



## SOCIETY FOR AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

May 22, 2025

The Hon. Destin Hall  
Speaker of the House  
North Carolina General Assembly  
16 West Jones Street, Rm. 2304  
Raleigh, NC 27601-1096

Re: Proposal for “Establishing the Underwater Archaeology Hobby License” in North Carolina

Dear Speaker Hall,

The Society for American Archaeology (SAA) expresses its strong opposition to the proposed Underwater Archaeology Hobby License program in North Carolina, contained in Section 14.5 of the Senate version of the budget. The House counterpart omits this language. Such a program, if included in the final version of the legislation, would only result in degradation to North Carolina’s irreplaceable submerged archaeological resources and should thus be rejected by the state legislature.

The SAA is an international organization that, since its founding in 1934, has been dedicated to research about and interpretation and protection of the archaeological heritage of the Americas. With more than 6,000 members, the SAA represents professional and avocational archaeologists, archaeology students in colleges and universities, and archaeologists working at tribal agencies, museums, government agencies, and the private sector. The SAA has members throughout the United States, as well as in many nations around the world.

If enacted, the proposed license would allow both residents and nonresidents of North Carolina “to conduct non-commercial exploration of abandoned shipwrecks and the bottoms of the navigable waters of the State, and to recover by hand underwater archaeological artifacts to which the State has title under G.S. 121 22.” Under the language of the Senate bill, the state would be required to “relinquish title . . . to all underwater archaeological artifacts” brought to the surface by licensees. There are several severe problems with this plan.

First and foremost, archaeological sites—both above and below the water—are by definition nonrenewable historic resources that tell the stories of the peoples who came before us. If such

sites and the artifacts they contain are allowed to be unscientifically harvested for individual gain, their scientific and cultural information will be destroyed forever. Additionally, the experience of such wonderful sites will be lost for future visitors, history lovers, tourism, and generations of whom would have otherwise visited the sites to experience the connection with the past that such places offer when left intact.

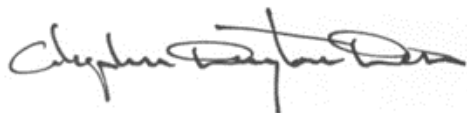
Second, underwater sites such as shipwrecks often have extremely complicated legal standings. Some wrecks in the state's jurisdiction have international parties claiming ownership. Others are owned by the US military. Certain examples may be covered by the Abandoned Shipwreck Act, but in such a situation North Carolina must demonstrate that the wreck is abandoned, and this has not occurred. In addition, the state has done little to demonstrate that it has possession of the title to the artifacts that it wishes to transfer to the hobbyists in the first place.

Third, it is not clear that any thought has been given as to how to prevent hobbyist collectors from extracting artifacts from Native American sites located in the state's navigable rivers. If this should occur, it could result in the looting of objects of cultural patrimony that are of critical importance to those tribes.

Fourth, similar experiments in other states have poor track records. In South Carolina, many submerged sites, including some never studied by professional archaeologists—have been ransacked by hobbyist collectors, to the cultural and scientific detriment of South Carolinians and the nation. Another program in Florida created in the late 1990s was short-lived. It was repealed due to safeguard provisions that proved to be unenforceable.

For these and other reasons, the SAA strongly urges the North Carolina state legislature to adopt the House position on this issue in the final budget agreement and reject the proposed underwater archaeology hobby license.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Christopher Dore". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Christopher" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Dore".

Christopher Dore  
President of the Society for American Archaeology

Cc: North Carolina House of Representatives