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Researchers find 1559 shipwreck, part of Spanish colonization effort in Florida Panhandle

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PENSACOLA, Fla. — In 1559, a hurricane plunged as many as seven Spanish sailing vessels to the bottom of Pensacola Bay, hampering explorer Don Tristan de Luna's attempt to colonize this section of the Florida Panhandle.

Almost 500 years later and 15 years after the first ship was found, another has been discovered, helping archaeologists unlock secrets to Florida's Spanish past. The colony at the site of present-day Pensacola was abandoned in 1561, and no trace of it has been found on land.

Teams of University of West Florida archaeology students last summer discovered what they thought was the shipwreck, picking up pieces of artifacts from the site. A 32-by-24-foot barge now covers the site to give divers access.

Florida Secretary of State Kurt Browning joined divers Thursday for a close look at the shipwreck, partially buried in sand about 12 feet below the water surface. It was "incredible" to touch something that has been submerged for centuries, Browning said.

"It was in good condition. As far as pieces of pottery, you could feel the bowls," he said.

The discovery is "another piece of the puzzle" of Florida's Spanish ancestry, Browning said, adding that he does not expect the ship to be removed from the water.

About 650 artifacts, mostly pieces of pottery and wood, were on display Thursday for about 100 people, among them members of the public, who gathered on land about a half mile from the shipwreck.

"It's an amazing site," said Gregory D. Cook, a University of West Florida nautical archaeologist.

Test excavations suggest about 60 to 66 feet of preserved hull from a small to medium-size vessel, he said.

The ship would likely have been built a few years before 1559, said Dr. Roger C. Smith, the state's underwater archaeologist.

The first de Luna ship was found in 1992 in the same area, near what de Luna founded as Florida's initial European settlement. Researchers believe as many as five other vessels were lost in the hurricane Sept. 19, 1559. The search for the others continues.

"These sites are unique doorways into Florida's past," Smith said.

They also give archaeology students an unusual opportunity for research.

Siska Williams of Atlanta, a West Florida graduate student in archaeology, said she has made about 100 dives at the site. In one, divers recovered seeds and rat skeletons, she said.

The ship apparently held food stocks and other supplies for the colonization campaign, a carefully planned expedition financed by the Spanish crown.

After the storm, only three ships were still afloat, including two small barks and the expedition's only caravel.

No human remains were found at the site, Williams said: "Most of the crew had gone ashore because of the

hurricane."

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