Technologies for Underwater Archaeology and Maritime Preservation

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Foreword

Exploration, trading, and other maritime activity along this Nation's coast and through its inland waters have played crucial roles in the discovery, settlement, and development of the United States. The remnants of these activities include such varied cultural historic resources as Spanish, English, and American shipwrecks off the Atlantic and Pacific coasts; abandoned lighthouses; historic vessels like Maine-built coastal schooners, or Chesapeake Bay Skipjacks; and submerged prehistoric villages in the Gulf Coast. Together, this country's maritime activities make up a substantial component of U.S. history.

This background paper describes and assesses the role of technology in underwater archaeology and historic maritime preservation. As several underwater projects have recently demonstrated, advanced technology, often developed for other uses, plays an increasingly important role in the discovery and recovery of historic shipwrecks and their contents. For example, the U.S. Government this summer employed a powerful remotely operated vehicle to map and explore the U.S.S. Monitor, which lies on the bottom off Cape Hatteras. This is the same vehicle used to recover parts of the space shuttle Challenger from the ocean bottom in 1986. The Commonwealth of Virginia is using a variety of advanced techniques to document and excavate one of General Cornwallis's ships, intentionally sunk off Yorktown during the Revolutionary War to prevent General Washington from capturing it. In international waters, the location and documentation of the British luxury liner Titanic was possible only by using a variety of sophisticated positional devices and deep water submersibles. These efforts have captured the interest and imagination of the American public.

This background paper also examines the legal framework that affects the salvage of historic shipwrecks and recovery of artifacts. Historic shipwrecks in U.S. coastal waters contain a wealth of important information about the economic and social history of this country. Yet they are suffering rapid attrition, in part because the United States lacks a coherent national policy to guide the identification and preservation of underwater and maritime cultural resources. For example, State laws governing historic shipwrecks found in State coastal waters often conflict with Federal Admiralty law, which gives private salvors the right to salvage shipwrecks, regardless of their age or historic value. Attempts to place historic shipwrecks under the same protection as other historic cultural resources have led to the Historic Shipwreck Act of 1987, which is discussed and analyzed in this background paper.

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John H. Gibbons
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