

Florida's Underwater Archaeological Preserves: Preservation through Education

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With the longest coastline in the continental United States, as well as hundreds of miles of inland waterways, Florida's history is tied to a maritime context. The remains of ships and boats, as well as prehistoric watercraft, are preserved in the state's waters. Although all historical and archaeological sites on state-owned or controlled lands in Florida, including submerged sites, are protected by law, shipwrecks remain vulnerable to looting, vandalism, and uninformed souvenir collecting by sport divers.

Florida is the top sport diving destination in the United States with thousands of diving and snorkeling visitors contributing to the state's economy and impacting the state's underwater resources each year. With the exception of one shipwreck in a national park, all shipwrecks in Florida waters are open for visitation, although unauthorized disturbance, excavation, or removal of artifacts is prohibited by the Florida Historical Resources Act (Chapter 267 of the Florida Statutes). Most diving visitors, and even many Florida divers, are unaware of the legal protection of shipwrecks. Additionally, a pervasive "finders-keepers" attitude, fostered by the media and local fables of Spanish gold and pirate booty, resulted in shipwrecks becoming targets for looting and treasure hunting. In the face of this continuing problem and the inability to adequately patrol all of the state's submerged sites, State of Florida archaeological resource managers rely on intensive public education programs to promote the protection and preservation of shipwreck sites.

Florida's Underwater Archaeological Preserves are historic shipwrecks around the state interpreted especially for divers and snorkelers. Visitors are encouraged to explore sites, but to "take only photos and leave only bubbles." Interpretation materials include brochures for each site featuring the history of the ship and how it came to be wrecked in Florida, a poster showing all of the Preserves, a laminated underwater guide illustrating site features and providing safe diving tips, a bronze marker designating the site as a Preserve and Florida Heritage Site, and a web page. Additionally, all of the Preserves are listed on the National Register of Historic Places and are included on Florida's Maritime Heritage Trail. These materials are intended to educate the diving public about the importance of shipwrecks as remains of our maritime past and as non-renewable resources deserving protection for future generations to visit and enjoy.

The establishment of Florida's Underwater Archaeological Preserves is the result of partnerships between government and the public to manage and protect submerged cultural resources in a cooperative spirit. Underwater sites of recognized historical and recreational value are designated as State Preserves in response to local nominations, and by a public desire for a fuller understanding and appreciation of



Figure 1: A diver explores the *Half Moon* Preserve

these unique public-owned resources. Once a submerged site is nominated, it is carefully researched and evaluated for its suitability to become a Preserve, considering such criteria as historical value, archaeological integrity, biological diversity, public accessibility, diving safety, and recreational potential. If the site meets these criteria, data from its evaluation are presented in a formal public proposal for the creation of a new Preserve. Public input generated by the proposal helps to determine appropriate methods of site enhancement, interpretation, and protection based on local needs and desires. Interested organizations and individuals then work together with state and local governments to prepare the site and to maintain it as an historical, educational, and recreational attraction.

Shipwreck parks are a relatively new phenomena as a means of education and preservation through recreation. Following the lead of Michigan and Vermont, where sites in cold, fresh water were established as preserves, Florida's program began in 1987, with the designation of *Urca de Lima*, a Spanish merchant ship cast ashore on the east coast near Ft. Pierce during a hurricane in 1715, as the first state Underwater Archaeological Preserve. Salvaged soon after her wrecking, and again by modern treasure hunters, the remains of the wooden sailing ship lie in shallow water on an offshore reef, where they became a popular location for sport divers. Members of the St. Lucie County Historical Commission approached the Florida Department of State's Division of Historical Resources to explore the possibility of giving the shipwreck a special status that would both interpret and protect the site for future visitors. Local waterfront businesses joined with city, county, and state officials to enhance the wreck with replica cement cannons to replace those removed long ago. An official bronze plaque, embedded in a cement monument attached to a large mooring buoy, was positioned near the wreckage to mark the site and to prevent anchor damage. Interpretive brochures, thousands of which have been circulated, were widely distributed to encourage public visitation and participation in the maintenance of this unique piece of Florida's maritime heritage. *Urca de Lima* thus was

Florida's Shipwreck PRESERVES

- 1 USS MASSACHUSETTS**
The USS Massachusetts (BB-3) was the first of the USS Massachusetts-class battleships. She was launched in 1904 and served in the United States Navy until 1921.
- 2 SS Tarpon**
The SS Tarpon was a passenger liner that was wrecked off the coast of Florida in 1918.
- 3 Varnar**
The Varnar was a passenger liner that was wrecked off the coast of Florida in 1918.
- 4 CITY OF HAWKINSVILLE**
The City of Hawkinsville was a passenger liner that was wrecked off the coast of Florida in 1918.
- 5 Regina**
The Regina was a passenger liner that was wrecked off the coast of Florida in 1918.
- 6 Santa Sophia**
The Santa Sophia was a passenger liner that was wrecked off the coast of Florida in 1918.
- 7 Elbert Moore**
The Elbert Moore was a passenger liner that was wrecked off the coast of Florida in 1918.
- 8 SS Copenhagen**
The SS Copenhagen was a passenger liner that was wrecked off the coast of Florida in 1918.
- 9 Lofthus**
The Lofthus was a passenger liner that was wrecked off the coast of Florida in 1918.
- 10 Georges Valentine**
The Georges Valentine was a passenger liner that was wrecked off the coast of Florida in 1918.
- 11 Uboa de Lima**
The Uboa de Lima was a passenger liner that was wrecked off the coast of Florida in 1918.

Florida's Underwater Archaeological Preserves
The Florida Department of Cultural Resources is proud to announce the establishment of 11 new Underwater Archaeological Preserves in 2024. These preserves will protect and preserve the state's rich maritime history and the shipwrecks that are a vital part of our state's heritage.

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Figure 2: Poster presenting Florida's Shipwreck Preserves

adopted by the local community as a new historical attraction; by placing the site in the public's trust, it became important for everyone to preserve.

The pattern for establishing the *Urca de Lima* Preserve proved to be successful, with public interest and participation in its management continuing for nearly twenty years at this writing. Following the popularity of the first Preserve, a second Preserve was established in 1989 on *San Pedro*, a galleon that grounded in the Florida Keys in 1733. *City of Hawkinsville*, a sunken steamboat in the Suwannee River, became a third shipwreck park in 1992. *USS Massachusetts* (BB-2), the nation's oldest surviving battleship, was designated in Pensacola in 1993 and the wreck of the steamer *ss Copenhagen* near Pompano Beach became a Preserve in 1994. In 1997, *ss Tarpon*, a merchant vessel that sunk in a gale off Panama City, was designated a Preserve. In 2000, Florida's seventh Preserve was established at *Half Moon*, a German racing yacht sunk off Key Biscayne near Miami. The eighth Preserve is the Norwegian lumber barque *Lofthus*, wrecked in a storm off Boynton Beach and dedicated in 2004. In the same year the steamer *Vamar*, sunk under mysterious circumstances off Port St. Joe, became the

state's ninth Preserve. The molasses barge *Regina*, wrecked in a storm off Bradenton Beach, was added to the Preserve system in 2005. State archaeologists continue to work with local communities to establish Preserves as new sites are nominated and investigated.

As an area set aside for enjoyment by the public and protection by the state, an Underwater Archaeological Preserve is an experiment in cultural resource management. These Preserves are of past and future historical value and can provide a means of education through recreation for generations to come. Furthermore, they offer the public a chance to participate in local historic preservation. Shipwreck Preserves throughout Florida have enabled local communities to develop a sense of stewardship and pride in their submerged historic sites as pieces of their own history and heritage. By establishing a Preserve, residents and visitors have the opportunity to become better informed about their past and to become more aware of the long-term value of preserving a historic shipwreck in its natural setting. This local involvement strengthens a community's ties with the past while enhancing recreation and tourism in the present and contributing to the preservation of all historic shipwrecks.

Figure 3: Divers inspect the bronze plaque at the *ss Copenhagen* Preserve

