Bermuda’s Heritage and shipwrecks - Week 2
Discovering Bermuda’s Shipwrecks

We learned in March that Bermuda has a barrier reef around it! The reef line protects our island from the strong waves coming off the Atlantic Ocean! These reefs have also provided Bermuda with impressive cultural heritage sites; there are 150 known shipwrecks dotted along the island’s reefs, and over 300 sites where ships have sunk in Bermuda’s waters. The reefs are difficult to see and sailors eager to seek shelter from the rough ocean often ended up wrecking upon them. This combination of violent Atlantic storms and an extensive reef system has led to Bermuda being one of the only islands in the world that is completely encircled by shipwrecks. Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, English, Italian and American ships populate the waters surrounding our islands; serving as material evidence for Bermuda’s place in the Atlantic World.

Salvage and Wrecking

For a significant portion of Bermuda’s history locals made their living working as pilots guiding ships through the islands’ dangerous reef systems, or through salvaging from wrecks. In search for more salvage opportunities, some Bermudians even took this a step further, and began setting fires on hills to lead unsuspecting ships into dangerous areas. Once the ships were wrecked, those who went out to help were entitled to salvage awards, making wrecking a very profitable enterprise. For much of Bermuda’s history salvaging from the islands’ wrecks was how many enterprising locals made their money, and this practice ended up enabling one of Bermuda’s most recognisable divers to make history.
Teddy Tucker

Teddy Tucker first started diving at the age of 12, whilst working as a dive attendant for the Aquarium’s tourist diving program. During down times he and the other employees would take turns putting on the dive helmet to take a walk amongst the corals and fish. This experience not only helped him to learn to dive without scuba at an early age, but also awakened a passion for the adventure and excitement that underwater exploration brings. Years later, he bought an old boat and started a marine salvage and construction business that helped fund his passion for exploring the reefs in search of shipwrecks.

In 1955, Teddy’s years of experience searching for wrecks on the ocean floor and his research into ancient sea voyages and ocean charts led him to a discovery that catapulted Bermuda’s shipwreck heritage into worldwide fame. Returning to a site he had been introduced to years ago by a local fishermen, Teddy ended up uncovering the remains of the San Pedro, a Spanish ship that had wrecked on Bermuda’s reefs on the way to Spain from South America. The treasure found on the ship, particularly a gold cross studded with brilliant emeralds, which would come to be known as ‘Tucker’s Cross’, received worldwide recognition, bringing media attention to Bermuda’s shipwrecks for the first time.

Over the next 20 years hundreds of historic wrecks were found dotted among Bermuda’s reefs, and academics flocked to the island to investigate them. The investigations done in the 60s and 70s were some of the earliest examples of underwater archaeology, and helped solidify many of the methods still used today.
What to look for when seeking a shipwreck?

Searching for shipwrecks usually involves a combination of archival research (looking at ship logs, newspaper articles, ship registers, etc.) and visual or electronic search methods. Electronic search methods using magnetometers and sonar don't really work in Bermuda, due to the magnetic anomaly that surrounds the islands’ sea mount, and the high coral heads that hide most of the shipwreck evidence from sonar. Fortunately, our waters are clear enough to make visual searches the perfect method for looking for shipwrecks.

When trying to find evidence of a wreck, you are essentially looking for anything that looks man made. Big objects like anchors, cannon, and iron fittings are some of the most obvious signs, but you also want to look out for ships ballast, which can take the form of piles of smooth rocks, or scrub marks, which is when a bit of reef has been flattened by a ship being dragged over it. One of the best methods for searching for shipwrecks is called ‘Towing’. This is the method used by Teddy and his friends when they went out in search of wrecks. Towing involves holding onto a line that is connected to the back of a boat and being dragged along while wearing a mask, snorkel and fins so that you can dip in and out of the water in search for signs of shipwrecks. This allows you to cover large areas in a relatively short amount of time, and is also a lot of fun to do! Although back in Teddy’s day they did have to keep an eye out for the sharks that would sometimes follow them as they moved through the water...

If you want to take a look at how Bermuda’s shipwrecks look today, visit http://bermuda100.ucsd.edu/, where you can find interactive 3D models of some of Bermuda’s most impressive shipwrecks, and get a glimpse of what it's like to explore them underwater.
Activity: Shipwreck Search

Using the information of what to look out for provided above, take a look at the below image and colour in anything you think could be part of a shipwreck.