

# Promise of treasure from Cornwallis fleet fuels ambitious salvage effort off Virginia

By Donald J. Frederick,  
National Geographic Society

YORKTOWN, Va. — Two hundred years after the British commander Lord Charles Cornwallis was cornered at Yorktown, some of the battle casualties — seven of his merchant ships — still lie just a few hundred yards from the town's public beach in the silty York River.

This fall, underwater archaeologists will begin exploring the three best-preserved vessels.

The ships were once part of a chain of 14 vessels scuttled by the desperate Cornwallis before the battle began in the early autumn of 1781.

Facing a strong assault from troops led by Gen. George Washington and the French Comte de Rochambeau, who had combined their armies in the north and marched to Yorktown, Cornwallis formed a link of sunken vessels to prevent an amphibious landing on his weakly defended waterfront positions.

The French-Patrol forces, however, overwhelmed the British and on Oct. 19, 1781, Cornwallis surrendered, leading to the final British collapse two years later.

After the battle, a Patrol officer described the view from the devastated Yorktown waterfront: "At a small distance from the shore were seen ships sunk down to the water's edge — further out in the channel the masts, yards and even the topgallant masts of some might be seen, without any vestige of the hulls."

Preliminary dives on the three wrecks have already turned up enough for a display at the Yorktown Victory Center — such objects as a vintage wine bottle, a pipe bowl, and a bronze ship's bell. The project, directed by John D. Broadwater, an underwater archaeologist with the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission, is partly supported by the National Geographic Society.

Broadwater hopes for a lot more. Panicked by news of the advancing Patriot troops, affluent Loyalists in Yorktown had pleaded with Cornwallis to store some of their valuables on British

ships anchored in the harbor.

It's not known whether he agreed, but papers signed after the British surrender suggest that some of the goods were accepted. "At least one of these ships probably went to the bottom with some fine Tory furnishings aboard," said Broadwater.

THE SEARCH is expected to last through December. Poor visibility and strong currents will prevent the divers from investigating much below the top layer of silt covering the wrecks. On the surface the biggest hazard is water skiers zooming by the site, ignoring markers.

These problems will be avoided in a far more ambitious salvage operation planned next spring for one of the ships, a supply vessel 25 feet wide and 75 feet long with roughly half its hull and two masts still intact. The ship is described as the best preserved ocean-going merchant vessel yet found in North America.

If all goes well, a steel cofferdam will be barged out to the ship, lowered around it, and anchored in place with massive pilings. Archaeologists will then be able to dive on the wreck without being bothered by tides and skiers. A special purification system will clear the water within the boxlike dam structure.

The scientists aren't going to all this trouble just for a collection of 18th-century memorabilia, however. By exploring each layer of silt that has accumulated throughout the years over the decks and hull, they hope to get an idea of how the ship was laid out.

First, Broadwater will analyze the objects he's found, such as eating utensils.

"By matching these items with the nautical floor plan that's been developed, we'll be able not only to get a good picture of how the vessel looked below decks, but what took place in the compartments there on a day-to-day basis."

NAVAL HISTORIANS are intrigued with the project. Although much is known about warships of the period, little has been learned about the merchant ships, which not only carried the

supplies to far-flung colonies but brought valuable trade goods back to the mother country.

In their own way the merchant men contributed to the collapse of the entire British war effort in the colonies.

"These ships were a major expense because they had to haul everything from boots to bully beef across the ocean to keep the conflict going," points out John O. Sands, a naval historian and assistant director for collections at the Mariners' Museum in Newport News, Va.

"Severe losses such as the 40 vessels from Cornwallis' support fleet that were either sunk or captured at Yorktown made matters even worse so the supply ship situation was one of the key factors that made the British throw in the towel two years later."

As the ship salvage progresses visitors might be treated to a first-hand look. If funds are available, Broadwater hopes to build a concrete pier from a major beach access road right out to the cofferdam, so people can watch the divers at work on the wreck.

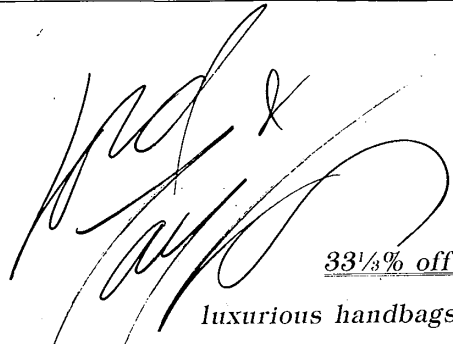
## Holiday traffic deaths down

Michigan's Labor Day weekend motorists have set a modern traffic safety record, according to the Automobile Club of Michigan.

The 13 persons killed on roads this holiday compares with 26 last year and an average 30 Labor Day deaths during the past 26 years. The recorded low for Labor Day weekend deaths was 12 in 1958. Mike Wild of AAA said this holiday's drop in the death toll is a continuation of a year-long trend. Traffic deaths so far this year are down 13 percent, compared with 1980.

Wild said the fact that motorists drive more safely during economic hard times, a 7 percent increase in holiday drunk driving arrests by state police, plus vigilance of sheriff and other police patrols also were factors.

He added that tourism declined 10 percent this holiday, compared with a year ago, due to poor weather.



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