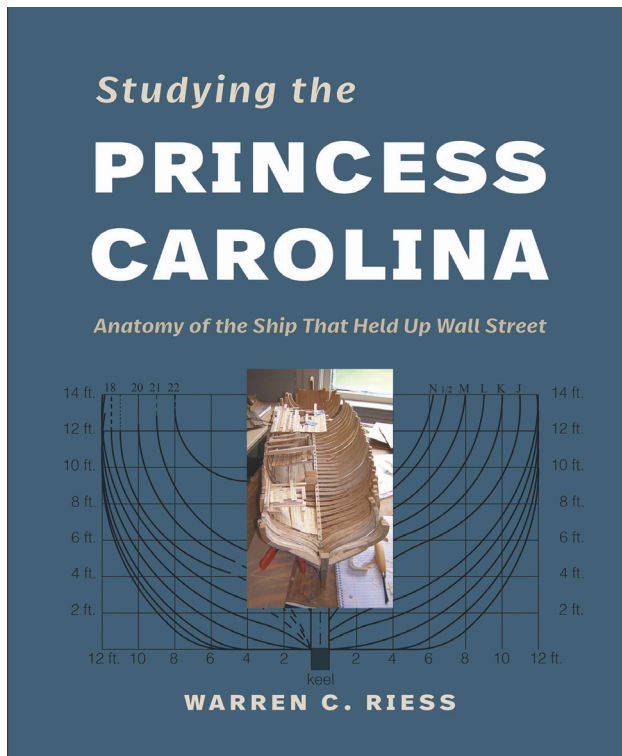




STUDYING THE PRINCESS CAROLINA: ANATOMY OF THE SHIP THAT HELD UP WALL STREET

By Warren C. Riess, Texas A&M University Press, 2023

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This is a companion volume to 2015's *The Ship that Held Up Wall Street*.¹ Both works sit on the foundation of a report written by Riess and Smith in 1983 and the author's doctoral dissertation on the site.² The archaeological site, found in 1982 a few blocks from the East River in Manhattan, was discovered during a terrestrial archaeological field investigation by Soil Systems, Incorporated at the location of an intended office building. It was initially believed to be wooden cribbing; further investigation, however, determined that the timber structures belonged to a watercraft, and the unidentified vessel would come to be known as the "Ronson Ship" (named after the developer Howard Ronson). Soon Riess and Smith would sign on as maritime archaeological experts. After decades of research, Riess suggested that the unidentified watercraft represents the remains of *Princess Carolina*, a bluff-bowed, square-sterned, three-masted oceangoing ship built in South Carolina. Riess notes that this identification is *probable* but not definite.

The earliest pages of the book touch upon a challenge faced by maritime archaeologists: What evidence is needed to associate a named historical ship with an archaeological site? This question lingers within the text, connected to the idea that archaeological researchers study sites distorted by time, like a jigsaw puzzle needing reassembly but invariably missing pieces. In this theme, the author describes the ship's remains as an extensively damaged and collapsed structure: listing in two directions, hogged, rotted, splayed out, and otherwise broken down. The ship's port side from the upper deck to the keel was the most intact part of the hull, but after centuries of burial, many of the iron fasteners connecting

timbers had entirely corroded. With these added distortions complicating analysis and identification, the evidence showed the vessel to be an old, heavily used hull, stripped, beached, and filled with soil, stone, and debris to serve a new role as a building. The challenges of seeking an identity for the remains would be difficult under any circumstances, let alone within the “rescue archaeology” context of this find.

However, the author sought to do everything possible to solve the question of the ship’s identity. Though many decades have passed, this volume outlines his revised analysis of *Princess Carolina* (as he notes, he deviates here and there from the information presented in his earlier works, as added information has become known). Whereas the earlier *Ship that Held Up Wall Street* focuses on the narratives embedded within the historical details surrounding the use and deposition of the ship that would eventually become the archaeological site, this 2023 book represents an explicitly technical work focused on analyzing the design (i.e., “anatomy”) of a colonial merchant ship, commencing with the assumption that the craft was designed and built by Benjamin Austin of Charleston, and launched in 1717. To try to reconstruct the Ronson Ship as *Princess Carolina*, Riess examines shipbuilding treatises representative of some of the ship design philosophies used in naval construction from 1669 (Edmund Bushnell’s *The Complete Ship-Wright*) to 1768 (Fredrik Henrik af Chapman’s *Architectura Navalis Mercatoria*). Riess includes detailed descriptions of the methodology he used to draft the curvature of the frames that defined the shape of *Princess Carolina*’s hull from stem to stern, first reconstructing a body plan and then moving to the conjectural half-breadth and

sheer plans for the vessel. Riess follows the traditional route of many ship reconstructions, noting the appearance of diagnostic features in the hull, describing the configuration of frames, and communicating the patterns of fasteners in the proper eighteenth-century vocabulary.

As he describes traits and features of the archaeological site and explores these techniques, a second challenge becomes clear: How can an archaeologist know the mind of the shipbuilder? How can the maritime archaeologist infer a system of thought and apply it to an assemblage of ship timbers to infer missing hull structures with certainty? Riess explores this idea, considering how knowledge, technical ability, and artisanal traditions may diffuse with the movement of people. In doing this, Riess is seeking deeper meanings in archaeological evidence, rather than merely describing the timbers that make up a forgotten ship; he is looking to extrapolate underlying patterns in ship construction to deepen his interpretation of the site and to aid other researchers interested in this period. In essence, he is looking to re-create a ship while illuminating a philosophy of shipbuilding. Indeed, as Riess notes the potential to compare *Princess Carolina* to other notable eighteenth-century shipwreck sites (*Defence*, the Brown’s Ferry Vessel, and the World Trade Center Ship), it is clear he has contributed to the database of scientific knowledge regarding eighteenth-century ship construction in the New World.

1 Warren C. Riess with Sheli O. Smith, *The Ship that Held Up Wall Street* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2015).

2 Warren Riess and Sheli O. Smith, *175 Water Street, Manhattan: Volume 3: The Ronson Ship* (Columbus, OH: PAST Foundation, 2006) (the PAST Foundation reprinted the 1983 report in 2006, making the original data easily accessible). Warren Riess, “The Ronson Ship: The Study of an Eighteenth-Century Merchantman Excavated in Manhattan, New York in 1982” (PhD diss., Texas A&M University, 1987).