Shipwrecks of the Revolutionary War

The gondola *Philadelphia, 1776*

Late in 1775, Benedict Arnold led an attack on Quebec, hoping to break the English forces in two along Lake Champlain. He captured Fort Ticonderoga and an significant number of guns.

Carrying the guns across land, Arnold invaded Canada. After taking Montreal and laying siege to Quebec City during the hard Winter, Arnold withdrew his forces to Fort Ticonderoga on Lake Champlain.

In the Spring of 1776, General Arnold was attacked by the British army near Plattsburg at Valcour Island.

During the engagement, the American troops resisted the British force for 6 hours. With a total of 17 vessels, mostly gunboats and a few schooners, the American forces resisted an English fleet of 25 vessels.

General Arnold lost the schooner *Royal Savage* and the gunboat *Philadelphia*.

Next morning, knowing that the English would use all the vessels they could bring against him, Arnold sunk part of his fleet and retreated to Fort Ticonderoga.

Found in 1932, the *Royal Savage* was raised in 1934 by Lorenzo Hagglund, a salvage engineer interested in old shipwrecks. As it was heavily damaged, after drying it was abandoned and eventually burned.

In 1935, Mr. Hagglund found the *Philadelphia* standing upright with it’s mast stepped. The guns were removed and the hull was raised.

Following its recovery, the *Philadelphia* was displayed aboard a barge that traveled around the waterways of New York State.

After Mr. Hagglund’s death, it was offered to the Smithsonian Institution, arriving in Washington in 1961.

Carefully treated and completely recorded, the *Philadelphia* is today a key element in the exhibits of the Museum of American History.

**Hull remains**

The hull of the Philadelphia was perfectly preserved.

In the exhibit, we can see the British shot that sank it.
Armament
With a crew of 45 men, the Philadelphia mounted: one 12 pounder at the bow, two 9 pounders on its sides, and 8 swivels on the caprails.

Artifacts
Many artifacts were found on the Philadelphia: personnel possessions, ship fittings, shot, weapons, pots, and a stove.

In the 1990s, a replica was built and tested by the Lake Champlain museum.

The hull of the Philadelphia is 16.1 m long. It carried 45 men and several large guns.

In 1997, another of Arnold’s ships was located at the bottom of Lake Champlain near Valcour Island.

H.M.S. Augusta
The British 64-gun ship H.M.S. Augusta was sunk by the American forces during Howe’s 1777 attempt to take Philadelphia.

After running ashore, the Augusta was pounded by Fort Mifflin’s guns and the fire of several gunboats. It exploded with a considerable loss of lives.

Its remains were raised in 1869, as they were considered a hazard for navigation.

Its artifacts were sold.

The Daughters of the American Revolution had some timbers pulled from its site to make panels for the walls of their hall in Washington DC.

Hull remains
Except for the timbers that were used in the building of the New Jersey Room of the Continental Hall in Washington, there are no known remains of the hull of the H.M.S. Augusta.

The timbers raised by the salvors slowly deteriorated and were eventually discarded.

Armament
The guns of the H.M.S. Augusta were probably salvaged after the Revolutionary War.

Artifacts
The artifacts salvaged in 1869 were exhibited in a tent built by the salvors for that purpose. People would pay 25 cents to look at the timbers and artifacts raised.

After the interest in the exhibition faded away, the artifacts were distributed and sold.
The brig *Defence*, 1779

The *Defence* was probably built in Beverly, Massachusetts, in 1779. It was a fast ship designed to serve as a privateer.

Almost new, the *Defence* was lost while engaged in an attempt to destroy a loyalist colony at Penobscot Bay.

Around mid-June 1779, three sloops of war under the command of Captain Mowatt entered Penobscot Bay with around 800 loyal colonists from Nova Scotia and took possession of the Baja-bagaduce peninsula.

When the news of this expedition reached Boston, preparations were immediately started to organize a military force to drive these colonists out of the State of Massachusetts.

Learning about the attack, a force of British ships sailed from New York to Penobscot under Commodore Collier to defend the new loyalist settlers.

To attack the colonists, a fleet of 19 armed vessels carrying over 200 guns, and about 20 transports, was assembled and sailed to Penobscot Bay on July 19 under the command of Commodore Saltonstall. Almost 1,000 men comprised the military force, under the command of General Lovell. General Wadsworth was second in command, and Lieutenant-Colonel Paul Revere was in charge of the artillery.

Upon arrival on the 25th, lack of coordination between the navy and the army made it impossible to conquer the fortress in which the colonists were entrenched. Delays and lack of determination allowed the loyalists to fortify their site better each day that passed. After 3 weeks of indefinite actions, a British force arrived and the American force fled upstream, abandoning their vessels to the enemy.

Back in Boston, Comodore Saltonstall was tried by court martial and dismissed from the navy.

The *Defence* was found in 1972 by a team sponsored by the Maine Maritime Academy and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

It was excavated between 1975 and 1981 by the Maine Maritime Academy, the Maine State Museum, and INA.

The *Defence* exploded, sinking without burning first, and was quite well preserved.

**Hull remains**

The hull of the Defence was very well preserved, with the exception of the stern, which exploded.

**Armament**

The *Defence* may have carried as many as 16 guns.

However, only two guns were found on the site in 1972.

**Artifacts**

Many artifacts were left behind by the fleeing crew of the Defence:

Food was found in storage at the bow;
Personel items were found amidships, where the crew lived; 
Towards the stern was the powder locker, the shot locker, and the bilge-pump.

**Bonhomme Richard, 1779**

On August 14, 1779, John Paul Jones, a 62-year old navy officer with large record of victories against English vessels, set sail from France on the frigate *Bonhomme Richard* to cruise around the British Isles. Jones captured 16 merchant vessels and sailed back to France.

Lost in 1779 during a naval fight with the *H.M.S. Serapis*, the *Bonhomme Richard* was never found.

No hull remains
No armament
No artifacts

**H.M.S. Charon, 1781**

The *H.M.S. Charon* was a 44-gun frigate (5th rate) built in England in 1778. In the summer of 1781, it was the largest warship present at Yorktown.

As the hostilities began on October 10, the *Charon* was pounded with heated shot by the French battery and caught fire, burning to the waterline with a considerable loss of life.

In 1934, several 1781 wrecks were salvaged. In 1935, the *Charon* suffered from some salvage work, although its identity was mistaken.

In 1976, after the Virginia Division of Historic Landmarks took over the protection of the wreck, Texas A&M University and INA were invited to run a survey of the Yorktown wrecks in order to assess their importance and condition.

In 1980, TAMU/INA conducted a summer school on the site of the *Charon*.

**Hull remains**

The hull remains of the *Charon* were investigated in 1980, and they coincided with great precision the plans and specifications existing for this type of vessel.

**Armament**

Most of the guns of the *Charon* had been removed by General Cornwallis before the battle.

None were reported to have been found during the 1980 field season.

**Artifacts**

The artifacts retrieved in the 1930s have been mixed with artifacts from other wrecks.
Betsy (YO88), 1781

The Betsy was a merchant brig built in 1772 at Whitehaven in England and committed to coal transport.

Part of the British force under siege at Yorktown in 1781, it was sunk by General Cornwallis in an attempt to stop the French fleet that was blocking the entrance of the Chesapeake Bay under the command of Comte de Rochambeau.

A total of around 50 British ships were sunk around Yorktown in an attempt to prevent the French from landing their troops on the shores of the York River.

The Betsy was excavated in the late 1970s and early 1980s by John Boradwater and the Virginia Division of Historic Landmarks.

To improve the diving conditions, a cofferdam was built around the wreck.

Hull remains

The remains of the brig Betsy were extensively preserved. It was a slow and sturdy old collier, with a shallow draft and a large cargo capacity.

Armament

Although the Betsy was a supply ship and there were no weapons aboard, one gun carriage was found on the wreck.

Artifacts

A large collection of artifacts was found on this wreck:

- Food and drinks;
- Rigging elements;
- Personnel possessions.


See: Additional texts in the Readings Volume.