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# COOK-WITTER REPORT

Volume 22, Number 5

September 2007

## Illinois' Shipwrecked History

Lying under Illinois' waterways and Lake Michigan are hundreds, probably thousands, of pieces of Illinois history and archaeology. The majority of Illinoisans don't even know they exist or that state government is charged with protecting them. Yet these relics can tell us about the history of our waterways, lifestyles, and development, not to mention their own occasionally tragic tales of death.

These treasures are Illinois' underwater shipwrecks. Most are located on the one million acres of Lake Michigan bottoms the state owns. (Though some are in rivers, like an 1800s flatboat found seven years ago in the Ohio River near Olmstead, Illinois.)

No one knows exactly how many shipwrecks are in Illinois waters. Estimates range up to 3,000. "Most are vessels from the 1800s and would have been commercial or passenger vessels that sank because of storm, fire, collision or other mishap," says David Blanchette, spokesman for the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency

(IHPA), which oversees the state's efforts to protect shipwrecks. Many of the ships were traveling to or from Chicago, which was an important port during the state's early days. The wrecks range from sail to steam-powered ships, but also include 20th century vessels, like a WWI German submarine.

The Great Lakes' cold, fresh water has kept many of the wrecks remarkably intact. Some ships still have their wood hulls, cargo, anchors, and even rope.

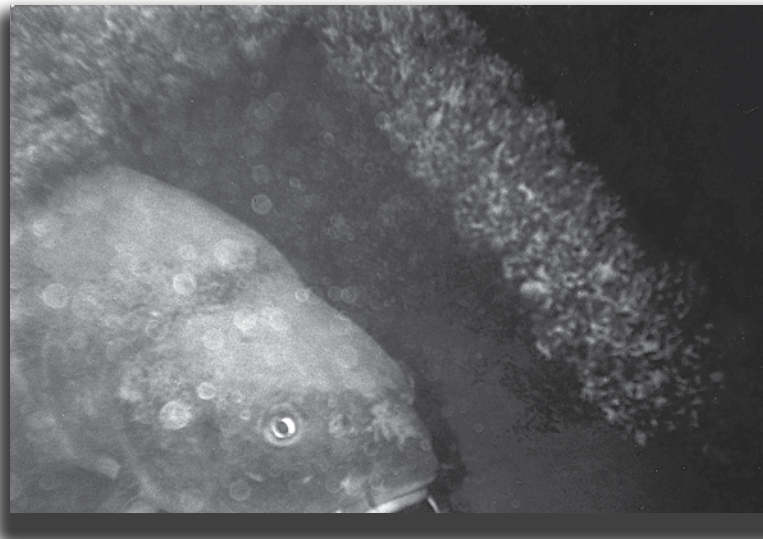
The mystery and history of these water-faring grand dames has been their blessing and their curse. Most divers merely want to visit the wrecks. A few go to great lengths to find lost ships; some hope to profit from them by retrieving their bounty or raising parts of the wreck. "Many estimate that there are thousands of ships...yet undiscovered," wrote Daniel Yoder in the 1992 "Illinois Shipwrecks," published by the Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant Program.

For a few decades, shipwreck souvenir hunting was a popular, legal pastime. The hunters' code was

the person who found a wreck was the only one entitled to take its artifacts -- and they did, say the ship's bell for the family room or its china for the mantel. "So much has been found and removed from the lakes' bottoms that one archaeologist was moved to comment that there is more stuff in divers' basements than in museums," Yoder wrote. But taking artifacts "removes the ability to confirm scientifically what was on the ship and perhaps even the ability to learn

something about the nature of the wreck event," says Bill Wheeler, Associate Director with the IHPA.

The situation was out of hand nationwide. Rampant looting and fights over shipwrecks' ownership led Congress to pass the Abandoned Shipwreck Act, which the president signed in 1989. The law gives states ownership of "abandoned, historic" wrecks "embedded" in their lands in an effort to help them challenge looters and protect shipwrecks, according to Wheeler.



*This giant catfish was named "Rex," by photographer David Blanchette (IHPA spokesman), because "I found him lurking around the Seabird wreck. I don't know how long he was, but the metal pole in the photo was about the size of my wrist."*

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*This is the windlass of the ill-fated 1860 steamer, the Lady Elgin. A windlass lifts a ship's anchor and chain. Photo by Claire Gadbois, Underwater Archaeological Society of Chicago.*

Illinois protects its shipwrecks in a variety of ways, and with very little funding (from a stagnant pool of federal money that has to fund several programs), he says. The state offers financial rewards for identifying looters, it has helped define wrecks' ownership through lawsuits, and it regulates who can disturb or remove items from a wreck through a permit system (disturbing a wreck is illegal, so permits are typically given only to scientists researching a wreck).

In addition, the IHPA works with the Underwater Archaeological Society of Chicago ([www.uaschicago.org](http://www.uaschicago.org)), a nonprofit group of preservation-minded volunteer divers, which researches and protects wrecks. The state helped defray the group's costs for mapping and illustrating shipwrecks, and for attaching permanent buoys to them "When you dive on something frequently, it's helpful to have a semi-permanent buoy on it so every time you go out there you don't have to drag the bottom and hook onto the wreck to set up a buoy... It also lets divers know that they haven't discovered anything, that we know the wreck's there," Wheeler says.

Shipwrecks are "a photograph of a time gone by," says David Blanchette. Civil War era muskets, 1800s tools and cargo,

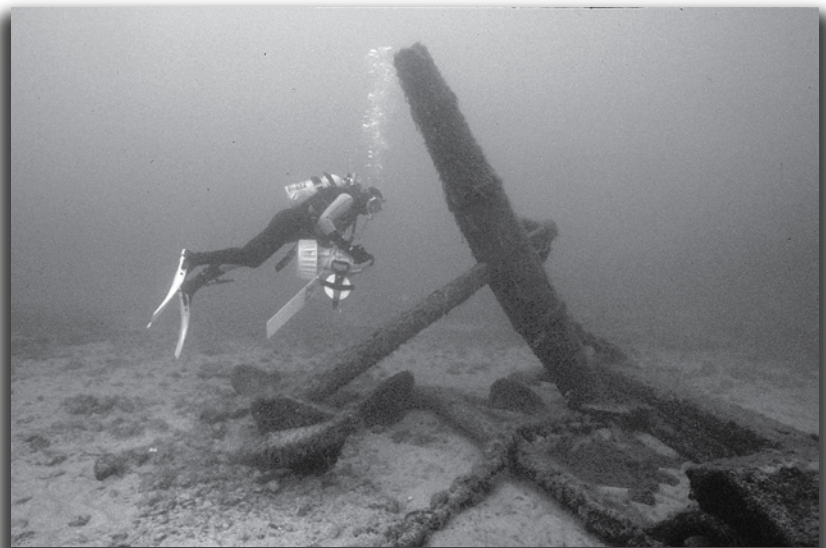
and even passengers' possessions have been found on Illinois wrecks.

Protecting them is important because "this is our heritage," says Liz Jurkacek, a member of the Underwater Archaeological Society of Chicago. She's explored nine Illinois shipwrecks and underwater sites.

For instance, "many people don't know that Christmas trees were shipped down from Michigan and Wisconsin to (Chicago) during the 1870s and on..." she says. The reason there are Christmas trees in our homes "is due in part to the ship captains who saw this as a lucrative cargo and were willing to transport them to Chicagoans, who had no other method of receiving trees in time for Christmas."

One of these ships, the Rouse Simmons, nicknamed "The Christmas Schooner," sank in 1912 in typically bad winter weather on its trip to Chicago. Supposedly, its Christmas trees are still in its cargo hold.

"Shipwrecks tell us about our growth and development during the last two centuries," Jurkacek says. "They tell us where we come from and who we were 100 or more years ago."



*The Lady Elgin's anchor. "The way a ship's wreckage is strewn gives an idea of how the ship sank," says David Blanchette, IHPA. "In the case of the Lady Elgin it became apparent after archaeologists looked at it, that as it was going down, the anchor chain wrapped around a large underwater boulder and that helped separate the front part of the ship from another part that was found some distance away." Photo by Joe Oliver, Underwater Archaeological Society of Chicago.*

# Diving Illinois

“Diving the Great Lakes is not the same as diving Aruba,” says David Blanchette, half-jokingly. Blanchette is spokesman for the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, which protects Illinois’ shipwrecks, most of which are at the bottom of southern Lake Michigan.

Fourteen years ago, Blanchette, a certified diver, dove down to two shipwrecks near Chicago to check on them for the agency. (At that time he was IHPA’s only certified diver.) The two wrecks were the Lady Elgin, a sidewheel steamer that sank in 1860 after a crash and is now privately owned, and the Seabird, another sidewheel steamer that sank in 1868 after a fire. He said diving Lake Michigan is far different than diving the Caribbean.

“The water is considerably colder, the visibility is considerably lower,” he says. “The Lady Elgin was a little more than 60 feet deep. The first 40 feet I couldn’t see my hand in front of my face because the water was green or brown.

“You follow a rope on the way down and stay close to your diving buddy. Then you reach a point where everything is clear and you see this vast expanse of sand, like an undersea desert, with the odd rock or boulder strewn around. As your vision comes into focus, you see pieces of the shipwreck and in the case of the Lady Elgin, the most dynamic piece was an anchor that had embedded itself upright on the lake bottom.

“You swim around and see the various pieces of wreckage, some you can identify, like the boiler and windlass, others you have no idea about.”

Lake Michigan shipwrecks lure many divers, such as Liz Jurkacek. She’s been a diver for 15 years and is member of the Underwater Archaeological Society of Chicago, which helps preserve shipwrecks. She’s dived down to seven Illinois wrecks and an ancient submerged forest, among other sites in southern Lake Michigan. An area geologist discovered the forest and had UASC members, including Jurkacek, take core samples from the trees. “Carbon dating put the trees at 8,000 years old,” she says.

“Studying shipwrecks and their history brings me back to a time when this country was just developing,” Jurkacek says.

“Shipwrecks tell tales of bravery, loss, discovery, and inventions... Each ship has a story. It covers why it was on the lake, who sailed on it, what time period in Chicago history it sailed, the impact of the vessel’s loss, what the crew was like, and what the

cargo was. All of these questions give us a glimpse of Illinois.”

In order to understand a wreck and its history, Jurkacek and other UASC divers carefully document it. They take digital images of the wreck’s parts and set up a grid system on the site, much like archaeologists do to historic sites on land. “Our divers take measurements and draw on mylar paper attached to slates.” This provides an “accurate inventory of the wreck and the components on it... We then create slates which show where the vessel lays and where the component parts are relative to the wreck.”

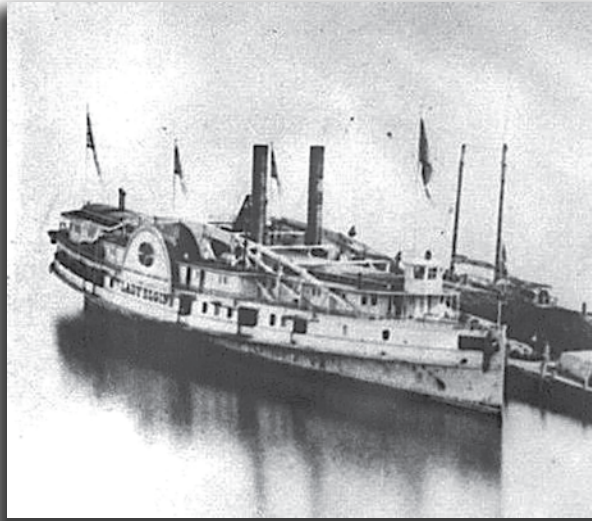
UASC divers do a lot of work above ground, too, at libraries and archives. “We can spend months, even years, verifying the ship’s name,” Jurkacek says. They look “far and wide” for photos of the vessel and information about the ship’s accident. “Eventually a unique story comes to life.

“Our ultimate goal is to create a written ‘snapshot’ that records the salient details regarding the vessel, the crew, the cargo and the time period the vessel sailed. We also try to produce digital and video programs so we can take our work on the road.”

Scuba divers can visit Illinois’ state-owned shipwrecks, as long as they don’t disturb the wreck or remove anything. Several dive shops in northern Illinois and tour companies offer shipwreck diving trips. If a wreck, like the Lady Elgin, is privately owned, the State cannot give divers permission to access it. In those cases, divers need to ask the shipwreck’s private owner for permission and deal directly with them.



# The Lady Elgin



*In the early morning hours of September 8, 1860, the steamer Lady Elgin was struck by a Chicago-bound schooner and sank, about ten miles away from Winnetka, Illinois, killing at least 430. Parts of the wreck floated quite a while after the accident and became water hazards for ships. Numerous books and even a song were written about this devastating maritime disaster.*

Some shipwrecks in Illinois waters have interesting stories, one is the Lady Elgin. This sidewheel steamer collided with another ship and sank in 1860, while returning hundreds of Milwaukee travelers home after they heard Stephen Douglas speak at a political rally in Chicago. Seminary students near Evanston tried valiantly, though not always successfully, to save people who made it near shore. Still, at least 430 died (bodies washed ashore for days), making this the second worst disaster on the Great Lakes.

However, the State of Illinois does not own the Lady Elgin. By federal law, states own shipwrecks unless someone else legally proves ownership. In 1989, after looking for her for many years, salvager Harry Zych found the Lady Elgin in waters five miles out from Highland Park. He fought the state for ownership. A ten-year court battle ensued and ended with the Illinois Supreme Court declaring Zych the owner. As a result, the state has neither legal jurisdiction nor responsibility of the wreck or its artifacts.

## Veto Session

The Illinois House of Representatives and the Illinois Senate are currently scheduled to meet on the following days for Veto Session:

**Tuesday - October 2**  
**Wednesday - October 3**  
**Thursday - October 4**  
**Wednesday - October 10**  
**Thursday - October 11**  
**Friday - October 12.**

*Check the House and Senate schedules online (at [www.ilga.gov](http://www.ilga.gov)) for any changes to the chambers' calendars.*

## Transitions

**Governor Rod Blagojevich's** former special assistant, **Seth Webb**, left state government in July to head a New York City marketing agency named Civic Entertainment Group.

On September 14, **Milt Sees** became the official Illinois Department of Transportation Secretary by gubernatorial action. He had been the acting secretary.

