certain, as yet. There's no smoking gun."

The ship was discovered in 2010 during excavation for the World Trade Center's underground Vehicular Security Center. It lay at the edge of Manhattan's original shoreline, beneath fill deposited as the city expanded into the Hudson River in the 1790s.

Archaeologists were already monitoring the construction under federal historic preservation requirements, Lucas said. Workers had unknowingly driven a wall through the wreck, cutting off about 13 feet of its bow, before archaeologists recognized something had been found and halted construction.

"Lo and behold, what they

found was this ship," Lucas said.

A team with expertise in excavating historic vessels was assembled within two weeks, with roughly a week available to remove the remains. Each timber was tagged according to its position, photographed and laser scanned so researchers could eventually put the vessel back together.

One of the first clues to its age came from the trees themselves.

Researchers sampled oak timbers and used tree-ring dating to establish that the latest ring dated to 1773, meaning the vessel had to have been constructed after that year. Analysis also linked the oak to the Philadelphia region.

Combined with the date of the Manhattan landfill, that narrowed the ship's working life to an

unusually small window.

"We know that the ship was on the shores of Manhattan probably by the 1790s when they started

this landfill," Lucas said. "And then it was constructed in the mid-1770s. So you have a 15-

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year period in which to situate it. That's pretty good."

Its design provided another clue.

Researchers initially considered whether it might have been a Hudson River sloop, but the vessel was too shallow and its dimensions did not fit. Its profile instead closely resembled gunboats — small, shallow-draft military vessels that could carry cannon and maneuver in waters larger warships could not enter.

Lucas compared the vessel with the gunboat Philadelphia, which fought at the Battle of Valcour Island on Lake Champlain during the Revolutionary War and is now in the Smithsonian Institution's collection.

Researchers also found that the ship had been rapidly constructed using metal fasteners rather than the wooden fasteners more typical of shipbuilding. Its hull was coated with black tar and paint, another feature consistent with specifications for military gunboats.

That evidence led researchers toward a tantalizing possibility: The vessel may have been one of the gunboats built by Philadelphia's Committee of Safety in 1775 to defend the city early in the Revolutionary War.

Some of those vessels were destroyed, while others fell into British hands.

"It's possible that the British actually captured one of these ships," Lucas said. "That's the theory right now."

A small artifact found aboard the wreck strengthens that theory.

Among thousands of objects associated with the excavation was a button from the British Army's 52nd Regiment of Foot.

"You have an American-made ship with a British military

button," Lucas said. "So that's a piece of evidence. It's like, well, how did that get there?"

Other finds included a 4-pound cannonball, grapeshot, hundreds of pieces of small lead shot and gunflints, as well as ordinary possessions that may have belonged to sailors. Researchers also recovered a small spoon decorated with what appears to be a sword and a silver Spanish 2-real coin minted in Mexico City in 1758.

The ship itself carried evidence of another journey. Its timbers were riddled with marine worms identified as a variety associated with warmer southern waters, suggesting the vessel had traveled south before eventually reaching New York.

By the early 1780s, Lucas said, the vessel may already have been deteriorating because of the worms and its iron fastenings. Mussel and oyster growth suggests it then sat partly submerged along the Manhattan shoreline before disappearing beneath landfill.

Excavation, however, was only the beginning.

Waterlogged wood can collapse as it dries, so the timbers were initially cleaned in Maryland before being sent to Texas A&M University for a yearslong conservation process. There they were soaked in polyethylene glycol, a synthetic wax that replaces water within the wood, and eventually freeze-dried.

The freeze-drying alone removed about 4,800 pounds of water from the timbers. One massive piece that had weighed roughly 660 pounds when excavated was reduced to about half that weight, Lucas said.

The process took years longer than originally expected, in part because conservators had

to deal with the vessel's metal fasteners, which threatened to damage the surrounding wood. A conservation contract began in 2015; the ship did not return to the New York State Museum until 2025.

Reconstruction brought its own surprises.

The project was supposed to take about 12 weeks after the timbers arrived in Albany in May, Lucas said. It lasted until December.

One of the most time-consuming jobs involved fabricating carbon-fiber supports to hold the fragile hull together. Lucas joined the work himself and recalled nearly putting a rotary tool through his thumb

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while cutting the material.

"It was a dangerous process," he said.

Museum employees and volunteers contributed hundreds of hours to the reconstruction before the ship became a centerpiece of the museum's Revolutionary New York exhibition.

The preservation effort reflects the larger mission of the State Museum's archaeological collections, Lucas said. The museum holds more than 4.5 million artifacts from battlefields, farmsteads, military sites and industrial sites across New York, material Lucas said should be made available not only for exhibition but for future research.

That includes collections from Lake George. Lucas noted that Skidmore College students

are cataloging archaeological material excavated by the late archaeologist David Starbuck so it can become more accessible to researchers.

For now, the reconstructed hull remains both an artifact and a question.

The evidence can establish when and where it was built, show that it had a military purpose and trace pieces of its travels. But after 250 years, researchers still cannot give the vessel a name.

That uncertainty, Lucas suggested, is precisely why preserving the evidence matters.

"There's lots of research that can be done on the artifacts, as well as the ship itself," he said. "It's good to have these things available for researchers for the future."