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AS NATURE CLAIMS

Shipwrecks, Historians Can Only Watch

Pieces of wrecked ships from as far back as the 17th century can still be found on Texas shores, but these relics are getting more scarce as nature takes its toll.



**As Nature Claims Shipwrecks,
Historians Can Only Watch**

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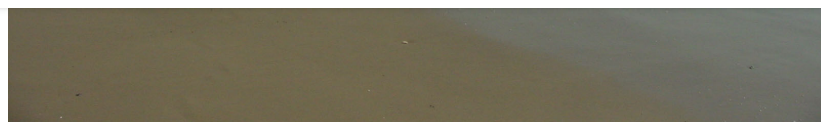


Photo courtesy of Texas Historical Commission

Boca Chica Shipwreck Number 2, emerging from the sand in 2002

What remains of the ship [La Belle](#) sits in a place of honor in the Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin. It sits in a dark exhibit hall, constantly monitored, and protected by clear plastic barriers. According to Franck Cordes, one of the museum's curators, there's a good reason the ship is given such respect.

"It's a pebble that sends out huge ripples on the water in terms of our history here as Texans," Cordes says.

La Belle was a French ship whose passengers intended to colonize Texas. Their plan failed, but it spurred the Spanish to set up missions that irrevocably changed the area's fate.

"This really pushes the Spanish to make a



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effort.

It was located in 1995, buried in the sand under about 12 feet of water. archaeologists had to build a structure called a [cofferdam](#) to get it out. Cordes describes it as a “donut island” – two rows of steel plates around the perimeter of the ship. Once it was constructed, the water on top of *La Belle* could be pumped out, and the excavation could happen like it would on dry land. The dig took about 10 months. Then, Texas A&M University researchers disassembled *La Belle* and dehydrated each piece with the largest freeze dryer in North America to preserve them. Archaeologists also cataloged the unprecedented haul of artifacts from the ship, including muskets, combs, jewelry and cookery. The whole process took over 20 years, tens of millions of dollars – and explains why shipwrecks are so seldom rescued.

Tough to save

As the state marine archaeologist for the Texas Historical Commission, Amy Borgens knows this



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time-consuming and expensive to preserve them. And that's if there's still physical evidence of the wreck. In the Gulf of Mexico, many ships have disappeared into the bellies of [tiny wood-boring mollusks called shipworms](#).

"If you have a ship that sinks in open water and it doesn't immediately become buried, all that wood that's exposed above the sediment line will become consumed," Borgens says.

Shipworms are actually a kind of clam with a long, skinny body. They burrow into submerged timbers and eat the wood as they go. Thousands of ships are known to have wrecked in the Gulf of Mexico. For many of them, this was their fate: slowly disappearing into the bellies of shipworms. That means it's rare to find evidence of an old shipwreck. But they are out there – [including a couple at the very southern tip of Texas](#) on Boca Chica Beach, where the Rio Grande meets the Gulf of Mexico.

"I have kind of a soft spot for those because they're sort of underdogs in a way," Borgens

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Number 1 likely dates back to around the Civil War, while Number 2 is probably from around the early 1800s.

The wrecks are buried under Boca Chica Beach, so they're not usually visible. They only emerge after a big storm that uncovers the sand on top of them. But that's also why they've survived for so long — the sand protects them from shipworms. But that's starting to change. Boca Chica Beach is losing sand, exposing the wrecks to open and the Gulf and the shipworms that live in it.

“So these really unique, preserved shipwrecks, if that process continues, we're eventually going to lose them,” Borgens says.

Boca Chica Beach loses about four feet of shoreline per year due to erosion, [according to studies](#) from the University of Texas at Austin's Bureau of Economic Geology. It appears to be particularly harmful to Boca Chica Number 2. It hasn't been seen for a few years now, and Borgens fears it may have already been



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behind, combing the beach in his white Nissan Titan.

Reynolds lives nearby in a house on the Rio Grande. He volunteers for the Texas Historical Commission, keeping an eye out for artifacts on the beach. He's typically the first one to tell Borgens if Boca Chica Number 1 or Number 2 is visible. His property looks like a shipwreck graveyard – stack upon stack of old timbers he's found and kept for Borgens to study later on.

“There's no telling how many different shipwrecks are located just right off the beach,” Reynolds says.





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and down the beach through the rain, inspecting the ocean side first, then turning around at the river and searching the dunes.

Neither of the buried wrecks were visible. But after about 20 minutes on the beach, Reynolds stopped, and got out of the truck. I followed him to a seven-foot-long timber sitting on top of the sand near the edge of the dunes.

I wasn't really sure what I was looking at, but Reynolds seemed to be. It was clearly manmade – hewed into a rectangle tapered at one end. After several long minutes in the rain, he pointed out a couple of half-dollar-size pegs hammered into the wood.

“Those are the wood nails,” Reynolds says. “This is part of an old shipwreck.”

It was an electric moment, to realize that we were in the presence of something exceptionally old. The timber was heavy, but we barely noticed its weight as we hoisted it into the bed of the pickup. Reynolds theorized that a recent storm



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came from, it definitely wasn't an old boat.

"The treenails are not through-and-through wooden dowels but covers for underlying metal fasteners," part of her message read.

I was disappointed. The discovery charged my imagination about the people on the ship we thought we'd found. Maybe they were coming to help build Texas, I thought, or maybe conquer it, or maybe just sell some cotton. I thought about navigating thousands of miles, from some far-flung port, all the way to the mouth of the Rio Grande, only to fail.

But in the end, the piece of wood Reynolds and I found didn't have any such significance. Perhaps that's fitting, since the shipwrecks on Boca Chica Beach are disappearing after all – and a physical connection to a shared history disappears with them. There's nothing anyone can do, since it's far too expensive to save them, like *La Belle*. So, with every tide, with every tiny nibble of a shipworm, their stories get carried a little further out to sea.



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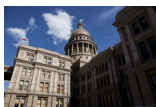
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