



RETURN TO THE DEPTHS

Re-sinking of historic ship to start at Ben Brenman Pond

BY OLIVIA ANDERSON

On Monday, Alexandria started the process of re-sinking three historic ship hulls at Ben Brenman Park Pond that were recovered along the city's waterfront in the past seven years. Following several years of study, the approximately \$400,000 submersion project has begun in order to preserve the hulls.

"These were truly significant and very large findings that tell us a lot about Alexandria's history when it was a thriving port," City Archaeologist Eleanor Breen said. "These ships really built Alexandria because they weren't shipwrecks in the traditional sense, but instead reused derelict hulls that became land-

fill as land was being built out into the deeper channels of the Potomac River."

Archaeologists working for developers along the waterfront discovered the first of the hulls in 2015, near the current Hotel Indigo site. That ship is currently undergoing restorative treatment at Texas A&M University.

Then, three years later, three additional hull remnants were discovered at the Robinson Landing site. Those have been kept in storage at a city warehouse in tanks of water to prevent the wood from decaying and will be relocated to the man-made pond in Ben Brenman Park.

Since the excavations, city staff and partners have been closely studying the hulls. Texas A&M University



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Archeologists excavate a ship at the Robinson Landing site in 2018.



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Four ship hulls have been recovered in the City of Alexandria since 2015.

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archaeologists scanned the timbers with 3D lasers and then documented that information so others can continue to study it in the future. The scan produced a digital model and a 1:12 scale physical model of one of the ships. The model is currently on display at the Torpedo Factory.

According to Breen, the discovery of the ships provides a glimpse into how Alexandrians made new land during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, a period from which there is little surviving documentation. Alexandria was a merchant city during this time, so she hypothesized it's likely the recovered hulls served as merchant ships.

"They sort of tell us about Alexandria's maritime heritage during the period after the Revolutionary War, primarily," Breen said.

City archaeologists previously found several ships in the 1980s, Breen noted, but the impacts were more severe so they were not recovered.

"This is really the first time we've seen such a fleet of archaeological ships that

we can study and learn more about Alexandria's heritage [from]," Breen said.

Starting on Monday, city staff started re-sinking three of the hulls in Ben Brenman Park Pond to ensure their stability for possible future study. Breen said the hulls were found in a waterlogged, anaerobic environment, which is why the 250-year-old wood was so well preserved.

This is rare, she said, and in order to keep it preserved the ship hulls must remain wet.

Jesse Maines, stormwater management division chief, pointed to Ben Brenman Park Pond's water-enhancing qualities and depth as a principal reason as to why it was chosen to hold the hulls.

"Burying these in a park, you would have to make sure that they stay wet. So that scratched some of those early ideas of, 'Oh, could we put it in Simpson Park or one of the other parks in the city?'" Maines said. "We really had to find somewhere to keep them wet and keep them submerged in water, and this just came up as the best idea to do it."

Ben Brenman Park Pond

was built in the 1990s when the nearby Cameron Station was being developed. In 2010, staff started exploring ways to enhance the water quality and amenities at the pond, as well as to reduce pollution and stormwater runoff.

Some of these adjustments included the addition of a water filter and an aquatic bench, which consists of wetland plants around the edge of the pond.

"It filters stuff that comes into the pond and reduces the pollution and provides a better habitat for the critters that live there," Maines said.

Maines also said that a great deal of water goes through the pond, which drains over 300 acres. The pond is the city's "flagship" when it comes to best management practice and significantly reduces phosphorus every year, according to Maines.

Ben Brenman Park Pond consists of a pedestrian bridge and forebay, which is the initial part of the pond where most of the water comes in that traps trash and sediment. Water then travels through

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PHOTO/OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA

Archeologists document a ship timber with 3D laser scanning.



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The process of re-sinking three of the four ship hulls in Ben Brenman Park Pond started this month.

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what Maines calls several “cells,” the second of which – and last before the water empties from the pond into Holmes Run – will hold the ship hulls.

Maines specified that submerging the timbers in water prevents air from getting to

the wood and subsequently rotting it.

“When the air gets to the wood, the microbes breathe the air and they eat the wood as a fuel source, like food,” Maines said. “So, when you submerge it in the water they don’t have that air as a source to respire, so they’re not there

to eat the wood and rot it.”

Amanda Dolasinski, communications specialist with the department of infrastructure and environmental quality, highlighted the importance of placing the timbers in a public space where residents can learn about the city’s history.

“By moving the timbers to Ben Brenman Pond, a public space, it’s giving the public an opportunity to connect and to be able to see this piece of history,” Dolasinski said.

Though the resinking began on Monday and will continue through May 27, the process kicked off with a

meeting on April 19 to inform community members and residents about the project. Staff explained that there will be activity where the timbers are currently stored.

According to Breen, city experts will first wrap the timbers in geotextile to keep them safe. They will then transport the timbers to the pond and use a forklift to place them in the water. Finally, several scuba divers will carefully swim the timbers to the bottom of the pond, where they will remain anchored.

Archaeologists will reassess after 20 to 25 years whether the artifacts should remain in the pond or if a different stabilization method, such as conservation, would be a better method for preservation.

“It’s really an innovative storage solution and we’re really looking forward to the process starting,” Breen said.

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