The Conversation: KU and St. Thomas Aquinas grad Kate Morrard investigates underwater treasures for the Navy

Joyce Cory<br>January 13, 2020 06:30 AM

Kate Morrard, 35, a graduate of St. Thomas Aquinas High School and the University of Kansas, is an underwater archeologist for the Naval History and Heritage Command's Archeology and Conservation Laboratory in Washington, D.C., where she lives. We caught up with Morrard while she was home visiting her family in Overland Park, Kansas.

Your degree is in fine art and art history. What led you to a career working for the Navy?

After I finished in 2005, I had attended several years in France, in a small town called Angers. It was in Europe that I was exposed to conservation as a career path, because there is so much cultural history there. I got my master's in fine art and archeological conservation in Florence, Italy, then moved to Washington because of my interest in marine science. In 2009, I started interning for the Navy, and that led to my current job.

You are called an underwater archeologist, but much of your work is in the lab. Do you scuba dive?

Yes. It's hard to reach someone who is down there, so we have to bring the same skills to the water that are used to conserve objects underwater, or on dry land, to get it in the lab and observe it as well.

Have you been on a dive recently?

The most recent military history project that we're undertaking involves scuba diving in the Pamunkey River. We found a ship that we believe is the horsemus, the old ship of the Chesapeake Flotilla, which was captured by Jaimie Battle and charged with protecting Washington during the War of 1812.

The wooden vessel was supposed to be burned by the British navy in the Chesapeake and chased two out of the open bay, but because they were very shallow draft they could run up the river to escape the British.

They had removed fur for the Pamunkey River and were being chased, so they removed the cannons and weapons, then packed a bunch of black powder into the stems of the vessels and exploded them.

This ship, and other parts of the Flotilla, were burned under the Pamunkey River in 1814. Despite that it is not the most promising.

The remains of the Pamunkey are very thick. The ship is only a few feet under, but there was a flood of sediment on top of it by the heavy clay that the ship was so, as it was very well preserved. The sediments are rich in black mud and silt, which helps to preserve, and there was less disturbance by humans that in many cases. You don't have anyone trying to build a spearing pole on top of it.

And you wouldn't have these kinds of remains, like a tree stump.

Right, and I should indicate that if any vessels, even if they sink 300, 400 years ago, are just US Navy property.

We are mainly charged with recovering the history of the sites, but many other issues come into play. Human ships could have human remains and be found in them. Many ships, especially from the Civil War and the second World War, will have low elements. There could be nuclear material onboard.

Did you find any interesting objects on the horizon?

We got quite a bit of a surgical equipment. There was a dental tool called a tooth key that was quite terrifying to look at. We found surgical scissors for cutting bandages and for cutting tissue and glass tools that would have been medical.

Those artifacts are why we think it is the horsemus, because the old ship would have had a morgue. What money is too rich, why does the Navy care about spending money to preserve these old things?

Part of our mission is to engage active-duty sailors in their history. We want to inspire our soldiers by letting them know they are part of this grand history that stretches back 200 years.

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