

GILLETTE CASTLE STATE PARK

East Haddam, Connecticut

Gillette Castle sits high on a bluff perched above the Connecticut River in bucolic East Haddam. It was the home to William Hooker Gillette, the popular Connecticut actor who was best known for his stage portrayal of Sherlock Holmes. Indeed, Gillette is credited with having popularized the image of Holmes with his curved smoking pipe. But it was not just the fieldstone castle that Gillette was known for locally; it was his “novel houseboat,” the *Aunt Polly*, which he commissioned in 1896. Described as “an Aquatic Freak,” the twin-screw flat bottom houseboat was comfortably outfitted. Gillette lived on the boat between 1901 and 1919, during which time he had his castle in East Haddam built. The steam yacht was originally approximately 100 feet long, and had a main cabin about 40 feet long, with four staterooms. In 1903 he had the houseboat remodeled and lengthened to 144 feet, and lived there comfortably for many years. In 1932, the *Aunt Polly*, which was no longer sea-worthy, succumbed to fire.



Part of the 144-acre estate of William Gillette is now a Connecticut State Park, and what remains of *Aunt Polly* lies along the shoreline of the Connecticut River far below the castle. In 2003, an inspection survey of the shipwreck was made. It was also at this time that the site of the *Aunt Polly*

was nominated by Historical Perspectives, Inc. (HPI) and designated as a Connecticut Archaeological Preserve. When the Connecticut River’s tide is at its lowest, over 100 feet of the hull is exposed, making it accessible to archaeologists. HPI assisted in a collaborative effort to visually inspect the exposed portion of the hull, as well as the completion of an underwater inspection of the obscured portion of the remains. Hull remains were photographed, measured, drawn to scale, and sampled. Intensive documentary research was completed, and HPI produced *His Beloved Aunt Polly*, a State Archaeological Preserve booklet that provides an historical overview of Gillette and his beloved houseboat.



Wood samples being taken by Connecticut State Archaeologist, Dr. Nick Bellantoni

