

Analysis of Artifacts

Item # 149

Coconut Fiber

WHO FOUND	Graves group Chappel Sr./Blair Hedden Restall Triton Alliance
WHEN FOUND	1795 1896 1937 1960+ 1967 1970
WHERE FOUND	Money Pit Smith's Cove
FIRSTHAND/ SECONDHAND	
REFERENCES	D'Arcy O'Connor's, "The Big Dig", Pgs. 90, 142, & 167
LOCATION TODAY	
ODDITY FACTOR	
ASSESSMENT OF AUTHENTICITY	
COMMENTS	

digging for treasure in Canada.) Hedden also purchased a 1,000-gallon-per-minute turbine pump, the largest ever used on the island, to drain the pit. It was fed by 7,500 watts of electric power and proved more than adequate for the job.

Hedden kept a diary recording the summer's work. Some excerpts: "I arrived on Oak Island May 27, 1936. . . . Put in turbine pump. Ran the pump two hours and fifteen minutes and lowered the water seventy feet in the shaft, which would be one hundred feet below the deck head. I observed when the water was down to [that] level, an old shaft [the Cave-in Pit] was drained also, proving there is some clear passage between [the two]. . . . I also noticed that three other old pits are gradually becoming dried out since pumping operations [began]."

During the balance of the summer, the Chappell shaft was cleared and re-timbered to its original depth of 155 feet and then driven down to 160 feet. Some lateral probing was done at various levels, but the only discovery of any consequence was two large oak splinters found several feet to the east at a depth of 147 feet. From their state of decay and the location in which they were found, Hedden believed that "these splinters must be part of a box or an oak platform of logs which fell to that depth in the collapse" of the Money Pit in 1861. He concluded that the original Money Pit was probably slightly to the east of the Chappell shaft. He and his crew therefore left off work in September and planned to return the following spring to begin a new shaft in that location. This hole was to be large enough to allow pneumatic drills to be brought down and used for lateral drilling. The drill rods would extend out twenty feet in all directions from the shaft at vertical levels of two feet apart, beginning at the one-hundred-foot level and working as far down as necessary to locate the treasure.

Before leaving the island that summer, Hedden uncovered more coconut fiber six feet under the beach at Smith's Cove. He also made two other interesting discoveries.

One Saturday in July, while he was wandering along the beach at Joudrey's Cove on the island's north side, Hedden spotted a large granite rock half buried in the sand. He dug it out and discovered lettering etched into one of its flat surfaces. It bore the Roman numeral II and below that the letters

the treasure had been buried. Restall believed the island may have been used as a long-term repository by English privateers during their raids on Spanish ships and settlements in the seventeenth-century. He thought, for instance, that part of the loot from the city of Panama may have found its way eventually to the island after the city was sacked by Henry Morgan in 1671.

Mildred, on the other hand, believed, as she still does, that any treasure on Oak Island was probably retrieved before the Money Pit was discovered in 1795. And her favorite theory is that the deposit was designed by a group of Acadians prior to their expulsion from the province in 1755.

Restall spent most of the first couple of years exploring the artificial drainage system at Smith's Cove. He had come to the island with only his life's savings of \$8,500—hardly enough to purchase or rent heavy digging machinery. So it was basically a tedious pick-and-shovel operation. An old cofferdam (built in 1866) was still visible at low tide, and Restall and his son concentrated their search between the dam and the shoreline, a distance of about seventy feet. They dug some sixty-five holes, two to six feet deep, and uncovered sections of the five finger drains that had been first noticed in 1850. They also found layers of eel grass and coconut fiber anywhere from eight to twenty-four inches thick under parts of the false beach.

In his 1961 progress report, Restall said, "We now have a complete picture of the beach work, and it is incredible." He described it as being 243 feet across near the cofferdam, and composed of "paving stones" overlaid with eel grass, fiber, sand, and rocks. Much of it had previously been ripped up and destroyed by the 1850 searchers. Although Restall noticed that the drains all converged toward one main point near the shore, he wasn't able to find the main channel. Either the drains were no longer connected to it, or else it was far deeper than he was able to dig by hand.

Through a few of his Ontario friends, Restall was able to raise \$11,000 to continue work. In 1961 he purchased the large pump that both Hedden and Hamilton had used on the island and set it up over the Hedden shaft. He explored and recribbed parts of both that shaft and the Chappell shaft and

being worked by man, was also brought up from cavities below bedrock.

One borehole in the Money Pit came to an abrupt halt at 198 feet. Blankenship and the professional driller operating the machine were positive, because of the high-pitched whining sound, that the drill was biting into hard metal. It required twenty-five minutes for the diamond drill to bore through a half inch of the material. But the core sample was lost just before it reached the surface.

Concurrent with the drilling program Blankenship explored other parts of the island. Here too he made some important discoveries. In 1966 he reopened and deepened the shaft that Dunfield had found the year before on the south shore. At about sixty feet Blankenship found an ancient hand-wrought nail and a kind of nut or washer. The hole was dug to about ninety feet, where he encountered a layer of round granite rocks, all about the size of a man's head, lying in a pool of black stagnant water. Blankenship was sure he had intersected a part of the south shore flood tunnel, and he spent several months trying to crib the shaft and evacuate deeper. But even wood and steel casing couldn't hold back the collapsing earth, and the hole was eventually abandoned.

The following year Blankenship dug up parts of the Smith's Cove beach. This yielded more coconut fiber. Tobias recalls that he was present when some of the material was found. "I remember picking it up and thinking maybe it was some sort of seaweed. But we sent a sample off to the National Research Council [in Ottawa], and sure enough, their botanists confirmed that it was coconut fiber. That was the first time I really believed there was coconut fiber under Oak Island."

Blankenship also uncovered the remains of the artificial drainage network under Smith's Cove. Beneath one of the stone drains he found a pair of wrought-iron scissors. These were submitted to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, which found them to be Spanish-American in origin, probably made in Mexico. They were examined by Mendel Peterson, former curator of the Smithsonian's Historical Archaeology