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Shipwreck Research Program at Channel Islands National Park

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Abstract. Shipwreck research programs yield data on specific vessels and the overall context of the vessels in maritime activities. Channel Islands National Park has an ongoing research program to identify, document, and locate vessels lost in the vicinity of Anacapa, Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa, San Miguel, and Santa Barbara islands. The methodology for identifying and documenting vessels and the general maritime history of the area is discussed using examples from the ongoing research program.

Keywords: Channel Islands, California; Channel Islands National Park; Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary; Pacific Missile Test Range; California; shipwrecks; submerged cultural resources; maritime history; research, methodology.

Introduction

Shipwrecks are a valuable cultural resource supporting various multiple uses. These resources are threatened by artifact seekers who by their actions deny to others the experience of encounter they so highly prize. Yet, shipwrecks emote a certain fascination with the public, often acting as the stimulus that motivates interest in local history and preservation of maritime heritage (Fagan 1989). Quite simply, maritime history, heritage, and traditions do matter!

Individually and collectively, shipwrecks embody multiple intrinsic and symbolic values (Colin 1989). Archaeological and historic values are enhanced by the interpretation of artifacts within the context of the entire wreck site and the wreck's historic background. Shipwrecks in which life was lost embody memorial values. A wreck's symbolic value reflects the individual vessel's role in history, literature, and art.

Rigorous research on the life and loss of a vessel is needed to fully realize each of these values. Collectively, shipwrecks are crucial elements to understanding maritime activity in an area that in turn, is often important in explaining the social, economic, and cultural development of an area.

Channel Islands Shipwreck Research Program

Conceptually, the shipwreck research is a 5-step process consisting of (1) identifying vessels lost in an area, (2) gathering data about the vessels, (3) identifying and documenting actual wreck sites, (4) interpreting the research findings, and (5) disseminating the research findings.

The first 2 tasks, identifying and documenting vessels lost in the area are formidable undertakings. One study of the Channel Island's historic resources noted the following:

> the reports on shipwrecks are not only incomplete, but made more complicated by the fact that they are cited only on the year of the accident. Since narrative accounts, and especially newspaper reports, can only be found when the exact date of the wreck is known or by checking every page of 10 or more Southern California newspapers for the past 100 years, no exact picture of this intriguing chapter in American economic history is likely to emerge soon (Weiman 1978).

Since the early 1980s, Channel Islands National Park has had an ongoing program of wreck site investigation and identification (Morris and Lima, in press). Initial efforts with the survey of the wreck site of the Gold Rush era paddle-wheel steamer Winfield Scott by James Delgado (1983) resulted in the site being successfully nominated to the National Register of Historic Places. Research conducted on the vessels shows the dual nature of shipwrecks. The on-site investigation of the wreck yielded valuable information about the ship, while archival research developed information about the ship's life and loss as well as important information about the larger role of maritime transportation in the early development of California.

A National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration study (Hudson and Howorth 1985) listed several known and suspected wreck sites within the boundaries of the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary. The study increased the awareness of the extent of submerged cul-

tural resources in the area, but also begged the question "what were those vessels doing there?"

Courses in marine archaeology at California State University, Long Beach, conducted by William B. Lee, director of the Los Angeles Maritime Museum provided invaluable information on wrecks in the park and illustrated the diversity of primary and secondary sources of information regarding these vessels. Vessel documentation provided by San Francisco Maritime National Historic Park staff proved a valuable source of archival information on the wrecks within the park.

Several popular press publications have described West Coast shipwrecks including those in the Channel Islands (Wheeler and Kallman 1986; Cardone and Smith 1989; Douglas 1990). However, comparison of these sources with primary documentation and official secondary sources (i.e., ships' registries) reveals minor and substantive inconsistencies in many secondary sources. In addition, many of the accounts in the popular press do not place the wreck in the larger context of West Coast maritime history. As such, the accounts describe or imply that many wrecks are "historic" without providing an understanding of why it is so.

The ongoing program of shipwreck research at Channel Islands National Park conducted by the park archaeologist and volunteers to identify and map wreck sites and carefully document vessel history was expanded in 1992 by a Defense Department Legacy Program grant. This study, conducted in cooperation with the Naval Weapons Center at Pt. Mugu Naval Air Station, retrieved archival information on vessels lost within the Pacific Missile Test Center Range, which extends from Cambria to San Nicholas Island, encompassing the Channel Islands National Park. Of the approximately 400 vessels documented within and on the border of the Test Range, more than 100 of the vessels are associated with the Channel Islands.

Methodology

The methodology used by Channel Islands National Park ongoing shipwreck research program (1) identifies vessels lost or damaged in the area, (2) assembles data on each vessel from a variety of primary and secondary sources, and (3) creates a shipwreck archival and computer database to facilitate analysis and data retrieval. Similar methodology was used in a recent Minerals Management Service study of west coast shipwrecks from central California to the Canadian border (Gearhart et al. 1990).

Identification of vessels

The first step in the research program involved assembling a list of vessels that were lost or damaged in the area. Any vessel lost in the area represents a potentially locatable cultural resource. The value in these sites is twofold. First, the remains of a vessel can yield information about construction techniques and materials and vessel operation and cargo yields information about trading and other activities. Second, each vessel represents an element of the total maritime activity in the islands.

Vessels that were damaged in the area but that were successfully returned to operation or refloated and salvaged elsewhere were also identified. Like actual wrecks, these vessels represent an element of the island's maritime activities. Including these vessels contributes to the comprehensiveness of historical analysis. Moreover, knowing a ship was not lost in the area may eliminate the vessel from a list of possible candidates when wreckage is located. Numerous yet-to-be-positively identified wreck sites are distributed throughout the islands.

The list of vessels lost in the area was assembled from a variety of sources including the Vessels Lost listing from annual *Merchant Vessels of the United States* (MVUS) from 1906 to 1980. This register contains information on the vessel, ownership, and circumstances of loss, how, when, and where the vessel was lost for U.S. documented vessels in excess of 5 gross tons (approximately 25 ft). Shipwreck databases maintained by the California State Lands Commission, the U.S. Department of Interior Minerals Management Service, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and the National Park Service National Maritime Museum in San Francisco provided additional information on vessels lost in the study area, including foreign vessels that would not be listed in MVUS.

Clearly, relying exclusively on ship registries biases the census towards larger commercial vessels lost after 1906. One predictable outcome of this bias is that most pleasure craft and smaller fishing vessels are overlooked in the census. Yet, these uses are important elements of the maritime heritage of the island. To counter the bias, which cannot be completely removed, other sources of information must be used. For example, the book *Diary of a Sea Captain's Wife*, by Margaret Eaton (1980) chronicles the island-based fishing and tourist trade that thrived around the beginning of the twentieth century and documents the loss of vessels including her husband's locally constructed boat Irene, which was lost off Santa Cruz Island circa 1908.

Vessels such as the Irene typify Weiman's comment about searching newspapers for information about marine casualties. Eaton's book indicates that the vessel was lost in the winter of 1908. Yet, an issue-by-issue review of the Santa Barbara Morning Press from January to April of that year revealed that the vessel was hauled out in Santa Barbara for the duration of the winter in order to avoid the dangers posed by winter storms. Similarly, San Francisco Maritime Museum card catalogs contain an entry for the San Buenaventura, a vessel lost near Santa Cruz Island in 1858, and the second oldest wreck in the park. A newspaper article from the *Alta California* indicated that Miguel Cota, descendant of one of California's founding settlers, died in the mishap. Using this information, genealogical information developed by the family and on file at the Santa Barbara Historic Society indicates that the vessel was locally constructed and was enroute to pick up cattle on Santa Rosa Island. Often, discovery of the reported loss of non-documented vessels is serendipitous, found while looking for information on other wrecks.

Assembling data on each vessel

Information on each vessel and the circumstances of its loss was gathered from a variety of primary and secondary sources including newspapers, vessel documentation, Coast Guard vessel log books and after-action reports, and maritime and historic society files. In some cases, searching for information regarding vessels is an exercise in infinite regression.

The MVUS listing for each vessel provides a great deal of information including the physical dimension of the wrecks, hull material, propulsion system, ownership, home port, and primary activity the vessel.

Newspapers proved to be the most abundant source of information on vessels lost in the islands. After establishing the date the vessel was lost, local newspapers, most notably the *Santa Barbara News Press* or *Ventura Star Free Press*, were canvassed for accounts of the vessel's loss. For vessels lost prior to the advent of modern communications (until approximately 1920), newspapers had to be checked for at least 2 wk after the incident to allow time for the incident to be reported. Thereafter, newspapers had to be checked for no more than 1 wk. The timeliness of maritime disaster stories is relatively short for most occurrences. Unless the incident was particularly dramatic or unless some type of official inquiry was convened, stories seldom ran for more than 1 day.

The selection of local newspapers was purposeful. Local papers are more likely to give island wrecks greater prominence than regional newspapers of record such as the *Los Angeles Times*. Yet, the "local" quality of news was not just determined by the location of the wreck; it was also influenced by the origin of the vessel. Local newspapers such as the *San Pedro Pilot* or the *Long Beach Press Telegraph* reported on vessels lost in the Channel Islands. The ownership and home port information in MVUS provided information on which newspapers were most likely to contain information on wrecks not reported in the Santa Barbara and Ventura papers. Other newspapers canvassed in the study include the *San Francisco Chronicle, Monterey Peninsula Herald, San Luis Obispo Telegram Tribune, Lompoc Register, Oxnard Press Courier*, and the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*.

When a story was located, constraints on research time and funding seldom allowed additional newspapers to be checked. In some cases, reviewing newspapers provided valuable additional information. For example, an account in the *Santa Barbara News Press* of the stranding of the purse seiner Dante Aligheri II on Santa Barbara Island in 1938 narrowed the area of the potential wreck site. However, like most stories about shipwrecks, the account, while providing essential factual material, could not precisely establish the location of the wreck. A coincidental review of the *Long Beach Press Telegraph* revealed U.S. Coast Guard photographs showing the wreck site on the island. Inquires to the newspaper, the Coast Guard, and the National Archives failed to locate the photographs. But, National Archives records contained a Coast Guard after action report on the incident with precise notes and diagrams of the wreck site. This information proved extremely valuable in narrowing the possible location of the wreck.

The example of the Dante Aligheri II highlights a valuable yet often underutilized source of information available from U.S. Coast Guard records. Extracts from Coast Guard vessel log books and after action reports available from the National Archives provide a rich detail for many vessels lost in the islands. In fact, Coast Guard records provided information about the Jane L. Stanford, a 4-masted barkentine Pacific Rim trader converted to a fishing barge that was rammed by the coastal steamer Humbolt at Santa Barbara in 1929. The Stanford was declared a hazard to navigation, towed to Santa Rosa Island, destroyed with explosive charges, and came to rest in several large sections near Skunk Point. According to the log of the Cutter Tamaroa, a large piece of the wreckage drifted into the Channel and was not located. Similarly, the wreck of the tuna seiner Equator, which was stranded in 1949 at Anacapa Island enroute to Columbia River packing plants with a cargo of frozen tuna, is detailed in logs of the Coast Guard vessel Blackthorne. The name of the Coast Guard vessel responding to the incident must be determined before log book extracts can be requested. In many cases, the newspaper article provides this information.

Sometimes information is not available from any source. Persistent reports of a galleon type vessel that wrecked near Point Bennett on San Miguel Island cannot be substantiated (Hillinger 1958; Holland 1963). According to California State Lands Commission records, a commercial salvage operation in the 1970s failed to find any evidence of the vessel. Several fishing vessels recorded in Merchant Vessels of the United States as being lost in the Islands have no corresponding newspaper report. The California Fish and Game vessel Bluefin was lost near Santa Rosa Island in 1944. A review of Southern California newspapers failed to reveal any information on the loss of the vessel. A copy of vessel documentation received from the National Archives revealed that the vessel was under bareboat charter to the U.S. Army Quartermaster Corps. Inquiries to the U.S. Army Historical Branch and California Department of

Fish and Game failed to uncover any new information. Whether or not the vessel was involved in supplying Army garrisons at Santa Rosa Island, a plausible hypothesis, cannot be determined.

Assembling data on maritime activities

As noted above, shipwrecks are important and concrete examples of broader maritime activities for any given period. Assembling data on the various maritime activities in an area is crucial to placing the vessel in broader historical context. This task, while conceptually separate from gathering data about specific vessels, cannot be divorced from the process of gathering data. Information about the broader social and economic conditions is often derived from the same sources as much of the information on specific vessels. As a matter of efficiency, data for each task are gathered concurrently.

For example, while searching for accounts of the San Francisco purse seiner Sea Bee lost in the Channel in October 1947, an article in the *Ventura Star Free Press* was found that described the huge sardine catches in the channel and the operation of the fishing vessels. Similarly, while searching for information on the loss of the Los Angeles purse seiner San Giuseppe in December 1950, articles were discovered in the *Santa Barbara News Press* chronicling movement of the sardine fishing fleet into the area. Transcripts of an interview with local fish wholesaler and distributor George Castagnola, located during a literature search for vessel information at the Santa Barbara Historic Society, contained several insights on the dynamics of vessel operation and the fishing industry during that time period.

In fact, historic societies and maritime museum archives contain valuable sources of information about vessels and maritime activities in an area. Research on Channel Islands maritime heritage utilized the collections of the Ventura, Santa Barbara, Goleta, and San Luis Obispo historic societies and the San Diego, Los Angeles, and Monterey maritime museums.

Creating the database

Information on vessels was input into a DBASE III database file with each vessel constituting a discrete record. More than 50 fields may be entered for each of the more than 400 wrecks recorded by the research. Most of these fields record the physical dimension of the wrecks, ownership, home port, and how and where the vessel was lost. Additionally, each record contains bibliographic data on sources of information for each vessel. Equally as important, the record lists which sources were reviewed which contained no information. The field/record format of the database was designed to include common fields from other databases, such as those maintained by the California State Lands Commission and the U.S. Minerals Management Service, to improve reliability of the analysis and to facilitate data sharing among the various agencies.

In addition to the computerized database, the park maintains archival files on each vessel. These files contain information gathered on each vessel including copies of vessel documentation, wreck reports, newspaper accounts, and photographs and other documents relating to the vessel. In addition to vessel-specific information, the data files contain general information about maritime activities around the time the vessel was lost. This information is crucial to placing the wreck in the larger context of maritime activities.

Application of the Research

Within Channel Islands National Park, there are ship identities in search of a wreck site and wreck sites in search of an identity. Archival data acquisition to identify vessels within the park occurs simultaneously with an active ongoing cultural resource field survey program, described by Don Morris elsewhere in this volume, that maps known wreck sites and discovers previously unknown or unidentified sites. Both activities guide each other. The physical evidence detailed in the field survey is compared with the information database to tentatively identify wreck sites. Conversely, information in the database alerts the field team to the likelihood of wreck material in the survey area. The field survey data then becomes part of the archival database and may indicate that additional data acquisition is warranted. The field staff has found that reviewing newspaper accounts of the wreck and salvage of a vessel provides useful information in identifying the wreck.

Conclusions

The methodology employed by Channel Islands National Park staff to document shipwrecks consists of identifying vessels lost in the area, conducting a data search of primary sources and reliable secondary sources for information about each vessel and overall maritime activities, and storing the data for retrieval in computerized databases and document archives.

Identifying vessels lost in an area often involves using ships' registries compiled by government agencies and other reliable sources. This source introduces a bias for larger vessels into the list that cannot be wholly removed using presently available sources of information. As such, smaller recreational and fishing vessels are not generally recorded.

Newspaper accounts are the most common source of information on area shipwrecks used by researchers. An abundance of local and regional daily newspapers with overlapping coverage ensure that not all possible sources of information will be reviewed. The newspapers not reviewed represent a rich but untapped source of information. For this reason, the electronic database contains details of which papers were reviewed, and whether any information was found.

Shipwreck research is an ongoing activity. Multiple sources of information make for a stronger chain of evidence when analyzing incidents. While constraints may limit the initial search for information, additional documentary evidence is continually being discovered. Logbooks and after-action reports from responding U.S. Coast Guard and naval vessels are such sources of information, the potential of which is just now being realized.

While conceptually separate, the task of gathering data on each vessel and overall maritime activities often occurs concurrently. Both tasks are crucial to understanding the maritime heritage of the islands.

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