

STUDY TITLE: Shipwreck Research in the New Orleans Notarial Archives

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SPONSORING OCS REGION: Gulf of Mexico

APPLICABLE PLANNING AREA: Gulfwide

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BACKGROUND: For 20 years, the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement (BOEMRE; formerly Minerals Management Service) has required cultural resources assessments for oil and gas leases in the northern Gulf of Mexico. Since the 1970s, such studies (Coastal Environments, Inc. 1977, Garrison et al. 1989, and Pearson et al. 2003) have resulted in an in-house database containing over 3,000 entries. Despite this research, several historic shipwrecks have been identified in industry surveys on the Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) that appear to have no corresponding analog in the BOEMRE database. It was long believed that these vessels were simply lost to the historical record and the documentation on the event of their loss was no longer extant. It now appears; however, that previous researchers contracted by BOEMRE overlooked a potentially rich source of information at the New Orleans Notarial Archive (NONA), which houses the City of New Orleans notary records from 1733 to 1970. A large number of these documents relate to bills of sale, wills, and property inheritance matters; however, among the documents are also sea protests. This archival source of information promises to contain a wealth of previously unknown data about historic shipwrecks in the Gulf of Mexico.

OBJECTIVES: (1) To update and expand BOEMRE's existing GOM shipwreck database by examining primary sources (i.e sea protest) housed at the NONA for shipwreck information; and (2) To determine the shipwreck locations in the updated shipwreck database.

DESCRIPTION: The study area consists of the entire Gulf of Mexico (GOM). The study encompassed two principal tasks. Task 1 involved archival research to collect

information to expand the shipwreck data collected in the 1989 and 2003 studies. Task 2 involved the analysis of collected data, the development of a revised model of shipwreck occurrences in the GOM, and the recommendation of further research and study of GOM shipwrecks. As part of Task 2, all of the information on shipwrecks collected during Task 1 was entered into a relational database (Microsoft Access) and incorporated into a GIS program (ArcView) that will serve as a tool for BOEMRE personnel for the continued assessment and monitoring of shipwreck data in the GOM.

SIGNIFICANT CONCLUSIONS: A total of 122 documents notarized by twelve individual notaries were photocopied. Of that number, 85 protests (70 percent) were filed in response to vessel losses in the interior continental riverways, and 37 (30 percent) documented maritime losses. After consultation with BOEMRE staff, it was decided to include the riverine protests. Protest dates ranged from 1804-1900, the majority of which (118 or 96.6 percent) dated to the antebellum period (ca. 1812-1861). Three protests (2.4 percent) were recorded during the territorial period (ca. 1803-1812), and one (.008 percent) was recorded in 1900.

STUDY RESULTS: Precise locational information for vessel losses was difficult to obtain. Few documents contained latitude-longitude information; and those that did include latitude-longitude did not do so as reference for the wreck locations themselves. When possible, locational references such as lighthouses or islands were identified.

STUDY PRODUCTS: Rawls, J.K. and D. Bowker Lee. 2011. Shipwreck research in the New Orleans Notarial Archives. U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement, Gulf of Mexico OCS Region, New Orleans, LA. OCS Study BOEMRE 2011-040. 696 pp.