



Archaeology Across the Atlantic

LAMP Overseas Research at Achill Island, Ireland

by Chuck Meide

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It's a freezing cold July morning. Freezing by St. Augustine standards, at least, but we are a world away from Florida. We are on board the wooden-hulled vessel *Naomh Davnait*, built by our captain John O'Malley, a third-generation Irish boatbuilder, the local lighthouse keeper, and proud descendant of the infamous Pirate Queen Grace O'Malley, a contemporary of Elizabeth I. Earlier we motored from a pier on Achill Island, guarded by a 15th century O'Malley castle, but now we are anchored off the coast of Clare Island, under the watchful and somewhat familiar eye of its lighthouse, mounted precariously on the rocky cliffs high overhead. As I pull my hood over my head the sounds of the boat and sea go mute, and fixing my mask to my face I stand and make my way - careful not to trip over my fins -- to the water's edge. With a giant stride, a rush of bubbles, and intense cold I join my buddy in the green Irish sea.

Slowly we descend into the dark silent world spread out beneath us, moving hand over hand down the buoy line tied off to the shipwreck 90 feet below. My drysuit, whose bulk made me feel like an astronaut on the boat, is hardly noticeable in the weightless void and it gives me comfort to imagine how much colder it would be without it. Suddenly, an endless expanse of white sand becomes visible, and I forget about the cold. The wreck itself looms into view, a compact pile of corroded cargo, covered in white sponges, a strange fuzzy green growth, and swirling with unfamiliar fish and congor eels. For the next 20 minutes time stands still and all thoughts of the world above disappear as we explore the remains of this ghost ship on the opposite side of the Atlantic . . .

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Achill is Ireland's largest and westernmost island, located off the remote coast of County Mayo. Long renowned for its magnificent vistas and dynamic coastline, Achill is today relatively well-known throughout Ireland and the U.K. as a tourist destination which sees a regular influx of visitors during the summer months, while somehow still managing to retain a sense of isolation. The island has been continuously habited since at least the Neolithic, and its archaeological landscape features a wide range of sites including megalithic tombs, Iron Age forts, a fifteenth century fortified tower, the ruins of several nineteenth-century villages, and a medieval crannog (lake-dwelling). An ongoing excavation program sponsored by the Achill Folklife Centre has brought much attention to Achill's archaeology and history, though until recently the island's rich maritime heritage has been mostly under-appreciated.

As a PhD student at the College of William and Mary, I started my dissertation research on Achill in 2004, initiating the first maritime archaeological survey ever on the island. Once I accepted the position of Director at LAMP, the St. Augustine Lighthouse and Museum agreed to join William and Mary and the Institute of Maritime History as a joint sponsor of my third and major season of fieldwork on Achill in the summer of 2006. While the connection between Ireland and St. Augustine's histories

may not be readily apparent, both were part of a widespread maritime system known to scholars as the "Atlantic World." Comparative studies of Atlantic World societies are drawing an increasing amount of attention from archaeologists on both sides of the Atlantic. Maritime societies, whether in Africa, Europe or the Americas, were connected by the sea and often underwent similar social processes throughout the period of European colonization and the expansion of global capitalism.

On Achill, I have become interested in the changes in maritime lifeways that occurred during the 19th century. This period was one of economic, religious and social strife, exemplified by the Great Famine (1845-50) and increasing political conflict with Britain, which eventually lead to Irish independence in the 1920s. Achill islanders have always turned to the sea for survival, using the rocky shores, tidal flats and natural harbors for fishing, seaweed harvesting, maritime trade and shipwreck salvage. Legislation imposed by British authorities attempted to change traditional maritime lifeways, by introducing commercial fishing and wage labor where none had previously existed, discouraging indigenous Irish boatbuilding in favor of British vessel types, restricting trade, and outlawing the salvage of shipwrecks. The effects of, and resistance to, these efforts can be discerned in the archaeological record. Over the last three summers, we have identified and documented a wide variety of 19th century sites on the coast, underwater, and on the foreshore (the zone fully exposed at low tide but submerged at high tide; a significant area considering Ireland's ten-foot tide change). On land, these sites include the impressive stone ruins of an 1830s Coast Guard station and two 1860s boathouses, along with a fishing station and ice house related to the commercial salmon fishing industry introduced in the 1850s. Standing in stark contrast to the imposing Coast Guard boathouses are three sets of curragh pens. Curraghs are distinctly Irish rowing boats of ancient design, built by stretching hides or canvas over a light wooden or wicker framework. Low, stonewalled pens were used to secure them against the strong winds common to the region when not in use. Two sets of these pens showed signs of 20th-century alteration (poured cement footings and iron tie-down rings) while a third set was abandoned shortly after the Famine and remained in pristine condition. There are no other remaining examples of curragh pens anywhere else in Ireland.

We have also documented a number of traditional Irish watercraft, including curraghs and the wooden-planked Achill yawls widely utilized in the 19th century and are still in use on the island. The oldest working boat located so far was a yawl built by the local O'Malley boatbuilding family around 100



The Successful on the foreshore of Ireland

years ago. It appears very similar in size and construction to Achill yawls pictured in old photographs dating to the late 19th century.

To date five 19th or early 20th century shipwrecks have been discovered by project archaeologists. One of these was a fishing trawler named *Successful*, whose wooden remains lie exposed on the foreshore near the village of Achill Sound. This vessel featured two masts as well as a propeller and steam engine, and may represent a ship that was modified by incorporating new technology (adding a steam engine) or else a rare hybrid purposely built with both sail and steam.

One of the artifacts observed amid the wreckage, a small glass pharmaceutical bottle labeled "Successors to the California Fig Syrup Co.," was virtually identical to a bottle recovered from a trash pit used by the Keeper's family at the St. Augustine Lighthouse! The presence of a health product manufactured in California on a wrecked fishing trawler on Achill and a refuse pit in St. Augustine suggests that even poor Irish fishermen from this remote locale were part of a global consumer society, and stresses the trans-regional connections inherent to Atlantic World societies. The 2006 season, because of a grant offered through the Irish Heritage Council and the support of the St. Augustine Lighthouse and Museum, saw the most extensive diving operations to date. In addition to myself, LAMP's Director of Archaeology Dr. Sam Turner and two other volunteers spent a full week diving from the *Naomh Davnait* on two separate shipwreck sites in Achill waters. Despite the fact that the two wrecks were separated by less than 2.5 miles, they were located in totally different but equally challenging environments.

The *Jenny* was a 492-ton Norwegian sailing bark on route from Morant Bay, Jamaica to Hamburg, Germany. Blown off-course by a severe gale, *Jenny* crashed against the rocks in a cove at Achill Beg ("Little Achill") Island on January 13, 1894. *Jenny* carried a cargo of logwood and her entire crew of ten sailors, including the captain L. Andersen, survived the wreck, which was witnessed by local islanders. It is known that local boatbuilders salvaged part of the extremely durable logwood cargo to fashion thole pins (oarlocks) for their currachs. This cove is frequently battered by storms and a heavy surge, and in the century since its wrecking the ship has been torn to pieces. Today, most of the hull has disappeared but numerous metal fittings and cargo components lie scattered throughout the underwater gullies and canyons making up what is a dynamic, kelp-covered underwater landscape. While none of the wreckage was deeper than 40 feet, and the water here was quite clear, the rough surge, confusing topography, and dense kelp forests made this a challenging site for divers. Despite this, a map was produced marking the extent and location of most of the scattered components of the site.

The other shipwreck, described in the preface to this article, was a completely different type of site with its own unique set of challenges. This vessel remains unidentified, though it is believed to be a

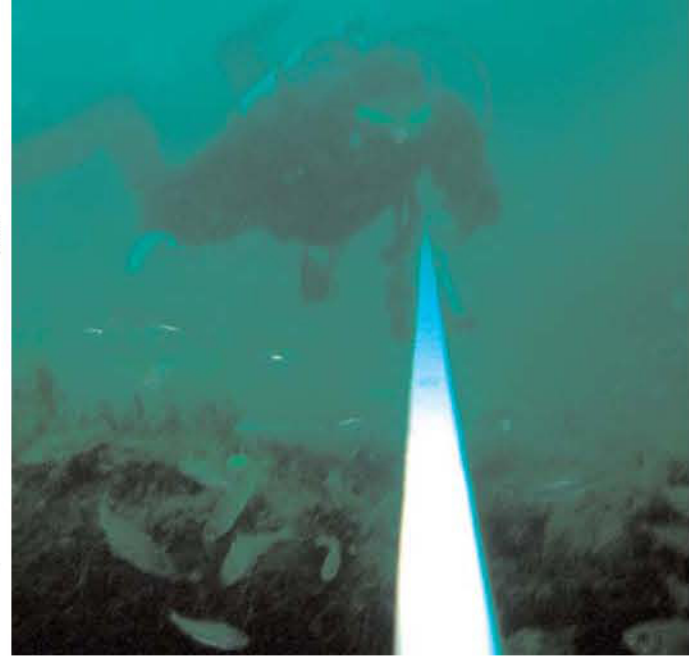


LAMP Director Chuck Meide records the rudder pintle of the *Jenny*

small coastal trader dating to the late 19th or early 20th century. It carried a cargo of train parts and other mechanical fittings, earning it the nickname "Train Wreck." Unlike the *Jenny*, the Train Wreck is virtually intact, and is situated on a flat, sandy seafloor. The main challenge facing divers here was the significant depth of the site at 90 feet. Diving at this depth entails the onset of nitrogen narcosis, a potentially dangerous physiological effect that makes it hard to concentrate and harder to accurately record measurements. Because of decompression sickness (related to the build-up of nitrogen in the diver's body) concerns, the time divers can spend at this depth was limited to no more than 30 minutes starting from the moment of descent. Limited air supplies (divers at that depth consume almost four times as much air as they would on the surface) meant that most dives had to be curtailed after only about 20 minutes.

Given these conditions, we were very pleased that after a week of diving we had completed a basic site plan, a longitudinal profile of the cargo pile, a detailed scaled drawing of exposed hull remains, and a photomosaic of the entire wreck.

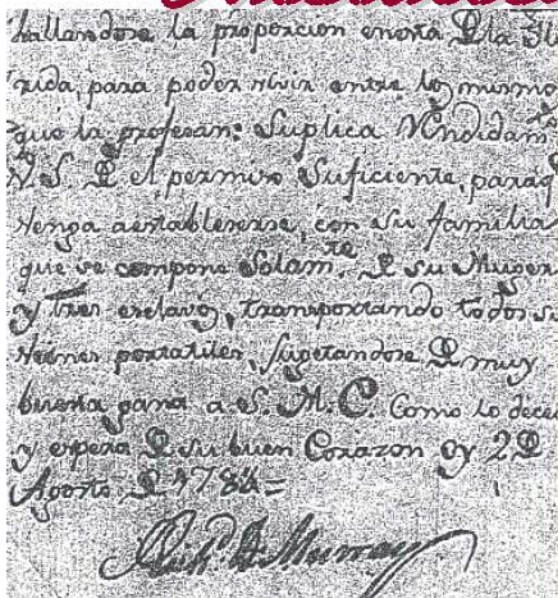
The 2006 field season on Achill generated an immense amount of data from a wide variety of archaeological sites. The results of this research is still being processed, and will be compiled in an archaeological report that is currently being prepared for submittal to the Irish government. This is not LAMP's first overseas research -- previous work was carried out on the wreck of the CSS *Alabama* off the coast of France -- and it is hoped that in future years LAMP will sponsor another research expedition to Achill. Potential future projects might not only include further investigations of the wrecks already mentioned, but the search for *La Rata Encoronada*, a Spanish Armada galleon that is known to have wrecked just north of the island. While LAMP will always retain a strong focus on the maritime heritage of St. Augustine and Florida's First Coast, this kind of international research provides us with a broader historical and cross-cultural perspective that ultimately will lead to greater insight into St. Augustine's place in the greater Atlantic World. 🚢



Meide stretches out a measuring tape as they map the 90-foot deep train wreck

Historical Documents

Reveal St. Augustine Trade



An ongoing study by LAMP of the 1784-1821 East Florida Papers has shown that in 1784 trade to St. Augustine was dominated by the newly independent ports of Savannah and Charleston. The trade was carried in small and relatively shallow draft *goletas*, schooners, and *balandras*, sloops. Cargoes included barrels of flour, line for ship's rigging, sweets, soap, Madeira wine, and beer. These papers show an interesting interpretation of English names rendered in Spanish. For example, shipmaster *Juan Ytan* was almost certainly John Eaton who captained the *La Lenta* out of Savannah, and *sabana* for the port of Savannah.

The East Florida Papers should reveal changing trends in commerce such as renewed trade from Spanish ports and possibly a change in tastes.