

Alexandria Times

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A decade of discovery at Hotel Indigo

Archaeologists excavated the remains of a ship hull 10 years ago this week at the site of what is today the Hotel Indigo. This was no ordinary wrecked ship. In the 18th century, enterprising Alexandria landowners reused old ship hulls as landfill, “banking out” their properties eastward to extend wharves and move cargo more efficiently from ship to shore.

The archaeological remains of the hull, including the bow and starboard side, measured about 50 by 13 feet, making it one of the largest artifacts ever discovered in Alexandria.

In the years since its excavation, research has revealed remarkable details about the ship’s construction and working life. The science of tree ring dating showed that sometime after 1741, ship carpenters built the vessel using white oak harvested in Massachusetts. By combining 3D modeling and period ship drawings, archaeological researchers de-

veloped a conjectural model of the complete ship hull that originally measured about 70 feet long and 18 feet wide.

This was a merchant ship, built to carry goods in its estimated 104-ton cargo hold. Alexandria mainly exported raw goods like tobacco and wheat during this time and imported manufactured goods from Europe and sugar from the Caribbean.

Although the ship’s name and individual voyages were never recorded, late 18th-century newspaper advertisements suggest that vessels like this regularly sailed between Alexandria and ports such as London, Baltimore and Philadelphia.

After excavation, the timbers were placed in large water-filled containers for short-term preservation. In 2017, the timbers began a long-term conservation process at Texas A&M University’s Conservation Research Lab, where they remain today. Unless it

is kept wet or conserved, waterlogged wood will crack and deteriorate.

In Texas, archaeological conservators are carefully removing water from the wood’s cellular structure and replacing it with a wax-like substance that will stabilize the centuries-old timbers and allow them to be safely displayed in a museum environment.

The final step of conservation requires freeze-drying the timbers in the world’s largest archaeological freeze dryer. In 2019, the Alexandria Archaeology Museum opened an exhibit featuring a scale model of the ship, which is still on view today.

As construction and development continued along Alexandria’s waterfront, archaeologists excavated three additional ship hull remnants from the Robinson Landing site. The Texas A&M Conservation Research Lab 3D laser-scanned the timbers of each of these ships, as they



PHOTO/ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY

Ship timbers.

did with the first one, before they were submerged in Ben Brenman Park Pond for preservation.

The ship excavated from the Hotel Indigo site is expected to embark on its final journey back to Alexandria in 2028. Once returned, the timbers will be stored until the reassembled hull can be exhibited at a future site.

You can learn about the ship and other archaeological projects in the Alexandria Archaeology Museum, located on the third floor of the Torpedo Factory Art Center.

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