The Maritime Archaeological and Historical Society (MAHS) is a non-profit, tax-exempt organization of volunteers committed to enhancing public awareness and an appreciation of historic shipwreck preservation and the science of maritime archaeology. Founded in 1988 by sport divers, governed by a Board of Directors, and guided by an advisory committee of professional archaeologists and historians, MAHS serves as an Institutional Associate Member to the Advisory Council on Underwater Archaeology. Members come from all walks of life and include archaeologists, engineers, medical professionals, historians, lawyers, military and government personnel, photographers, and many others. Membership in MAHS is open to divers and non-divers who support the goal of preserving our maritime heritage and who agree to abide by a Statement of Ethics. With the help of professional archaeologists, MAHS developed an Introductory Course in Underwater Archaeology for teaching sport divers in 1988 that has evolved over the years. The course consists of nine evening classroom sessions taught by experts in their respective fields. Course topics include archival research; ship architecture; surveying, recording, and mapping; photography and video; conservation; law and ethics; and project planning and reports.
Excavation of the Soldier Key shipwreck took place during July 2012 in Biscayne National Park under the direction of Park Archeologist, Chuck Lawson. In exceptionally shallow conditions, the wooden shipwreck’s maximum depth at high tide reached only 2 meters. The primary goal of the project was to replace the ballast and overburden that had protected the site prior to its modern disturbance, and to encourage the surrounding sea grass to encroach on the site and further stabilize it. Due to the site’s location in a National Park, the project acted as a compromise between conserving both cultural and natural resources.

Unfortunately, the Soldier Key wreck has been heavily disturbed by looters since the 1970s. Citing this disturbance as a reason to excavate, a major university professor conducted three years of field schools on the wreck from 1982-1984. The first field school took place without permits of any kind. The site’s stewardship was also questionable during the years that the field schools took place. Congress had approved expanding the boundaries of Biscayne National Park as it transitioned from a National Monument to a National Park, but the State of Florida had not yet ceded the submerged bottomlands on which the site rests.

The result of the area’s ambiguous status was limited oversight during the 1980s field schools and little follow-through on site preservation afterward. The Principal Investigator for the field schools did not recover the site with the ballast, never turned in a report on the work conducted, failed to properly conserve or curate any of the artifacts, and eventually passed away without leaving records behind. Exhaustive efforts to recover any artifacts or information resulting from the 1980s fieldwork were unsuccessful.

Seven iron drift pins protruding from the sand between the two large ballast piles were the only evidence of the hull at the start of the 2012 field season. Five-meter units were established over the site as few artifacts were expected to be recovered, and any that may be found likely lacked provenience due to the site’s highly dynamic nature and previous unreliable fieldwork. Despite the poor conditions in which the site was left after 1984, the wood that remained was in surprisingly good condition. The project team exposed 11 meters of keel, 20 floor beams attached to the keel with iron drift bolts, first and second futtocks, ceiling planking, external hull planking, and sacrificial sheathing. Neither the bow nor the stern were present. The hull was comprised entirely of white oak with the exception of the sacrificial sheathing that was likely scots or red pine. Despite the site’s relatively poor condition, 83 artifacts were recovered in 2012, including diagnostic ceramics and 611 seeds later identified as allspice.

The scantlings of the Soldier Key wreck compare favorably to historical treatises and similar sites of a vessel of around 100 feet long, 27 feet in breadth, and with around a 250-ton displacement. The ceramic assemblage suggests that the vessel sailed during the second quarter of the eighteenth century. The allspice present suggests that the vessel was carrying the spice from Jamaica, the only location at which allspice was commercially viable at the time. Given the size of the vessel and the cargo, the ship was likely a large British West Indianman travelling from Jamaica back to Europe. The extremely shallow depth of the site suggests that the vessel was tossed into the shallow flats during a hurricane. Unfortunately, many British ships wrecked in the area and the few artifacts recovered are unable to provide a tighter date range for the vessel.

Despite not being able to put a name to the vessel, the goal of recovering the wreck and conserving what remained of it was successful. The crew covered all of the hull structure in the original ballast, and the ballast and surrounding sea grass have successfully covered the site in silt and sand, creating an anaerobic preservation environment. Today, the site remains undisturbed and continues to be covered in sand and silt.

Submitted by Allen Wilson,
University of West Florida M.A. Candidate
In 1997, MAHS was awarded a grant from the Maryland Historical Trust to produce its introductory course on video. Now available on DVD, the introductory course is offered in the series Diving Into History: An Introduction to Underwater Archaeology. The DVDs are used as part of the undergraduate curricula in archaeology at several universities.

MAHS has worked with students from academic institutions around the world since its founding. As MAHS has grown, it has been able to support graduate students when they needed trained divers to help them with their fieldwork. Students have also gained valuable research and field experience by participating in MAHS projects. This experience has enhanced their resumes for graduate school and beyond.

MAHS divers have worked on a number of research projects. One project included a survey of a Revolutionary War shipyard on the Chickahominy River, Virginia, burned in 1781 by the British. Two shipwrecks were explored and artifacts were recovered for study and conservation as part of an East Carolina University (ECU) student’s Master’s thesis. Other projects included a survey of the French frigate L’Hermione, lost in 1838 in Bermuda, for

another Master’s thesis (ECU); a survey of two frigates lost near Anguilla in 1772; mapping the remains of the frigate Nuestra Senora del Buen Consejo and discovering the remains of an 18th century cargo ship for two Master’s theses (ECU and University of Norwich); and supporting the search for, and documentation of, shipwrecks in Anguilla for a University of Southampton Ph.D. candidate’s dissertation. Academic students who participate in MAHS programs and projects have often turned to MAHS for references to graduate programs and for professional employment. Other students have found the semi-annual MAHSNews to be an excellent forum for publishing preliminary articles on their research work. To find out more about MAHS projects or to get involved, visit www.mahsnet.org.

—Submitted by Jim Smailes, MAHS Secretary
The Advisory Council on Underwater Archaeology is pleased to announce the 2015 ACUA George Fischer Student Travel Award. This award of $1,000.00 (USD) will be offered to help fund travel costs for the upcoming 2015 SHA Conference in Seattle, Washington, USA, and will be granted to an international student presenting a paper on an underwater or maritime archaeology topic at this Conference. Submissions will be judged on academic merit and relevance to the field of underwater and maritime archaeology. All application materials must be sent to info@acuaonline.org by 12 September 2013. If you missed the deadline for the 2015 conference, don’t worry! The ACUA offers the George Fischer Travel Award each year.

To be eligible for consideration, students interested in applying for this award must currently be enrolled, and in good academic standing, in a graduate degree program (includes full-time, part-time, or thesis/dissertation hours only). Preference is given to international students. International students are considered to be those students residing or studying in a country other than the country where the conference is being held.

To apply for this award you must submit the following:
1. Curriculum vitae
2. Short covering letter
3. A short essay on the subject to be presented at SHA; 1,000 words maximum

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The 14th Society for Historical Archaeology Student Paper Prize will be awarded at the 48th Conference on Historical and Underwater Archaeology, to be held January 6-10, 2015 in Seattle, Washington. The prize will be awarded to a student, or students, whose written version of a conference paper is judged superior in the areas of originality, research merit, clarity of presentation, professionalism, and of potential relevance to a considerable segment of the archaeological community.

For more information, visit the SHA Student Paper Guidelines.