

The Invisibility of Empire in American Maritime Archaeology

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"Under murky waters, a ship's secrets await" reads a June 8, 1998 headline in the *Austin American-Statesman*, the leading (and only) daily newspaper in Austin, Texas, the capital of the state of Texas. The article refers to the excavation of the confederate blockade runner *Denbigh* in the waters surrounding Galveston island along the Texas gulf coast. The excavation is headed by the former Texas state marine archaeologist J. Barto Arnold III, who now is based at the Institute of Nautical Archaeology in College Station, Texas.

Texas, of course, was part of the confederacy (the losing side) during the American civil war; almost all of the state's political elite at the time were slaveowners, and many of them were strongly in favor of re-opening the African slave trade into Texas. Indeed many of these planters had been engaged in illicit smuggling of African slaves into or through Texas for decades. The African-American slave trade was perfectly legal at this time, and "negro speculation," as it was called, was an integral part of not just the antebellum American political economy, but constituted a crucial aspect of maritime commerce during the war as well. Much of this unsavory Texas history is omitted from mainstream periodicals, journals, and newspapers, although the self-righteous preening by death penalty and sex-crazed Texas politicians today can now be perhaps understood in some historical context.

While many citizens of the Lone Star State remain in a blissful if unwitting state of ignorance about the actual history of their beloved homeland, what amazes me is that historians, archaeologists, and other intellectuals who know or ought to know about this crucial aspect of Texas history either pretend not to notice that slavery and slave trading ever existed in Texas, or that it was of minimal, perhaps even microscopic, importance and should be forgotten or at least put up on the shelf because dwelling on such things can only be construed as "divisiveness" or "quibbling." The Texas Historical Commission and the National Underwater and Marine Agency (NUMA), for instance, presumably are too busy to concern themselves with such matters; the agencies are currently engaged in a joint effort to locate French explorer La Salle's flagship *L'Aimable* near Port O' Connor, Texas. It would seem, then, that there is no need for concern; with the Texas maritime archaeology community distracted by more important matters, the history of the Texas slave trade (and much else besides) is destined to remain in proper obscurity.

Perhaps. Nobody likes "politics." One wonders, however, whether or how long the vanguard of American maritime archaeology can continue to keep this skeleton in the closet.

Misrepresentation, strategic silences, and obfuscatory scientific technobabble may have at least kept a pair of skivvies underneath the emperor's trenchcoat up to now, but the stubborn facts of what was done to Mexicans, Indians and Blacks in Texas (and many others elsewhere in the "modern" world) keep rearing their heads like eager prairie dogs, and threaten to expose the

emperor as not just naked but perhaps ignorant as well.

For quite some time, the politics of maritime archaeology and undersea exploration generally have been dominated by the "archaeologist vs. treasure hunter" debate, and the debate appears to be raging as vigorously as ever. Quite frankly, I don't see what the big deal is about. Both groups are comprised to a large degree, not totally, by an in-bred clique of supremely arrogant and Eurocentric scholars and capitalists whose relationship to the things discussed here might be described as uncomfortable at best. When looked at from the perspective argued for here, the question of for or not-for profit archaeology becomes a marginal issue; both treasure hunters and maritime archaeologists are going to have to realize that the billions of former colonial "victims" they have so far chosen to ignore are simply beyond their peripheral vision, and that they might want to turn their heads and look a little closer (I'm paraphrasing a line from Ani DiFranco's song "32 flavors" here) at what's there. No more escapism: turn off the Jimmy Buffett music, please, and start listening to some Mutaburuka or Spearhead instead.

Now that I've angered most of the American maritime archaeology community, let me now venture a humble and tentative attempt at being constructive. Criticism, as the proverbial sentiment goes, is easy. How about suggesting something? O.K. here goes:

Books: There is no shortage of books addressing the things I mention here. The following is by no means a comprehensive list, although I think it's as good a start as any:

Said, Edward W.	<i>Culture and Imperialism</i>
Bolster W. Jeffrey	<i>Black Jacks</i>
Gilroy, Paul	<i>The Black Atlantic</i>
Du Bois, W.E.B.	<i>The Suppression of the African Slave Trade into the United States</i>
Chomsky, Noam	<i>Year 501</i>
Means, Russell	<i>Where White Men Fear to Tread</i>
Orser, Charles	<i>A Historical Archaeology of the Modern World</i>

People: In *Mud, Muscle, and Miracles*, former U.S. Navy Supervisor of Salvage and Diving Charles A. (Black Bart) Bartholomew referred to USN salvors as being "supremely skilled" and as often having "egos to match." And so it is with women and men of the sea generally. Maritime archaeology is blessed to have some truly gifted individuals as practitioners, and the person at the top of the list, in my view, is David Moore of the North Carolina Maritime Museum. The lead excavator of the *Henrietta Marie* shipwreck, Mr. Moore's accomplishments are too long to list here; many readers are probably familiar with them. Suffice it to say, that in addition to being a fine scholar (and world class drinker), David is also an outstanding human being. Any recognition or awards he receives have been a long time in coming.

Madeleine Burnside and Rosemarie Robotham's book *Spirits of the Passage* is a well illustrated and well written account of the *Henrietta Marie* shipwreck and the story of the middle passage in the seventeenth century. The book also contains a fine introduction titled "The Ignoble Paradox

of Western Modernity” by noted African-American scholar Cornel West.

Hans Van Tilburg of the University of Hawai'i at Manoa is also doing interesting work on Chinese and Polynesian seafaring and provides a refreshing antidote to the usual "ships of the explorers" humdrum that makes the morning papers. That Europeans who came to Polynesia relied upon and admired Polynesian sailing knowledge and skill at boat construction seems to always get drowned out in conventional narratives of "contact" and "conquest."

There are others, predominantly non-Americans, who are doing similar maritime archaeological and historical work, and I think that the WAC represents a tremendous opportunity for international cooperation among interested parties who understand that the maritime archaeology and maritime history of the modern world is the maritime archaeology and maritime history of empire. Since the evolution of the disciplines are themselves by-products of empire in complicated ways, fellowship and a "safe harbor" to express controversial opinions are as essential as ever. I (and I'm sure many others) am a member of the World Archaeological Congress because the organization has an overt and deliberate commitment to internationalizing the discipline. The road ahead looks pretty rough and challenging, but it's the right road. Let's get to work.

About the author :

Fred L. McGhee is writing his dissertation on the Texas Slave Trade.