Museum to display ancient canoe

By Matt McNab
ISLAND PACKET

A canoe that is nearly 600 years old will return to the area where it was discovered when it is put on display Wednesday at the Parris Island Museum.

Local historian and marsh comber James Cooler found the canoe, thought to be built between 1300 and 1420, submerged in a marsh near Parris Island in 1988, according to East Carolina University professor Lynn Harris.

It was removed from the marsh and tested. Researchers believe it is a product of the Mississippian culture of Native Americans, a period that runs between 800 and the early 1500s, when Europeans first made contact in the New World, Harris said.

The canoe's restoration and exhibition is funded by the Parris Island Historical Society.

Harris said ECU is one of the few universities in the world that conducts underwater archaeology. She led the reconstruction of the canoe from the fragments pulled from the marsh, along with ECU graduate students Alyssa Reisner and Sonia Valencia. The three came to the area twice in the past year to analyze and connect the fragments.

The canoe was pulled from the marsh June 7, 1989, by a team of Marines and archaeologists. Stephen Wise, Parris Island Museum curator, was part of the recovery team and will introduce Harris at a lecture, which starts at 12:15 p.m. Wednesday.

Reisner and Valencia will also make presentations with Harris.

After nearly 25 years of alternating between storage and treatments — including one in 2011 in which the fragments were freeze-dried in Maryland to preserve them — Harris and her students were able to access the canoe in May 2013 and begin putting together the "jigsaw puzzle."

The fragments were connected using plastic ties so they could be quickly broken down for further study, Harris said. The team also studied markings on the canoe, possibly made by tools or fire.

Harris and the students sent several recommendations to the Parris Island Museum about the vessel's display. The canoe will be exhibited to make it appear as it did almost 600 years ago. It will be embedded in sculpted, dark-brown foam to make it look as if it is in a marsh, and marsh grass will be added around it, according to a news release from the museum.

The canoe will be assembled in the exhibit Tuesday, museum officer George Hijar said.