

SHIPWRECK

Archaeologists work to learn more

Officials receive firsthand account of blockade runner's sinking

By Adam Wagner
StarNews Staff

FORT FISHER — From his office near Fort Fisher Museum, it takes Billy Ray Morris about an hour to reach the newly rediscovered blockade runner wreck he remains confident is the Agnes E. Fry.

Morris, director of the Underwater Archaeology Branch of the Office of State Archaeology, dove on the wreck for about an hour on

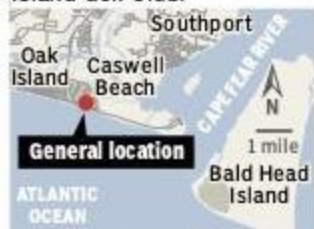
March 22. It was the first time Morris had been on the wreck, and the second time divers had been there since it was located Feb. 27.

Among the sights Morris saw were evidence that the wreck had been knocked down by a wire-dragging technique, which records indicate happened to the Fry in 1909. And there was a brass porthole, evidence of just how untouched the wreck is.

“Not only does that speak well to the state of preservation,” Morris said, “it also tells me people have not been out there diving on that thing and taking stuff home. The first thing everybody wants to take home from the wreck

Agnes E. Fry

Discovered Feb. 27 in the Atlantic Ocean near the Oak Island Golf Club.



Source: maps4news.com/HERE
GATEHOUSE MEDIA

is a brass porthole.”

Now, Morris and his office are working to gather as much information as they can about the Fry, a process that is stretching from Glasgow, Scotland, to Tampa Bay, Fla., to a

shipwreck beneath 18 feet of murky water off the Oak Island coast.

“Short of having someone actually hand me the maker’s plate off of the keel, I’m pretty sure this is the Agnes Fry,” Morris said.

Last Wednesday, Morris received in the mail a firsthand account of the Fry’s running aground, written by the blockade runner’s chief engineer, Bernard Roux Harding. It was a gift, he said, from Mary T. Parker, a Jacksonville resident who is Harding’s great-granddaughter.

The original account was handwritten in pencil

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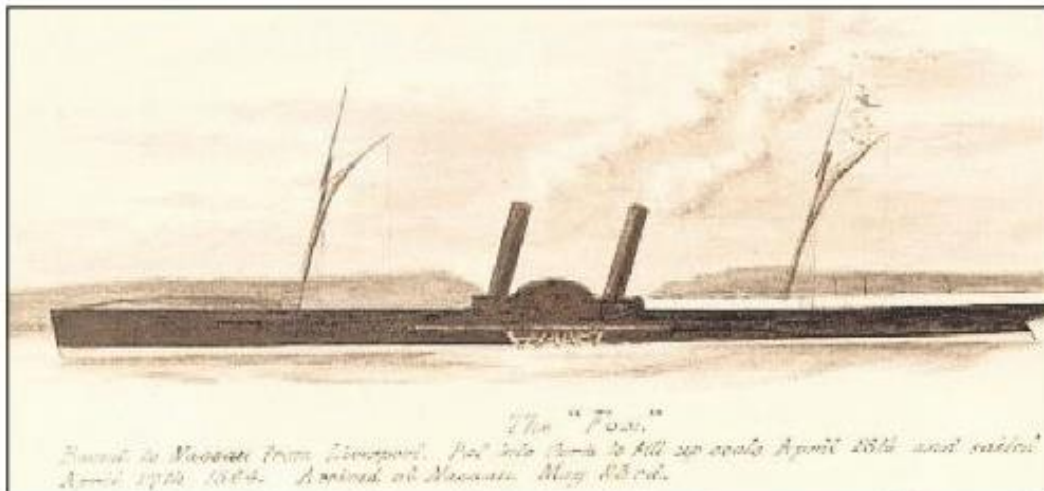
on a piece of Seaboard Airlines stationary, Parker said Monday. Harding worked for the railroad for at least two decades after the war.

"It was just kind of train of thought," Parker said of the letter, "so I think he must have written it while he was on the train."

Parker didn't even know the letter existed until 1992, when she was cleaning out her parents' house. It was in a large brown envelope at the bottom of a box of photographs, she said.

At the time, Parker transcribed it and sent a copy to Chris Fonvielle, a local historian. Then, in 2000, she used a word processor to make another copy and, after hearing of the Fry's likely discovery, she made yet another copy, clearing up typos and sending it to the Underwater Archaeology Branch's Carolina Beach headquarters.

"I thought if it's ever going to be helpful, it needs to be now," Parker said.



Experts say the shipwreck recently discovered off Oak Island is likely the Agnes E. Fry, which was previously known as the Fox. The Fox was built in 1864. COURTESY OF CALEDONIAN MARITIME RESEARCH TRUST/CLYDESHIPS.CO.UK

Morris agreed that it has been useful so far.

"It was like a gift from the gods," he said. "It was really, really neat."

Among the details in the account are that the man who ran the Fry aground wasn't Joseph Fry, the captain whose wife was the ship's namesake. It was instead the pilot.

"That's in Fry's journal, which you would expect for the captain to say. Always blame the pilot," Morris said. "But it's also in the

engineer's, and back in that time period, the engineering department and the deck officers didn't intermingle much."

In addition, the engineer's journal includes details that the crew abandoned ship rapidly when it ran aground, carrying little more than the clothes on their backs.

That detail is part of why Morris believes he can use the wreck to piece together details about the ship's crew. In addition, the hull is well-preserved and the

ship's Dec. 27, 1864, scuttling came in between two attacks on Fort Fisher.

"All of those things together coalesce to make me think there's a good chance that there's a portion of her cargo that was not salvaged," Morris said. "Clearly the garrisons of the fort would have been a little preoccupied with repelling the assault."

Morris is working to gain full access to Fry's journals, which are in a private collection in Tampa Bay, in order



Billy Ray Morris, director of the Underwater Archaeology Branch of the N.C. Office of State Archaeology, dives March 22 on the wreck he believes is the Agnes E. Fry. Morris had 18 inches of visibility that day, which he says is excellent for the area. PHOTO COURTESY N.C. UNDERWATER ARCHAEOLOGY BRANCH

to learn more about what the ship may have been carrying when it ran aground.

While the ship rests on the bottom of the Atlantic, Morris doesn't mind recreational divers checking it out, but he is adamant that they shouldn't disturb it, likening taking a part of the ship to taking a brick from Tryon Palace during a tour.

"Just because it's a shipwreck doesn't make it any

less a part of our shared heritage. I would really like for people to appreciate the fact that this is their heritage, too," Morris said.

"I'm just a caretaker for it. I really encourage people to go and look. I just want them to do it responsibly."

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