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Harbor map may shed light on Civil War

Artifacts off Charleston being charted

By Bruce Smith
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CHARLESTON — In the city where the Civil War began and where its longest battle was fought, an archaeologist with a clutch of high-tech equipment is searching for watery clues to the past.

James Spirek of the South Carolina Institute for Archaeology and Anthropology is making the first comprehensive map of the harbor bottom to record everything from fortifications to sunken ships.

Fort Sumter, where the war began in 1861, sits in the harbor. The fight over Charleston continued for four years, and historians say the fort has been shelled more than any other site in the Western Hemisphere.

The idea is to record the artifacts, but there will be no attempt to raise anything, Spirek said.

This week, he searched for the Battery Wagner battleground. The battery was attacked in 1863 by the black 54th Massachusetts, an attack memorialized in the movie "Glory."

The battery washed out to sea, and the location is now thought to be beneath the rocks of jetties built in the late 1800s.

There are thought to be about 45 wrecks in the harbor, ranging from ironclads to blockade runners and the so-called stone fleet, ships the Union sank to obstruct blockade runners.

After the jetties were built, the islands on the north side of the harbor have built up with sand, and wrecks of blockade runners are now thought to be beneath dry land. Spirek plans to return in May with ground-sensing equipment to look for those wrecks.

He also hopes to find the exact location of the failed April 7, 1863, attack on Fort Sumter by nine Union ships, including six monitors.

Union reports say the Yankees made it within 500 yards of Sumter but turned back because of obstructions in the water.

Confederate Gen. P.T.G. Beauregard, commanding in Charleston, said Confederate gunners were the difference and the ships made it to within only 1,200 yards. Spirek said the research may provide a more accurate history.

The study will also help preserve what remains.

"There are a lot of potential threats to these resources. Ships are getting bigger and at some point they may have to do some channel widening or change the channel," he said.

He said offshore sites are also used for sand to rebuild beaches.

"We need to know where these artifacts are so we can make decisions on where you get your sand and leave a buffer zone," he said.