

A Mid- to Late 18th Century Ohio River Flatboat Near Mound City, Illinois¹

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The remains of a mid- to late-18th century (ca., 1760-1780) Ohio River frontier flatboat were found recently near Mound City, Illinois by a Metropolis, Illinois man. A description of the flatboat and the artifact content first recovered from this flat boat is given in this paper, as well as a brief history of what has occurred to the flatboat after it was initially discovered.

On February 1, 2001, I, and a co-worker, were consulting on an archaeological project at the River Heritage Museum in Paducah, Kentucky where we were introduced to Metropolis, Illinois resident, John Schwegman. Schwegman brought with him a box of artifacts, a video player, and a portable slide viewing projector. Mr. Schwegman had discovered a flatboat north of Mound City, Illinois on the Illinois side of the Ohio River near Ohio River marker 970.1. The flatboat had become exposed initially during low-water on the Ohio River. Schwegman, along with a friend, dug through archaeological deposits within and around the boat (something that should not have been done). Revealing the spatial extent of the boat, structural evidence about how the boat had been constructed, and features within the boat, e.g., as a brick firebox. Schwegman assumed that his box of artifacts probably dated to the early part of the 19th century. His method of recovery involved the use of a shovel and a metal detector.

No provenience or context was maintained, and the legal jurisdiction of the boat (Kentucky's 1792 high water boundary, or claimed by the State of Illinois, and/or under either or both the jurisdiction of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Louisville District and the federal Archaeological Resource Protection Act of 1979, as amended). In most situations, federal permits are required to remove and study cultural artifacts (prehistoric or historic) from federally controlled waterways. In addition, questions concerning the legality issues of state boundaries are called into question as river-edge property lines move through time (ever notice how the state of Kentucky continues to claim land on the north shore of the Ohio River in "southern Indiana" just north of Henderson, Kentucky?

After advising Schwegman that he should have contacted the Archaeology Programs at Murray State University or SIU-Carbondale, so their scientific programs could properly investigate the frontier flatboat, and advising him that it appeared that several state and federal laws may have been broached, we examined the artifacts that he had brought for us to see. Several of the artifacts were viewed with a lighted magnifying glass. Among the temporally sensitive artifacts that we examined were:

1. A broken, but apparently complete, brown glazed redware vessel with a green annular marking that is similar to other redware forms that date between 1760 and 1781.
2. A convex-faced pewter button with one-piece-shank construction and a clearly defined mold

mark similar to Lyle Stone's Class I, Series A, Type 1 button as illustrated as item B on page 47 of his Fort Michilimackinac book (Stone 1974: 47, Fig. 26). Stone notes at Michilimackinac this style of button "may have been used by civilians rather than military" (ibid.). This same button type corresponds nicely to a "Type 7" button described by Hume (1982). The face of the button had a small sunburst design in the center of the dorsal (viewing) side.

3. Three pewter spoons; one broken at the neck, the other complete with an "x" quality mark and an undistinguishable maker's mark. The spoon shape and style are similar to other pewter spoons made between 1760 and 1783 (Laughlin 1971; Thorn 1949: 115).
4. Several badly rusted, hand-made, rose-head nails, dating pre-mid-19th century.
5. A camp-style axe, ca., 1770-1780 (Neumann and Kravic 1975: 25).

Non-temporally-sensitive artifacts we examined included:

1. Bone-handles for everyday cutlery (knives, forks?).
2. An iron caulking chisel for boat repair (ca., 15 cm long).
3. About 40 cm. of round rusted iron bailing wire.
4. Brick, possibly used as the fireplace platform on the flatboat.

We also observed in the video and slide photographs, shown to us by Schwegman, the outline of the wooden (oak?) frame of the flatboat, that measured approximately 11 ft wide by 44 ft

long (although a second dimension, 12 x 55 was also reported to us by Schwegman). The flatboat had been held together by mortise and tendon joinery; holes for wooden peg fasteners were still visible but the pegs themselves had deteriorated. Horizontal flooring appeared to be held in place with wooden pegs. The floor also contained drilled holes for plank attachment drilled every six inches. Some floor planking was still preserved. Lastly, side rails on the flatboat had unusual horizontally elongated holes within them spaced at regular intervals. (At the time of this viewing, it was not possible to take measurements from the slides/video that we were shown.)

Because of a pressing engagement with the dentist, Schwegman had to leave and we did not get a chance to photograph or draw any of his artifacts. However, I told Schwegman to contact SIU-Carbondale as this was an extraordinary find and that future scientific archaeological studies needed to be conducted on site by professionally trained archaeologists, and that proper state and federal permits needed to be requested and obtained by the appropriate agencies that would claim jurisdiction of the flatboat.

Schwegman agreed to show MSU and SIU-Carbondale his find site once water levels on the Ohio had receded and the flatboat was again visible this next summer. He has since provided us with a set of slides from his initial study of this highly significant archaeological site.

Jurisdiction

Probably one of the more significant, yet unresolved, issues surrounding the flatboat is legal jurisdiction. The flatboat was found within two miles north of Mound City, Illinois on the Illinois side of the Ohio River. But that does not mean, necessarily, that the flatboat is in Illinois. Jurisdiction will depend on the location of the Kentucky-Illinois low water mark of 1784 and 1792 is drawn. As in the Kentucky-Indiana river boundary dispute, it is the 1784 state boundary that was used to determine boundary between Kentucky and Indiana and not the shoreline, the edge of the riverbank, or the middle of the Ohio River. Accordingly, the "Supreme Court ruled in *Illinois v. Kentucky* that the boundary between Kentucky and Illinois is the low-water mark on the northern shore of the Ohio River, but the Court had not defined the low-water mark as of 1992" (Clark, Harrison, and Klotter, 1992:103). As for the existing legal boundary as drawn on the U.S.G.S. 1978 Cairo, Illinois-Missouri 7.5 minute topographical map, the division between Ballard County, Kentucky and Pulaski County, Illinois in the vicinity of the flatboat site area, varies from mid-stream within the Ohio River to within 300 feet of the present Illinois shoreline. Depending on the low-water location of the flatboat, the boat could, theoretically and legally, rest within Kentucky's jurisdiction, or still within Illinois. In a way however, state jurisdiction is a moot point without a release from the appropriate federal agencies (U.S.A.C.O.E-Louisville District, and/or the National Park Service which administers the federal permitting process for the implementation of the Archaeological Resource Protection Act of 1979 as amended).

Aftermath and Planning

Upon returning to Murray, I phoned Jan Hemberger with the Louisville Corps of Engineers to determine 1) what state and federal laws Schwegman had violated; 2) whether any other frontier flatboats ever had been discovered within the Ohio Valley to the best of the Corps' recollection so that I might conduct a comparison to the Schwegman flatboat; and 3) determine what the Corps recommendations might be.

Hemberger was to speak with the Louisville Corp's legal department to investigate the legalities involved and determine what MSU or SIU-Carbondale would need to do to comply with a legally-correct study of the flatboat if it were studied *in situ* on the banks of the Ohio River. As to the uniqueness of the discovery, Hemberger stated she had no recollection of any other 18th century frontier flatboat found along the Kentucky shoreline of the Ohio River.

My co-worker and I then examined several historic archeology typology books to determine more precisely the age of the artifacts associated with the flatboat. Based on our recollections, and not having the artifacts in front of us when we searched the typology books, we deduced that the contents of the flatboat, and hence, the flatboat itself, probably dated between 1760 and 1780 and may have been associated either with early French (ca. 1750s) occupation of Fort Massac, upstream in Metropolis, Illinois, or at the later end, possibly associated with the American (ca., 1780-1781)

civilian occupation of Fort Jefferson, across the Ohio River in Ballard County, Kentucky.

We also contacted Dr. Brian Butler at SIU-Carbondale outlining the events of the day. Dr. Butler informed us that Schwegman was familiar to the SIU-Carbondale archaeology program and that Schwegman had been warned previously against conducting illegal digging. SIU-Carbondale agreed to work through its historic archaeology staff to investigate the flatboat further, keeping us informed of their field and laboratory work, and any future, forthcoming written reports.

I then emailed Dr. Kit Weser, Murray State's historic archaeologist to apprise him of the situation and later expanded my information to him about the flatboat in a subsequent telephone conversation. Ken also informed Tom Sanders, then of the Kentucky Heritage Council (State Historic Preservation Office in Frankfort) in the event that the site was determined to be within Kentucky's jurisdiction should subsequent prosecution be warranted.

Dr. Butler at SIU-C later informed us that a member of his staff (Lee Newsom) had been in contact with Schwegman and that Schwegman was agreeable to taking SIU-Carbondale to the flatboat site once water had receded and the boat was again exposed.

I have never heard back from the legal department from the Louisville Corps of Engineers about legalities associated with the site. I am

assuming that this situation was not worth pursuing as Mr. Schwegman had been quite forthcoming and willing to work with SIU-C to have the site studied properly.

Schwegman's video exhibited that the flatboat was in an unusually good state of preservation prior to his destructive digging. How much of the site's undisturbed context remains intact is not known; nor is it known if the timbers from the boat remain *in situ* or have since floated away as Schwegman broke their seal and context with the sandy substrate that held them in tact.

I decided to modify the earlier paper and have this article published in the Jackson Purchase Historical Society's journal so that I can stress the significance of the loss of this one-of-a-kind archaeological site and the damage that has resulted from its contextual disturbance. Kentucky, like many other states, is witnessing a substantial loss of archaeological sites as a result of urban expansion (e.g., Fort Anderson in downtown Paducah), the Morrisroe National Register prehistoric archaeological site due to poorly managed USACOE-Nashville District maintenance of river bank erosion, and most unfortunately, the wholesale, purposeful looting of archaeological sites by folks out to just "find an arrowhead" or "looking for coins and jewelry" with metal detectors, picks, shovels, or in some cases, even heavy equipment!

I felt, because this is the only 18th century frontier flatboat found along the banks of the Ohio River, it was important to inform the archaeological

community of this site destruction. Recently, Schwegman informed me that he and his "discovery" have been featured in an article in *Springhouse Magazine*, a local, southern Illinois tourist-oriented history magazine. In our initial report, I did not identify the name of the person who pillaged the flatboat. However, since Schwegman revealed his identity and his activity in a public fashion through the *Springhouse Magazine* article, I decided to include his name in this report as well. It is our hope that John Schwegman's article does not encourage further damage to this archaeologically significant site.

However, all is not lost, as a result of our interaction and encouragement of Mr. Schwegman's contacting the SIU-C archaeological program, and subsequent studies conducted on the flatboat remains by SIU-C, a professional, scientific report has been completed. To my chagrin, the analysis by the SIU-C archaeologists, however, contradicted my cursory examination of the flatboat artifacts, concluding that the flatboat, once properly studied and all artifacts studied within their proper context, were NOT of 18th century origin, but rather early 19th century origin and use. And, although I have taken Mr. Schwegman to task for the destructive activities he had conducted initially on this rare and scientifically significant archaeological site, all worked out well in the end. The discovery was made. The site was studied professionally, and a final report was generated with baseline data now available for comparative purposes should other flatboats be discovered along the Ohio or Mississippi rivers. And, most

importantly of all, you, the readership, have been informed about various laws and procedures that should be followed should you make a discovery of an archaeological site (historic or prehistoric) along the banks of a federally-administered river in our area. Please, do not dig, remove, or disturb the archaeological site. Instead, contact your local university so that a proper assessment be conducted and federal and state laws be followed.

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¹Footnote: Another version of this paper was written by Kenneth C. Carstens, then affiliated with the Department of Geosciences at MSU, and Nancy Son Carstens, then affiliated with the Department of History at MSU. That version of the paper was presented on Feb. 7th, 2001 to a regional meeting of the Ohio Valley Urban and Historic Archaeological Meetings that met at MSU for their annual conference. Not knowing the current whereabouts of the co-author to the original paper, I have revised and updated the original conference paper as an educational article for the readership of the Jackson Purchase Historical Society.

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