J. C. Harrington Medal in Historical Archaeology

George F. Bass 1999

George F. Bass may be unique among the distinguished archaeologists who have been awarded the J. C. Harrington Medal in Historical Archaeology by The Society for Historical Archaeology. He began his career over forty years ago working on Bronze and Iron Age sites in the eastern Mediterranean. Since that time George has expanded his research to include sites dating to the classical and medieval periods, but with the exception of brief forays into the waters of the Caribbean and North America, he has remained an Old World archaeologist working on sites pre-dating the renaissance. Even if his own excavations have had little to do with the early-modern period, George Bass has nevertheless had a profound impact on the field of historical archaeology, and more particularly its sub-field in the Americas, underwater or nautical archaeology. This Harrington medal honors George for his pioneering work in shipwreck archaeology, for his tireless efforts to promote professional, ethical underwater archaeology around the world, and for his role in creating educational and research institutions that have advanced the study of seafaring in the historical period.

At first glance George's formative years would appear to give little hint of what the future held in store for him. He was born in South Carolina, the son and grandson of professors of English literature. Growing up as he did in a household filled with great books (and he had read of all of Shakespeare's works by the time he was 14), it is perhaps no surprise that when he enrolled at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland in the fall of 1950 he chose to major in English litera-

Historical Archaeology, 1999, 33(4):1–5.

ture. Following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather, George envisioned a career as a professor of English literature at a college or university.

Other influences were at work during his youth, however, influences which ultimately decided his choice of professions. One of these was a fascination with the water and exploring what lies beneath it. This interest led George and his brother to attempt to build a submarine out of wood; luckily for all concerned, this craft was never completed and launched. Another early influence was his uncle Dr. Robert Wauchope, a professor of archaeology who served as the head of the Middle American Research Institute at Tulane University. Wauchope conducted extensive excavations of Mayan sites, appeared in *National Geographic*, and, according to George, seemed to live an adventurous and exotic life seeking out traces of ancient civilizations in the jungles of Central America. Finally, during a break from university classes in the spring of 1952, George and several of his university friends took an informal tour of classical-period archaeological sites in Italy and Sicily, an excursion that awakened a strong interest in the ancient civilizations of the Mediterranean.

Infected by the archaeology bug, George abandoned English literature after graduating from Johns Hopkins in 1955 and spent the next two years attending the American School of Classical Studies in Athens, where he participated in excavations at Lerna, a Bronze Age site in Greece and at Gordion, an iron age site in Turkey. Lerna and Gordion sealed his decision to become a classical archaeologist. After two years of service as a lieutenant in the United States Army, George began Ph.D. studies in Classical Archaeology under Dr. Rodney Young at the University of Pennsylvania in 1959.

That first year at the University of Pennsylvania was pivotal, both for George and for the development of underwater archaeology as a discipline. By 1959 scuba equipment had been around for over a decade and a half, diving was becoming an ever-more-popular sport, and the underwater world was now more accessible to exploration than ever before. Scuba technology had opened up a vast new arena for archaeological research, particularly for the study of shipwrecks, but professional archaeologists in the Old World and the New World had yet to attempt an underwater excavation that matched the professional standards of a land excavation. Some even doubted that it could be done. In 1959 journalist Peter Throckmorton approached Rodney Young at the University of Pennsylvania with news of an exciting underwater discovery he had made that summer: the wreck of a late Bronze Age vessel sunk off the coast of Turkey, near Cape Gelidonya. Dr. Young recognized the potential of the wreck to shed light on ancient seafaring and trade, and asked his new graduate student if he would be willing to learn how to dive and then direct the excavation. George agreed to take on the project and the rest, as they say, is history.

The excavation of the Bronze Age wreck at Cape Gelidonya in 1960 set the example for future underwater archaeological research: the digging and recording was carried out by diving archaeologists rather than professional divers, the locations of all finds were carefully plotted on the seabed prior to removal, and after careful analysis of the site the results were widely published in professional journals. A detailed final report was presented in the December 1967 volume of the *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*. The Cape Gelidonya project proved that there was no reason why underwater sites should not be excavated using the same rigorous archaeological standards applied to terrestrial sites. It also demonstrated that shipwrecks can provide unique perspectives on seafaring practices, maritime trade, and naval warfare, information that might not be available from any other source. For those of us here in 1999, nearly forty years after Cape Gelidonya, the archaeological worth of shipwrecks seems self-evident, but in 1960 this was a new and unproven concept.

The 1960s saw George complete his Ph.D. and become a tenured professor in the Classical Archaeology Department at the University of Pennsylvania and an associate curator in the University Museum. He built upon his earlier success at Cape Gelidonya by directing a series of ambitious projects in Turkish waters, including shipwreck surveys and the excavations of two wrecks at Yassi Ada (Flat Island), one of them dating to the 7th century and the other to the 4th century A.D. This work served as a training ground for a number of scholars who went on to distinguished careers in nautical archaeology, including Frederick Van Doorninck, David Owen, Cynthia Eiseman, and Stuart Swiny. The work in Turkey in the 1960s also provided the opportunity to invent and refine the tools and techniques which have since become commonplace in underwater surveys and excavations.

George's other accomplishments during this time include overseeing the building of the world's first private research submarine, the *Asherah*, and directing the first side-scan sonar survey to locate an ancient wreck in the Mediterranean.

One of George's defining characteristics as an archaeologist is his commitment to publishing the results of his work in both scholarly and popular journals, and thereby share the underwater discoveries with as wide an audience as possible. He has also published a series of books that have introduced the discipline of nautical or underwater archaeology to other scholars and to the public. The first book of this type, published in 1966, was entitled *Archaeology Under Water*, and was produced by Praeger as part of the Ancient Peoples and Places series. Six years later, in 1972, George edited *A History of Seafaring Based on Underwater Archaeology,* a magnificent, color-illustrated volume published by Thames and Hudson of London and Walker and Company of New York. *A History of Seafaring* subsequently appeared in French, German, Italian, Dutch, and Swedish editions. In these two books George's holistic approach to the study of seafaring is apparent: both discuss wrecks, harbors, and submerged archaeological finds from every period and geographical locale, and four of the twelve chapters in *A History of Seafaring* are devoted to wrecks of the post-medieval period.

In the 1970s George made two decisions that would directly advance the study of shipwrecks and submerged sites. The first of these was his decision in 1973 to give up the tenured faculty position at the University of Pennsylvania and to strike out on his own by creating a non-profit institution devoted to the support of research in nautical archaeology. Initially known as the *American Institute of Nautical Archaeology*, the organization's name was subsequently shortened to the *Institute of Nautical Archaeology* (INA). The mission of the institute is extraordinarily open ended. Quite simply, its goal is to seek out significant examples of shipwrecks from every century of human history, to study them, and publish the results and thereby increase our understanding of seafaring through the ages and its effect on the development of cultures. Ancient shipwrecks in Turkish waters have continued to be a focal point of INA research, but since its formation the institute has sought to carry out its wider mission by sponsoring archaeological projects around the world.

The second key decision came in 1976. By that time George was convinced that if the institute were to achieve its goals it would not only have to carry out its research mission but also take an active role in training future generations of nautical archaeologists. This meant joining in a partnership with a major university. In 1976 George accepted an offer from Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas to start a nautical archaeology graduate program within the Anthropology Department. The program initially offered only a Master's degree, but expanded to include a doctoral degree in 1988. Faculty members originally consisted of George Bass, Frederick Van Doorninck, and J. Richard Steffy; in 1978 Donny L. Hamilton joined the Nautical Program to teach conservation and historical archaeology. Over time the faculty has expanded, and now consists of seven professors, three of whom have specialized in the study of historical-period sites.

The Institute of Nautical Archaeology celebrated its 25th anniversary last year and the Nautical Archaeology Program at Texas A&M has been in existence for 23 years. The word "symbiotic" probably best describes the relationship between the two entities. The academic program offers students laboratory courses in artifact conservation, ship construction and reconstruction, as well as seminars that examine developments in seafaring in the ancient Mediterranean, medieval Europe, and the post-medieval world. The INA provides students with fieldwork opportunities, and in turn has greatly benefitted from student participation in the research and publication of its results. Graduates of the Texas A&M Nautical Program can be found working in maritime museums, in archaeological research institutions, in contract archaeology companies, in state- and national-level archaeological management offices, and as faculty at universities.

The Institute of Nautical Archaeology has continued to study bronze age, classical, and medieval sites in Turkey, and the institute recently expanded its Turkish headquarters with the construction of an administrative and research complex in Bodrum. Of more relevance to the J. C. Harrington medal, however, is the work that the institute and the nautical archaeology program have carried out on historical-period wrecks and submerged sites in the Americas and elsewhere around the world. These projects have taken many forms, including full-scale excavations, test excavations, surveys, and

collaborative efforts with other research institutions. The following is a summary of some of the research that has taken place.

The Institute of Nautical Archaeology's involvement in Central America and the West Indies has been quite extensive over the past two decades. In 1979 George and nautical student Donald Keith taught a one-month course in nautical archaeology at the University of Mexico, which led to a two-year collaborative study with the Mexican Department of Underwater Archaeology on a 16th-century wreck at Cayo Nuevo in the Bay of Campeche. At the same time nautical archaeology graduate student Roger Smith carried out an extensive survey for shipwrecks in the Cayman Islands. Other I.N.A. surveys in the Caribbean included a search for wrecks on Pedro Bank off the south coast of Jamaica and a multi-year search for the remains of two caravels beached on the north coast of Jamaica by Columbus during his fourth and final voyage to the New World.

In 1981 Dr. Donny Hamilton commenced a ten-year program of excavation and research on the remains of Port Royal, Jamaica, the notorious port of pirates which sank beneath the sea during an violent earthquake in June of 1692. It would be no exaggeration to say that Port Royal is among the most significant English colonial sites yet excavated in the western hemisphere. Students participating in Hamilton's Texas A&M field schools uncovered the floors and fallen walls of numerous buildings, along with thousands of objects which were part of the everyday lives of Port Royal's inhabitants. Conservation and analysis of the finds continues at Texas A&M, but thus far the site has provided material for over a dozen theses and dissertations.

A second major research initiative in the 1980s looked at the nature of ships and seafaring during the early stages of European exploration of the New World. Between 1982 and 1983 Don Keith and several associates excavated the Molasses Reef Wreck in the Turks and Caicos Islands, a vessel that is among the earliest known examples of a 16th-century European ship of discovery and colonization. This wreck proved to be the catalyst for the formation of a research team, composed principally of Texas A&M Nautical Program students, to comb through Spanish archives and to examine other examples of 16th-century vessels. Among its many accomplishments the team carried out test excavations of the Highborn Key Wreck in the Bahamas and conducted surveys in Panama.

The Institute of Nautical Archaeology researchers have been active in North America over the past quarter century as well. During the era of the American bicentennial in the 1970s three Revolutionary War wrecks were investigated in INA-sponsored projects, including the American privateer *Defense* in Penobscot Bay, Maine, and the Cornwallis Cave Wreck and the Royal Navy frigate *Charon* at Yorktown, Virginia. Other North American projects have included the excavation and study of a late 18th-century sloop in South Carolina, the Clydesdale Plantation Vessel, an endeavor directed by Dr. Frederick Hocker, and a collaborative effort with Dr. Paul Johnston of the Smithsonian Institution to record the remains of the 19th-century propeller-driven steamship *Indiana* in Lake Superior. Since 1990 Lake Champlain has been a focus of institute research, and here Nautical Program field school students have documented the remains of eleven wrecks including a unique horse-propelled ferry boat, an intact 19th-century schooner, and two War of 1812-era naval vessels.

Institute of Nautical Archaeology work on post-medieval wrecks has not been limited to the western hemisphere. The wreck of a late 17th-century Portuguese frigate, the *Santo Antonio de Tanna* was excavated by staff member Robin Piercy at Mombasa, Kenya between 1975 and 1980. More recently, nautical program alumni Dr. Cheryl Ward and Douglas Haldane have completed their investigation of the remains of an 18th-century Islamic merchant vessel at Sadana Island, Egypt. The institute is also currently engaged in a multi-year shipwreck survey in the Azores in collaboration with Portuguese nautical archaeologists.

As this review of projects suggests, the Institute of Nautical Archaeology and the Nautical Archaeology Program at Texas A&M have busy over the last quarter century. If George has not been directly involved in the study of historical-period shipwrecks in recent years, he has nevertheless continued to take a leading role in promoting nautical archaeology in the Americas. In 1983 he recognized that while much research had been carried out on shipwrecks of the western hemisphere, there was no single, comprehensive book on the subject. He set out to correct this deficiency by

editing *Ships and Shipwrecks of the Americas*, a book published by Thames and Hudson in 1988. Ten years after publication this book is still the best single source on the archaeology of seafaring in the Americas, and, I might add, it was recently re-issued in a paperback edition. George has also been active in the protection of shipwrecks in the United States, by writing journal articles that have attempted to put the treasure-hunting versus archaeology debate in perspective and by testifying before United States House and Senate committees during the debate over the passage of the Shipwreck Protection Act.

George remains as committed to the advancement of nautical archaeology today as when he began his work at Cape Gelidonya nearly forty years ago. He continues to teach graduate and undergraduate classes at Texas A&M University, and is serving his second term as president of the Institute of Nautical Archaeology. Even as he is completing the final publication on a 10th-century A.D. Islamic wreck he is organizing the institute's next excavation in Turkey, a 5th-century B.C. merchant vessel.

It is safe to say that no other single person has had as much influence on the development of the field of nautical archaeology as George F. Bass. For his efforts to promote professional, and ethical archaeological research, his devotion to students, his dedication to publishing and his encouragement to others to publish, and for his philosophy that all shipwreck sites, whether ancient, medieval, or early modern, have something to tell us about the human seafaring past, George is hereby honored by his colleagues in The Society for Historical Archaeology.

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