



NEWS RELEASE

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200-year-old Shipwreck to be Recovered in Gulf of Mexico

MMS Protects Nation's Historic Treasures

NEW ORLEANS — The archaeological excavation of a historic shipwreck located in Federal waters 40 miles off the Louisiana coast begins today when archaeologists from the U.S. Department of the Interior's Minerals Management Service (MMS) and Texas A&M University's Department of Oceanography and Nautical Archaeology Program depart for the shipwreck site which lies in 4,000 feet of water. The record water depth makes it the deepest shipwreck in the world ever to be scientifically excavated for a non-commercial purpose.

Funded by the Okeanos Gas Gathering Company (OGGC) through an agreement with the MMS, the expedition team will excavate the shipwreck which was discovered along the route of a gas pipeline in what was then the Mardi Gras Gas Transportation System operated by OGGC. The pipeline which gathers natural gas from deepwater fields in the Gulf is now operated by BP America and an Enbridge Inc. subsidiary.

"This wreck dates from an extremely fascinating and important time in the history of the Gulf of Mexico," said MMS Acting Regional Director Lars Herbst, "This ship likely sailed around the time of the Louisiana Purchase, the War of 1812, and the infamous buccaneer Jean Lafitte. Its recovery will tell a story about what life at sea was like at that time that cannot be found in the history books."

The actual identity of the ship is not yet known; archaeologists have dubbed it the "Mardi Gras Shipwreck" after the pipeline where it was found. Very little is known about the ship. Using deep sea robots called Remotely Operated Vehicles (ROVs) scientists have been able to view the wreck through cameras in depths that are many times deeper than divers could reach and would crush most manned submersibles. What archaeologists have seen so far has caused them to speculate that the ship was a small merchant vessel or, possibly, a privateer and that it sank sometime between 1780 and 1820. The ship carried a cannon and a wooden chest filled with small arms, such as pistols, muskets, and swords.

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Because of the great depth of the shipwreck, where the weight of sea water exerts almost 1,700 pounds of pressure per square inch, the excavation will rely entirely on a robotic ROV operating from a 265-foot long ship positioned over the site. Both the ship and ROV are under contract with Veolia Environmental Services, the world's second-largest waste services company. The ROV is equipped with special tools to be able to photograph, map, and recover artifacts as fragile as an hourglass, of which at least three have been seen so far on the shipwreck, or as large as the cast-iron ship's stove, one of only four such stoves known to exist in the world.

A web site, hosted by the Florida Public Archaeology Network, will provide regular updates from the expedition team. The public will be able to take part in the discoveries as they are made at sea by visiting <http://www.flpublicarchaeology.org/mardigras/>.

Artifacts recovered from the site will be donated to the Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation, and Tourism for display at one of the facilities of the Louisiana State Museum.