

# Deep Thoughts: A Look at Public Access to Deepwater Sites through the Mardi Gras Shipwreck

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**Abstract** In late 2006, the Florida Public Archaeology Network (FPAN) was asked by the Minerals Management Service to direct the public outreach and education component of the Mardi Gras Shipwreck Project. Traditional public outreach efforts for archaeological sites in shallow water typically focus on getting diving and snorkeling visitors to the site. Interpretive materials for such sites often include waterproof site plans, submerged markers, and guidelines to direct visitors around the site as they explore and learn. Deepwater archaeological sites present unique challenges, namely, the interpretation of resources managed for the public that the public will never physically visit. This article discusses FPAN's role in the Mardi Gras Shipwreck Project and the public education strategies developed to present the shipwreck and the extreme deepwater project to the public.

**Extracto** A finales de 2006, el Servicio de Gestión de Minerales pidió a la Red Pública de Arqueología de Florida (FPAN, por sus siglas en inglés) que dirigiese la difusión pública y el componente educativo del proyecto del buque naufragado Mardi Gras. Los esfuerzos tradicionales de difusión pública para emplazamientos arqueológicos en aguas poco profundas se centran normalmente en llevar a visitantes que practican el submarinismo y el snorkel al

emplazamiento. Los materiales de interpretación para dichos emplazamientos incluyen a menudo planos del emplazamiento impermeables, marcadores sumergidos y directrices para dirigir a los visitantes en torno al emplazamiento a medida que exploran y aprenden. Los emplazamiento arqueológicos en aguas profundas presentan desafíos exclusivos, a saber, la interpretación de los recursos gestionados para el público que el público nunca visitará físicamente. El presente artículo trata del papel de la FPAN en el proyecto del buque naufragado Mardi Gras y las estrategias de educación públicas desarrolladas para presentar el buque naufragado y el proyecto en aguas profundas extremas al público.

**Résumé** Fin 2006, le Florida Public Archaeology Network (réseau public d'archéologie de Floride, FPAN) a été chargé de diriger la sensibilisation du public et le volet éducatif du projet de l'épave du Mardi Gras par le Minerals Management Service. Les actions traditionnelles de sensibilisation du public pour les sites archéologiques en eau peu profonde portent habituellement sur la plongée sous-marine et la plongée avec tuba des visiteurs sur le site. Le matériel d'interprétation pour ces sites comprend souvent des plans imperméables à l'eau, des balises de marquage submergées et des indications pour diriger les visiteurs autour du site pendant leur exploration et leur découverte. Les sites archéologiques en eaux profondes posent des difficultés particulières, à savoir, l'interprétation des matériels pédagogiques gérés pour le public que celui-ci ne visitera jamais physiquement.

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Cet article traite du rôle du FPAN dans le projet de l'épave du Mardi Gras et des stratégies de sensibilisation du public mises au point pour présenter l'épave et le projet en eaux très profondes au public.

**Keywords** Mardi Gras Shipwreck · deepwater archaeology · public archaeology · public engagement · deepwater site interpretation

## Introduction

The site known as the Mardi Gras Shipwreck (because it used to be afloat!) is a significant example of early 1800s shipping technology in the Gulf of Mexico. Although its identity is not yet confirmed, material culture evidence indicates it could have served as a merchant transport or privateer (Ford et al. 2008; Horrell and Borgens, this issue). Regardless of the vessel's name and function, it is definitely a significant and interesting wreck site, complete with an amazing variety of artifacts, a challenging environment for scientific research, and a discovery laced with controversy. All of these elements make for a fascinating story to catch and hold the public's attention, enabling archaeologists to use the opportunity to educate people about the goals and value of archaeological research and the unique information that can be obtained through scientific inquiry.

The major challenge of the Mardi Gras Shipwreck is, of course, its extreme depth. The vessel sank in the vastness of the Gulf of Mexico off Louisiana in water 1220 m (4,000 ft.) deep. This extreme environment tested the resolve and resourcefulness of researchers in terms of excavation strategy, methodology, and recovery, and in terms of public outreach ideas and programs. While the public obviously could not visit the site or serve as volunteers on the project, the federal Minerals Management Service (MMS), the lead agency on the project, was determined to ensure people could learn about the shipwreck and the investigation to bring its secrets to light. Toward that end, MMS invited the Florida Public Archaeology Network (FPAN) to partner on the project to provide not only archaeological expertise, but especially public engagement.

FPAN is a statewide system of regional centers that serve as clearinghouses for information; as places for learning, training, and study; and as headquarters for public participation in archaeology and historic preservation. FPAN was established by the Florida legislature

in 2004 and is administered by the University of West Florida (UWF) through a memorandum of agreement (MOA) with the Florida Division of Historical Resources. Each location is staffed with professional archaeologists whose primary job is to inform the public about Florida archaeology and involve volunteers in regional research and preservation efforts.

The goals of FPAN, as set forth in the enabling legislation, Florida Statute 267.145(1), are “to help stem the rapid deterioration of [the] state's buried past and to expand public interest in archaeology.” In the MOA, the mission is “to promote and facilitate the conservation, study, and public understanding of Florida's archaeological heritage through regional centers.” FPAN is committed to preserving Florida's fragile and endangered archaeological sites on land and under water, and to finding new ways of bringing the past and present together in an educational and interesting way. The MOA establishes three primary goals for the regional centers:

1. **Public Outreach:** The Regional Centers are to develop visible public outreach programs, including promotion of archaeological/heritage tourism; partnerships with Florida Anthropological Society chapters and other regional heritage organizations; dissemination of archaeological information to the public; promotion of existing regional heritage events and programs; and promotion of archaeological volunteer opportunities.
2. **Assistance to Local Governments:** The Regional Centers will support local governments in their efforts to preserve and protect regional archaeological resources by assisting with local archaeological ordinances, comprehensive plan elements, and preservation plans; providing professional archaeological assistance with local archaeological emergencies; and advising local governments on the best management practices for municipally-owned and county-owned archaeological sites.
3. **Assist the Florida Division of Historical Resources (DHR) in its Archaeological Responsibilities:** The Regional Centers will assist the DHR in its archaeological responsibilities by promoting Division programs, including grants; by supporting the Division with venues and professional assistance for regional training opportunities; by referring local inquiries to the appropriate Division office or staff

member; by distributing literature promulgated by the Division; and by assisting with and promoting the identification and nomination of local archaeological sites to the National Register of Historic Places.

Although the Mardi Gras Shipwreck is outside the State of Florida's waters, FPAN administrators recognized the need for public outreach and education on this important site and, further, were pleased and honored to respond to a request for assistance from a federal agency. The author, associate director for FPAN and a nautical archaeologist, was detailed to the Mardi Gras Shipwreck Project to serve as a staff archaeologist and to provide public outreach.

### Traditional Outreach Approaches for Underwater Cultural Heritage

Archaeologists have long recognized the benefits of involving the public in their work; see, for example, Jameson (1997), Little (2002), and Merriman (2004). Aside from the fact the public is entitled to know about archaeology conducted on public lands or using public funds, involving the public helps to instill a value for cultural heritage. People tend to appreciate what they know about and understand. Encouraging visitation to heritage sites helps foster a sense of stewardship and connection, ultimately serving to protect archaeological and historical resources. For several decades, underwater archaeologists have worked toward developing ways for the public to become both involved in research into underwater cultural heritage and able to visit underwater cultural heritage sites (Spirek and Scott-Ireton 2003; Jameson and Scott-Ireton 2007; Scott-Ireton 2014).

One of the primary ways to involve members of the public in archaeology, both on land and under water, is to train them to assist in research. By providing training and volunteer opportunities on underwater sites, archaeologists help sport divers find positive and effective ways to learn about submerged cultural resources, rather than collecting artifacts or hunting for nonexistent treasure. Courses, such as the State of Florida's Orientation to Underwater Archaeology for Sport Divers (Scott-Ireton 2008:74) and the *Queen Anne's Revenge* Project's Dive Down Program (Wilde-Ramsing and Hermley 2007) are popular among divers who want to visit archaeological sites and get involved in underwater

research. Additionally, the major sport-diver training agencies, including Professional Association of Diving Instructors, National Association of Underwater Instructors, and Scuba Schools International, have specialty courses focusing on underwater archaeology, further evidence that the diving public is interested in archaeological research and becoming involved in the study of the maritime past.

Much outreach related to shipwrecks and other underwater archaeological sites is focused on developing in situ interpretation so the members of the diving public can visit, understand what they are seeing, and learn about the site. Shipwreck parks, underwater archaeological preserves, and maritime heritage trails are popular, proven, and successful approaches to in situ interpretation, providing visitors with opportunities for recreational and educational, as well as heritage and ecological, tourism (Philippou and Staniforth 2003; Spirek and Harris 2003; Terrell 2003; Leshikar-Denton and Scott-Ireton 2007; McKinnon 2007; R. Smith 2007; Zarzynski 2007; L. Smith 2014). By encouraging visitation at the site of the shipwreck, local economies are also supported by promoting tourism, encouraging local travel, and patronizing local businesses. Heritage tourism, the impetus behind all these benefits, is one of the fastest-growing segments of the tourism industry, but is inextricably tied to people actually visiting the site (Center for Governmental Responsibility at the University of Florida and Center for Urban Policy Research at Rutgers University 2002:5). As more remote sites are discovered and investigated, however, archaeologists must also discover new and innovative methods for bringing the sites to the people when the people cannot go to the sites (Evans 2014; Gleason 2014).

### Challenges of the Mardi Gras Shipwreck

From the beginning of the Mardi Gras Shipwreck Project, challenges unique to conducting research in extreme depths were recognized and thoughtfully approached, including challenges for public outreach. Two of the most successful and customary methods for engaging the public in underwater research—utilizing volunteers and promoting visitation—were not at all possible. The extreme remoteness and depth of the site required specialized logistics, including staff living on the research vessel for several weeks and obtaining the services of specialized crew, such as professional

remotely operated vehicle (ROV) pilots and operators. Together with security and liability concerns, the logistics made it impossible for volunteers to participate in the research or to work directly on the recovery portion of the project. Additionally, no avenue was available for the public to visit the site. The extreme depth means scuba diving is not possible, obviously; the site can only be visited with submersible equipment, which was not feasible in this case. The only way for the public to “see” the site was virtually, through photographs and video. The Mardi Gras Project was very fortunate to include Nautilus Productions, a documentary production company contracted to record the project for television and other media, which very graciously provided content for public outreach as well (Faulk and Allen, this issue).

Despite not being able to visit or participate in the research, the public was very interested in the project, and the vessel represented an opportunity to explain to people what a shipwreck really is—not a repository for treasure to be mined for personal gain, but, rather, clues to the human maritime past. Further, the public has a right to know about the project. MMS is a federal agency funded by tax dollars; even though the Mardi Gras Shipwreck Project was funded through a legal settlement (Horrell and Borgens, this issue), people have a right to know what their tax-funded agencies are accomplishing. They also have a right to know about their collective human past. Working under the premise that education leads to appreciation, which leads to preservation—for all heritage sites—archaeologists studying the Mardi Gras site wanted as much public engagement and involvement as possible from the very inception of the project. Educating the public about the project, from the vessel’s history and the mystery of its sinking to research methods in challenging environments and ongoing hypotheses about the vessel’s identity, leads to greater understanding of the archaeological process, as well as appreciation for the value of archaeology and for the information scientific excavation can produce.

### Outreach Methods for the Mardi Gras Shipwreck

Methods for engaging the public in deepwater archaeological projects in which they cannot participate and in sites they will never actually get to visit have been developed over the last few decades as this kind of investigation has become feasible. Video documentaries and educational programs featuring RMS *Titanic* have been viewed by people around the world, effectively bringing the ship

from its deepwater grave to the living rooms and classrooms of millions (Ballard and Durbin 2008:249–251). These cutting-edge methods for public engagement with deepwater sites, which enable virtual visitation through submersibles and ROVs, will become more accessible as technology improves and costs are reduced.

Other means for public education about deepwater sites are easily available and cost effective. For example, the MMS provides an extremely useful model for utilizing the history and archaeology of deepwater shipwrecks as educational tools for school children (Ball et al. 2007). An MMS-sponsored project to examine shipwrecks in the Gulf of Mexico on the outer continental shelf, called the Deep Wrecks Project, produced not only scientific data but also a public-oriented website featuring information and daily updates from the field. Products designed especially for teachers and educators include a classroom guide, a poster, lesson plans, hands-on projects, activities, and a website (Ball et al. 2007:176–177).

The common factor in the projects described above and, indeed, for many archaeological projects on land and under water, is a website. In addition to presenting basic text-based information and photographs, websites allow archaeologists to develop “virtual” tours and interactive site plans, and to include links to additional information. Maintaining a Web presence is an easy, cost effective, and efficient method for providing information to the public. Websites are also remarkably flexible—they are simple to maintain and update regularly, are accessible to an extremely wide audience, provide a way to stay “in contact” with the public while a project is underway, and offer a relatively long-term method for continuing to update and add information. For all these reasons, FPAN and the MMS decided to develop a website as the primary means of informing the public about the Mardi Gras Shipwreck Project.

A webpage dedicated to the Mardi Gras Project was created by FPAN and hosted on the UWF domain (Florida Public Archaeology Network 2007) (Fig. 1). The homepage includes introductory information and a menu with links to additional pages. Pages include the “Research Plan”; a list of “Partners,” with logos serving as links to those agencies’ or companies’ websites; a “Crew” list with photographs and biographical sketches of project staff; a “History” page to set the historical context of the ship; and a page featuring artifacts recovered from the site. A site plan of the shipwreck is included on the “Pictures” page and was updated with new information as it was

# Mardi Gras Shipwreck

An early 19th century vessel off the coast of Louisiana.

Home Crew Partners Artifacts Daily Log  
Research Plan History Pictures Videos Contact Us

## Welcome Aboard!



The "Mardi Gras Shipwreck" sank some 200 years ago about 35 miles off the coast of Louisiana in the Gulf of Mexico in 4,000 feet (1220 meters) of water. The shipwreck, whose real identity remains a mystery, lay forgotten at the bottom of the sea until it was discovered in 2002 by an oilfield inspection crew working for the Okeanos Gas Gathering Company (OGGC). The crew was surveying with video cameras mounted on a remotely operated vehicle (ROV) the proposed route of the Mardi Gras Gas Transmission System, the highest capacity deepwater pipeline system ever built. Until further research and study hopefully can identify the name and history of the vessel, it remains known simply as "the Mardi Gras Wreck" after the pipeline where it was found.


In May 2007, an expedition, led by Texas A&M University and funded by OGGC under an agreement with the Minerals Management Service, will be launched to undertake the deepest scientific archaeological excavation ever attempted in order to study the site on the seafloor and recover artifacts for eventual display in the Louisiana State Museum for the benefit of all. You are invited to follow the archaeologists, oceanographers, engineers, students, ROV pilots, and ship's crew as they explore this 200-year old time capsule 4,000 feet beneath the surface of the Gulf of Mexico.

**Fig. 1** Mardi Gras Shipwreck Website homepage. (Image courtesy Florida Public Archaeology Network and University of West Florida, 2015.)

## See What We're Seeing

Be on the look out for new videos through the month of May as we are exploring this shipwreck. We plan on updating this page with videos of artifacts that we recover as well as some shots of the vessel itself.

### Video Clip 1



In the early dawn hours on Tuesday May 22, the Mardi Gras Shipwreck Project crew tossed off the lines holding TOISA VIGILANT to the dock in Fourchon, Louisiana and headed to sea. After a 7 hour transit to the shipwreck site, the survey and ROV crews began setting up the survey grid on the seafloor using the Triton ROV and five acoustic beacons.

The ROV began making trips to the seabed late Tuesday night to place the acoustic transponders on the bottom. The transponders will create an acoustic grid helping archaeologists create an accurate map of the wreck site. Before dawn the ROV pilots flew one pass over the shipwreck allowing archaeologists, ROV pilots and ship's crew to view the site for the first time.

An hour after the ROV returned to the surface field crew created the first project mosaic allowing archaeologists to begin their work of interpreting the shipwreck. For the archaeological team the project has officially begun as they start the painstaking process of studying the relationship of each artifact on the seafloor to another.

**Fig. 2** Mardi Gras Shipwreck Website feature page. (Image courtesy Florida Public Archaeology Network and University of West Florida, 2015.)

obtained, as well as with photos of features and artifacts that correspond to the plan. Video clips accompanied by narration provided by the project documentary filmmaker were used to create a “See What We’re Seeing” page (Fig. 2). Finally, a “Daily Log,” with details of each day’s goals and progress was updated from the research vessel. The log was also a venue for describing project procedures, such as developing specialized tools for excavation and recording the site using the Site Recorder program, and for introducing crew, including the ROV pilots and operators, as well as the archaeologists and researchers. Also included on the website was a “Contact Us” page featuring an invitation to “Ask an Archaeologist,” with a direct email link to the project staff; people following the project often sent in questions or comments, which were responded to individually. Based on feedback, many people, including hundreds of schoolchildren, watched the website daily for updates.

Once the field project was completed, daily updates were suspended, although updates are still posted whenever new information is made available. The project’s

final report was posted in PDF format, available for download. Segments of Nautilus Productions’ documentary feature, *The Mystery Mardi Gras Shipwreck*, are linked from the site; the DVD of the entire program, which won the 2009 Bronze Telly Award in the documentary category, is available for purchase. The Texas A&M University Conservation Research Laboratory, which conserved all the Mardi Gras Shipwreck artifacts, was also linked so people could watch as discoveries were made in the lab (Hamilton 2007).

As the Mardi Gras Shipwreck materials become available for display, FPAN will continue to assist MMS and the State of Louisiana in developing additional education and outreach materials. Ideas include educator lesson plans and activities, and museum exhibit labels and signage. A poster featuring the Mardi Gras Shipwreck was produced to celebrate Louisiana Archaeology Month in October 2008 (Fig. 3). Two thousand posters were distributed to Archaeology Month host organizations, Louisiana Archaeological Society chapter members, and teachers at the Louisiana Council for



**Fig. 3** Louisiana Archaeology Month poster featuring the Mardi Gras Shipwreck. (Image courtesy Louisiana Division of Archaeology and Nautilus Productions, 2008.)

Social Studies, as well as to the MMS, which made sure posters got to the National Science Teachers Association conference, the Offshore Technology Conference, and a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration teachers' workshop. The website will continue to be maintained, and additional information on the artifacts, along with any additional relevant information, will be added as research and analysis are completed.

## Conclusion

In the world of deepwater archaeology, where methods and techniques are still very much in development, archaeologists must be ready at all times to adapt, improvise, and overcome. Extreme conditions often call for thinking far outside the box, and tools improvised from snow shovels or fryer baskets can be made to work beautifully as excavation apparatus. The same open-minded philosophy can be used for public education. There is no one right way to engage the public, and new opportunities can foster new ideas and methods. The World-Wide Web has proven to be a valuable tool for allowing the public to virtually “visit” deepwater sites and for encouraging interaction with project members, even if the public cannot physically volunteer on a project. However, the Web should not be considered the only solution. As more deepwater projects are conducted, additional options for including members of the public in the study of their past undoubtedly will be developed. These future advances in public engagement promise to be as exciting as the archaeology itself.

Please visit the Mardi Gras Shipwreck Project Website at <[fpan.us/mardigraswreck](http://fpan.us/mardigraswreck)>.

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