

Pamunkey River Project and MAHS Fall Field School 2005

By John Dowdle

Over the Veteran's Day weekend of 2005, MAHS conducted an Underwater Archaeology Field School in conjunction with its ongoing Pamunkey River Project. The field school was part of the initial exploration and survey of the White House Landing area along the river. Participants in the survey and field school included MAHS President Steve Anthony; MAHS Director of Education and Field School Supervisor Tom Berkey; and MAHS members John Dowdle and Dave Shaw. The MAHS Field School students were Jack Conroy and Chris Ginther. Bruce Terrell, Senior Underwater Archeologist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), is Project Archaeologist for the Pamunkey River Project, and he provided guidance and oversight for the event.

The White House Landing area has seen over 300 years of American history. One of the most interesting periods was during spring and early summer of 1862, when Major General George B. McClellan's Union Army of the Potomac conducted a major offensive operation to take Richmond, the political and economic capital of the Confederacy. Civil War historians call this the Peninsula Campaign, as McClellan's strategy was to move his forces up the Virginia peninsula from Fort Monroe, around the Norfolk area, to threaten the Confederate capital from the rear. Key to McClellan's plan was the creation of supply bases along both the James and York rivers and their major tributaries in order to support his army of over 100,000 soldiers. The Pamunkey River and the Mattaponi River, which join to form the York River at West Point, several miles below White House Landing, were major arteries used to supply McClellan's army. The White House Landing site was a key transportation node in peacetime, being the crossing point of the Richmond and York River Railroad, and it became a vital supply link for McClellan during his campaign.

The Union campaign stalled outside Richmond, and in July 1862, McClellan abandoned his efforts to take the city, retreating instead to Fort Monroe. During the retreat, ships, barges and supplies were either left behind or burned to keep them from being captured by the Confederates. Research indicates that many of the barges and ships used around White House Landing may have suffered this fate. It is the remains of these vessels that MAHS hopes to locate and survey over the next several years.



The Virginia Peninsula Showing the York and James Rivers and Their Tributaries Planned as Conduits for McClellan's March on the Confederate Capital of Richmond (inset: Gen. George B. McClellan).

Previous MAHS surveys have documented the presence of remains along this stretch of the river. A visual survey was conducted in 2003, discovering various wooden structures along the shoreline that might be wharf or vessel remains (*MAHSNEWS* 2003), while a remote sensing survey in 2004 indicated a large number of submerged anomalies in the area (*MAHSNEWS* 2004). The present survey and field school focused on the White House Landing area for several reasons, including the historical activity documented there and the more practical aspects of landowner approval and access availability.

The project was conducted over a period of three days. Tom, Steve, and Dave arrived midday Friday, November 11, to meet with the present landowners. Two local historians, James Harris and Terri Lindsay (Secretary of the New Kent County Historical Society), introduced the MAHS team to the Powells, the property owners. After introductions, Dave, Steve, Jack, Chris and Tom conducted a low-tide shore reconnaissance until just before dark. They discovered what appeared to be the remains of four wrecks along the shoreline. After taking initial measurements and photos, the crew headed



November 2005 Pamunkey expedition members at the foundation ruins of the White House. Back row: T.Lindsay and J.Harris; Front row L-R: J.Conroy, T.Berkey and C. Ginther. Photo by J. Dowdle.

to motel accommodations in nearby West Point to meet the rest of the MAHS team, due in later that evening.

On Saturday morning, after a breakfast-and-planning session, the MAHS team arrived at the Powells' home around 9:00 AM to meet with Bruce Terrell and discuss the survey. Bruce provided the Powells with a historical and archaeological perspective of the area and described MAHS' work plan for the weekend, as well as plans for ongoing research. The Powells were enthusiastic, gracious hosts and offered to support MAHS' efforts in future surveys of the area. The MAHS team then prepared for the day's activities. Steve gave a safety briefing to everyone, as well as a course overview to Chris and Jack. Tom then led the two students in a dry-land exercise practicing trilateration mapping techniques. The rest of the team set up the zodiac boats and gear. During this time, Bruce sought out and met with other local citizens who had additional historical knowledge of the area.

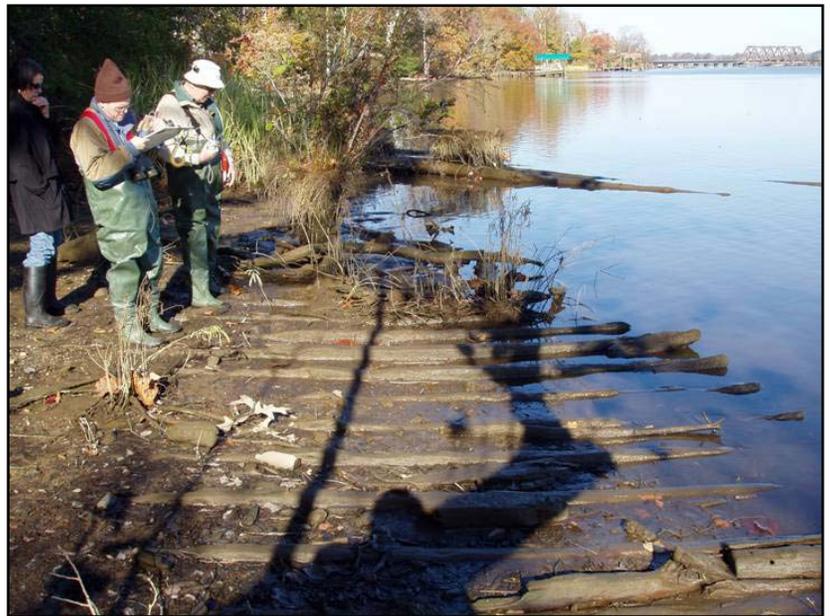
The plan was to finish diving and data collection by 3:30 PM and pack up the gear before dark, as sunset was around 5:10 PM. By midday, the team moved out to the survey site. The survey area chosen contained two vessels, which appeared to be located side-by-side, parallel to the embankment. Dave and Steve reconnoitered the area while the other team members prepped for the survey. After the initial reconnaissance, the team decided to wait for the tide to drop to its lowest point to expose the second hull along the shoreline.

Mud surrounding the wreckage made moving around the site an "interesting" experience, as it was firm in some areas and very

soft in others. More than once, team members ended up in amusingly undignified positions. In the meantime, Steve and Dave set up a granny line to use around the site, while John and Tom began initial measurements on the timbers of the first hull, closest to shore. When Bruce returned, he assisted Chris, Dave, and Tom, as they collected data on the first and second vessels. The second hull also seemed to have a keelson along its length, which indicated that it may have been a small ship or schooner rather than a barge. The team also discovered several artifacts possibly related to the wrecks including:

- stoneware bottle base
- polychrome white ware
- salt-glazed stoneware
- a leather shoe heel

At the same time, Steve and John suited up to conduct an underwater survey to determine whether any anomalies or items of interest were present in the water on the river side of the second hull. They found the water to be a 'refreshing' 55 degrees Fahrenheit with zero visibility. The divers conducted the survey totally by feel, surfacing to report any results to Jack, who was acting as the data recorder on the bank. Using a semi-circular radial survey technique with a line attached to a steel rod adjacent to the bank, they conducted the search moving out from the bank in 3-meter increments. If an anomaly was found, one diver would tug on the line to signal the other to move down to his location, and then both divers examined the feature together and surfaced to give Jack their impressions. Initial indications from the features identified by Steve and John indicated the probable outline of a third vessel parallel to the first two,



T.Lindsay, C.Ginther and T.Berkey inspect White House Hull #1. Two additional hulls lie submerged to the right. Photo by J. Dowdle.



Bridge over the Pamunkey River at White House Landing under repair ca. 1862, with locomotive in right background.

creating the type of temporary wharf seen in historical photographs of the White House Landing.

The team wrapped up its work right before dark, but remained awhile to observe optimal low tide conditions. Their patience was rewarded as the light from the three-quarter moon exposed the remains of at least 3 other wrecks along the shore line. The team then moved back to the motel in West Point for the evening and after dinner formally transposed the data from the day's survey.

The next morning several team members returned to the site to complete or clarify measurements from the previous day, but tide conditions along the bank were not conducive to gathering accurate measurements. So, the team did what they could along the bank and then walked over other parts of the area, including the extant brick foundations of the White House and the historic springhouse, in anticipation of future exploration. Finishing by early afternoon, the group headed back to northern Virginia.

The survey and field school were deemed a success and proved to be one of the more enjoyable field schools MAHS has held in the region in terms of weather, as the November days were mild and sunny with a gentle breeze. The weekend provided a wealth of information and future opportunities for MAHS to map and survey a little explored aspect of the American Civil War from an underwater archaeological perspective. The event also provided a valuable training opportunity for students, as well as a controlled environment in which to develop appropriate low-visibility survey techniques for later use at the site. Lessons—learned in the areas of site preparation, equipment, and procedures



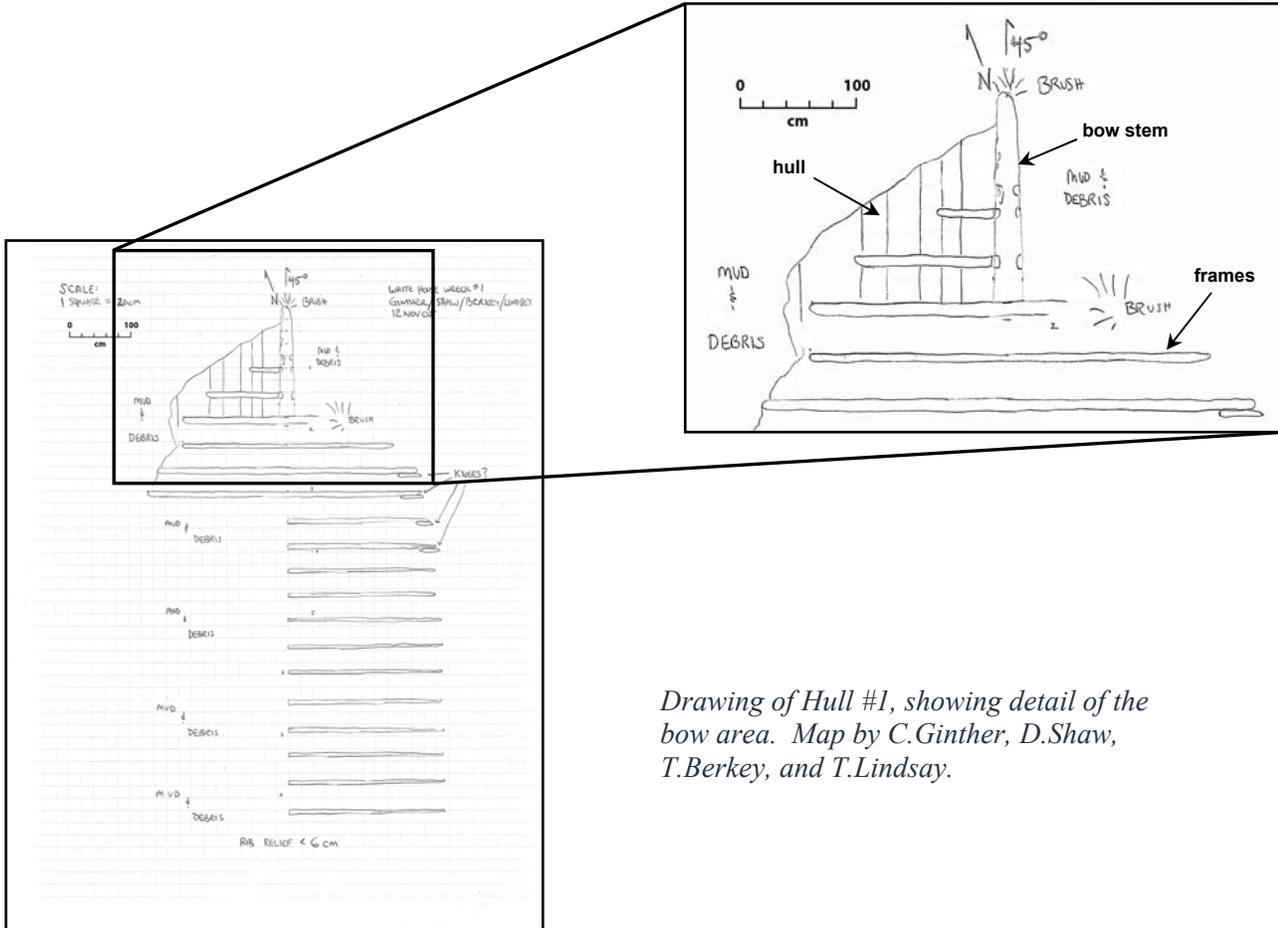
Barges moored parallel to the shoreline to create a temporary wharf, with a double-turreted ironclad in the background.

were collected and will help to make the next survey even more productive. With the active support of people like the Powells, James Harris, and Terri Lindsay, and with archaeologists like Bruce Terrell providing assistance and guidance, MAHS will have a unique opportunity to explore and survey this part of underwater Virginia for years to come.



Steve Anthony prepares for a dive to survey beyond the second hull. Photo by J. Dowdle.

Note: Bruce Terrell contributed some of the historical research for this article. The map on page 1 is the "Map of the Peninsula of Virginia: Showing Route of McClellan's Army Toward Richmond" by Robert Knox Sneden, from the collections of the Virginia Historical Society, Richmond. More historical background can be found via the Pamunkey Project link at www.mahsnet.org. 



Drawing of Hull #1, showing detail of the bow area. Map by C.Ginther, D.Shaw, T.Berkey, and T.Lindsay.