

Shipwreck Fragment Visits North Beach Island

by Alan Pollock

CHATHAM — North Beach Island had a visitor from the Graveyard of the Atlantic last week. A 25-foot fragment of a wooden boat hull appeared on the beach, and vanished almost as quickly as it came.

Assistant Harbormaster Mike Ryder was installing buoys last Wednesday when he came across the wreck on the northwest corner of the island. “It was a fairly substantial piece,” he said. While the age of the wreckage isn’t clear, “it was pegged and it had square nails,” Ryder said. “It was superior craftsmanship, no doubt. And it was in wonderful shape.”

The wreckage was completely uncovered, and its location suggests that it washed into the North Inlet, likely from its original resting place further north. As of early this week, it was gone. “I think it’s washed away again,” Ryder said.

David Robinson, director of the Mass. Board of Underwater Archaeological Resources, wouldn’t hazard a guess as to what vessel the wreckage came from. Given the relatively small size of the find and its loca-



The wreckage shows hull planks, some with joints that still appear tight, over the remaining fragments of ribs. COURTESY MIKE RYDER

tion, “there’s not a lot to go on,” he said. There are thousands of shipwrecks along the shoreline, he noted.

“Most of the wreckage we see on the beaches dates from the late 19th to early 20th century,” Robinson said. “Based on the excellent condition of the wood and what appear to be double-sawn frames, I think that time frame is likely for this relatively

small section of hull remains.”

The planks are fastened by treenails (pronounced “trunnels”), wooden nails usually made of locust.

“They were extremely good at keeping planks secured to the framing underneath, because they don’t corrode,” Robinson said. While treenails are excellent fasteners, they don’t provide much information about the age of the vessel, since they are still in use.

“The remains in the photo include outer hull planking that is secured to framing with treenails. Openings in the planking appear to be possible portholes. The thickness of the planking relative to each individual planking strake’s width is a bit curious, as they’re almost square in cross-section,” he said.

People who find fragments of shipwrecks are encouraged to visit the board of underwater archaeological resources’ website (visit www.Mass.gov and search for BUAR) to log their find. The board has launched a

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web interface known as the Shoreline Heritage Identification Partnership Strategy, or SHIPS, that allows people to enter information, photos or other data for inclusion in a state database. But without a special exemption, it's against the law to take the fragment home.

"These resources belong to all of us," he said, and by statute, the board is the sole steward of underwater archaeological finds.

To understand the number of wrecks along the coastline, it's helpful to imagine Route 495 during rush hour.

"The merchant traffic off our coast was not unlike the merchant traffic carried by 18-wheelers on the highway. There was that much traffic

traveling up and down the coast," Robinson said. Before the Cape Cod Canal provided a safer means of passage, vessels of all kinds had to hazard the sand bars, shifting currents and unpredictable weather off the Cape's outer beach.

But there's something about finding a shipwreck that inspires imagination and curiosity, Robinson said.

"It's a tangible link to the past," he said. Because most shipwrecks ended in tragedy, they're a poignant reminder of the risks mariners took in the past, and continue to take. The interest in shipwrecks can be of a personal nature, too.

"So many of us have a connection to the sea," either through our occupations, our hobbies or our ancestors. "Everybody that's of European descent, if our families came here a long time ago, they came by boat," he said.