



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

FURTHER INFORMATION:

Tom Beardsley
Onboard **David Folger**
315-263-8906
beardsleytom@att.net
or Andrew Tompkins
Finger Lakes Boating Museum
607-569-2222
info@flbm.org

Seneca Lake's Deep Treasures Reveal History of Life and Land

SENECA LAKE, June 13 -- The word "Shipwreck" might evoke visions of swashbuckling sailors, eye-patches, peg legs and chests of gold, beckoning explorers armed with shovels and dreams.

Researchers on Seneca Lake this year have no shovels, dreams of gold or three-cornered hats. Engaged in a month-long, dual-purpose mission on Seneca, the deepest of the Finger Lakes in Central New York, they say they are searching for elements of history which will tell us even more about the forces which drove New York State to its status as an economic and social driver in the 1800's.

The mission behind this effort results in finding the remains of cargo boats and barges, lake steamboats, cross-lake ferries, and canal packet boats. It's also a search for additional environmental understanding of the lakes which could help find answers to a developing world-wide freshwater crisis.

The lead investigator and organizer for this project is Art Cohn, a noted historian of the New York Canal system and well-known nautical archaeologist. Cohn and his team found the more than 40 years ago at the bottom of Lake Champlain, proving a theory that many canal boats which also operated on the lakes had masts and sails. "These sailing canal boats were primarily used in the first few decades of the canal eras, from the opening of the system in the 1820's and then less and less through the American Civil War." After that, steamboats would have been used to tow fleets of canal barges up and down the lakes. "We think there may be other places these sailing canal boats were used, maybe in the Finger Lakes, but that has yet to be determined," Cohn adds.

"The discoveries we're making tell a story. The story is one of economy, industry, and life in the area as well as life on the boats. It's the story of how New York State made its mark on history, leading the country in development and very importantly, societal change. Just a few days ago was Harriet Tubman's 200th birthday. Some of what we're looking for are clues to how the boats on this lake and in the canal might have been used as a part of the Underground Railroad," says Cohn.

The research team is mapping the bottom of Seneca Lake with a “Multi-Beam Sonar” which provides computer images of the lake bottom’s ridges, slopes, cliffs, hills, and valleys. It also provides the images of the shipwrecks. The project began in 2018 and in future years is expected to expand into Keuka and Cayuga Lakes. These three lakes were all connected to the NYS Canal System in the 1800’s. Only Seneca and Cayuga lakes continue to be and that’s how Cohn’s research platform, the **David Folger**, is able to be engaged in the study.

“**David Folger**” is a high-tech aluminum catamaran, loaded with computers and other equipment. Owned by Middlebury College of Vermont, this could be the vessel and the institution that provides many answers to the fresh-water crisis looming in the future through better understanding of currents, temperature variances, thermoclines and resultant algal blooms,” Cohn says.

Cohn’s team confirmed just last year a vessel found at the bottom of the lake in the 2019 study is an actual canal packet boat. Cohn says this is the only actual packet boat known to exist in any form. “There are probably more, either in this or other lakes, or buried in the mud on the canal. We just haven’t found them, yet. Packet boats were most popular prior to the civil war after which railroads took over for human transport. In their short 50-year life-span, they became an indispensable means of moving people across the state. Because this was mostly before film, these boats exist mostly as images in paintings, in advertisements and descriptions of traveler’s journals.”

Last year this wreck was extensively photographed with an underwater ROV. It shows dishware on the shelves and a woodstove on the deck, signs, according to Cohn, that the boat was lost in a storm, not simply abandoned. Further study is expected to add a treasure-trove of additional information about how these “buses” were designed to accomplish their function.

The New York State Canal System is currently celebrating an eight-year bicentennial, from the groundbreaking (July 4, 1817) to the canal’s official opening (October 26, 1825). The Seneca Lake Team expects to be presenting its findings in interpretive displays at the Finger Lakes Boating Museum and other museums and historical societies in the Finger Lakes area.

The mapping of the lake is the first complete mapping ever, showing previously unknown underwater structures, slides, reefs and more which will be turned over to environmental researchers and the NYS DEC.

The crew of the **Folger** will continue their survey on the lake through June, working first out of Sampson State Park Marina and then out of Watkins Glen.

##

Hi-res pictures are available of:

*Research vessel **David Folger***

***Art Cohn** (and other team members)*

Multi-beam maps

Underwater shots of the packet boat