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Shipwrecks Are Found In The Finger Lakes, Too

SENECA LAKE, June 20 -- "Endurance Shipwreck Found!" blazed the headlines a couple of months ago. This was followed by the discovery of a civil war era ship near Norfolk and a Spanish Galleon near Columbia.

The wreck of the Endurance told of incredible bravery and steadfastness of the crew and of the inspiring leadership of the mission by Sir Ernest Shackleton.

Shipwrecks all have a back story. In the Finger Lakes of New York State, while the headlines may not be quite as dramatic, the stories often are. These lakes which can sport unpredictable and sudden weather events, surprising boaters with the ferocity of shifting, blasting winds and frequent lightning. In the 1800's, before weather alerts, maps, radio or Al Roker, canal boats were towed the length of the lakes. On Seneca Lake, three different canals joined the lake and all routes led to the Erie. In Watkins Glen, there was access from the Chemung Canal, in Dresden the Crooked Lake Canal came in from Keuka Lake and in Geneva was the Cayuga-Seneca canal which joined with the famed Erie in Montezuma.

These canals were the super-highways of the 19th century and during the heyday of New York's canal era, there were hundreds of boats carrying coal, agricultural products, manufactured goods and people crisscrossing the state and traveling the lakes. When the storms came up, there was the drama of broaching boats, collapsed cargo covers, snapping lines and overtaking tows. Captains sometimes had no choice but to cut boats loose to save themselves and as much cargo as possible.

The stories of these losses are all but lost – until the wrecks of the boats are discovered.

A team with the Finger Lakes Boating Museum has spent the month of June slowly scanning Seneca Lake with a high-tech sonar device, completing a mapping project begun in 2019. The team says the mapping of the lake is the first done since the lead-line survey of 1870 and the most complete ever. The sonar maps depths of over 600' and as the bathymetry (think topography, but under-water) of the lake comes up on the computer screens, so does the outline of old canal boats.

In 2021, the team confirmed a 2019 discovery to be that of a canal packet boat. According to lead investigator Art Cohn, this is the first (and so far the only) actual canal boat known to still exist. “There were hundreds of these boats which traveled canals throughout the state and the lakes,” says Cohn, a career nautical archaeologist. “This one is particularly exciting in that it is nearly intact, it has dishware on the shelves and a wood stove bolted to the floor – in over 200’ of water.”

This year, the team has discovered over 100 targets suspected to be that of canal boats on the lake’s bottom. Further research, with other sonar devices, remotely operated vehicles equipped with cameras (ROV’s) and perhaps even divers will be required to confirm the wrecks and discover more of each one’s unique story.

The team will be turning all their research over to the state agencies responsible for the management of the wrecks. They will also be putting together displays and exhibits for the Finger Lakes Boating museum and other historical societies and venues.

“Our goal is to tell the story, to help in the understanding of history and in turn, enhance the experience of visitors and residents in the Finger Lakes area. New York State has an amazing maritime history which needs to be told in every way possible, from Native American transportation to European discovery to wartime marine battles to the water routes as a driving economic force. The story is fascinating and the more we learn of our history, the better informed we are for our future,” adds Cohn.

The team, onboard a high-tech research vessel called **David Folger**, will finish on the lake toward the end of June. While the boat has been chartered for the month from Middlebury College, its home is on Lake Champlain where the college uses it for a variety of lake studies, environmental, geology and biology programs for students and faculty research.

The Seneca Lake project is funded in part by the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, NYS office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, Institute of Nautical Archaeology, NY SeaGrant, Cassell Corporation, Sessler Corporation and Seneca Lake Resorts, Stiver’s Marina, Finger Lakes Boating Museum, private corporations, and individuals.

The crew onboard includes Art Cohn, lead investigator, nautical archaeologist and canal historian, Tom Manley, professor-Emeritus of Middlebury College (geology), Erin Hogan, Sonar Tech and Middlebury College alumnus, Captain Rich Furbush, captain of various Lake Champlain research vessels for more than 40 years and other boats throughout the Northeast and Tom Beardsley, captain of canal boats and canal historian for more than 40 years.

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Photo opportunities and interviews are available but must be scheduled as the boat is engaged in an intensive on-lake schedule.

Please call the boat (Tom Beardsley, 315-263-8906) to schedule.



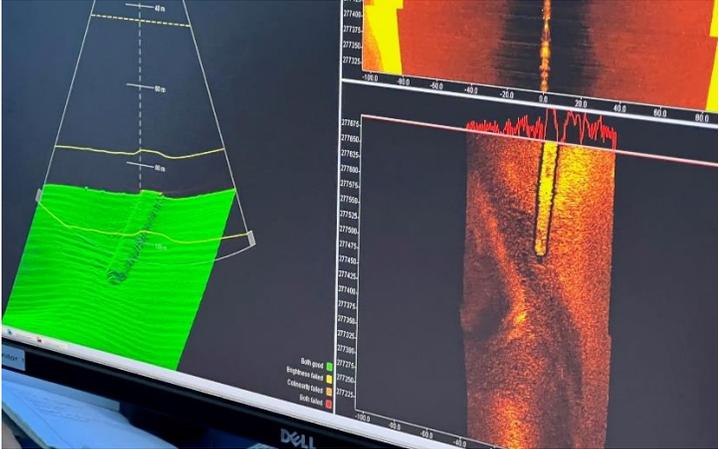
Computer imaging from sonar data collected on Seneca Lake, 2019



Art Cohn, Nautical Archaeologist and Lead Investigator of Seneca Lake Discovery Program



Middlebury College's Research Vessel David Folger, chartered for the project, pictured on Seneca Lake, June, 2022



Sonar discovery of a Seneca Lake wreck, June 6, 2022