

## The Tide: The Thrill of Discovery

### The divers of the Maple Leaf

By Jim Alabiso

A scuba diver since 1978, Keith Holland wanted to discover something himself. While diving a wreck in South Carolina with his brother-in-law, he recovered a bung, a brass spigot that would be hammered into a cask.

"I decided right then I was going to go home and find a wreck in my St. Johns River where I grew up. I started researching shipwrecks in the area," he says. It was then that Holland learned about the Maple Leaf in the book "Mandarin on the St. Johns" by Mary B. Graff.

"I was probably the only one that recognized that the Maple Leaf would still be there and in a state of almost perfect preservation, and was carrying the baggage of an entire brigade," he says. And he was right – about 800,000 pounds worth. "The concept grabbed hold of me, and I couldn't let go of it."

Holland, a dentist at the time, enjoyed science. He realized all that material in the Maple Leaf would still be perfectly preserved, because it was in an anaerobic environment.

"As a dentist, and obsessed with the concept, if you were a patient of mine you were going to hear about it. Some people got interested and provided insight and help. I met most of the volunteers through my practice. There were so many people who got infected by the excitement," he says. These adventure seekers included engineers, divers, archeologists and lawyers. "They had the imagination to think it was possible. Maple Leaf infected them too."

The group of divers began to experiment. "We would drag a piece of metal through the water to try and catch something. It wasn't working," says Holland. Then they bought a metal detector and during a search it got hung up on a shrimp net. His brother-in-law went down to untangle it in the dark water. He called out, 'We are on something big. I think we might have found it,' Holland recalls. They both dove down and found the paddle wheel axle of a large ship twenty-four feet deep. With a rod, they found the deck more than 7 feet down through the mud.

Shortly thereafter, Holland and his team sucked a hole in the mud to the deck, cut a 4-by 8-foot hole with a hand saw, and uncovered the largest known collection of war material in one place. For Holland and his dive team, it was "absolute darkness, swimming in a thick, viscous, colloidal suspension of clay and muck. The light won't penetrate it."

"You take your hand and reach down and there is a box." Once surfaced, one could see a person's name on the trunk, such as 'Surgeon Snow 1st New York Engineers, Morris Island, South Carolina.' "Once we realized the ship was a world-class, one-of-a-kind vessel, all of us agreed to abdicate on our right to 80 percent ownership and we donated the entire collection to the state of Florida. "What would we do? Sell Mr. Snow's box? The collection needed to remain in one place and be taken care of," say Holland.

Holland says seashells were the most surprising find. "These people had diaries. They got up every morning, went to Folly Beach and collected seashells and put them in their trunk. They had never seen a beach before. One out of every three boxes had sea shells."

Right here lurking under the waters of our beautiful river was the story of an entire Civil War brigade, their personal belongings preserved since 1864 when the boat went down. Thanks to Keith Holland and his team, it's a National Historic Landmark.

"It was a big and dangerous operation. The team sacrificed, and they never got paid. The divers alone recorded more than 300 hours each underwater, and they don't even have a button. But they do have the most incredible, and tangible, personal adventure and experience of a lifetime."

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The Treasure be Told

"The Wreck of the Maple Leaf is unsurpassed as a source for Civil War material culture. The site combines one of the largest ships sunk during the war, carrying all the worldly goods of more than a thousand soldiers, with a river bottom environment that perfectly preserved the ship and cargo. It is the most important repository of Civil War artifacts ever found and probably will remain so."

- Edwin C. Bearss, Chief Historian, United States Department of Interior, National Park Service