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Searching For Great Lakes Shipwrecks

by Brendon Baillod

For the last 200 years, ships have regularly gone down on the Great Lakes. I would conservatively estimate that about 8000 commercial ships have been lost and of those, perhaps 2000 foundered in open water. That is to say, they probably have physical remains which still lie on the bottom of the Lakes and have been or could be found. Of these, about 1000 have been located, leaving about 1000 historic Great Lakes shipwrecks that

have yet to be found. It is consequently, not surprising that wreck hunting has become an avocation among many Great Lakes divers and historians. Discovery of an historic shipwreck on the Lakes provides a number of exciting opportunities. Among these are the chance to see a time capsule of daily life in the 1800s, the opportunity to study the construction techniques and handiwork of a bygone era, the ability to solve the mystery of a lost ship and the chance to document a new historic site. Unfortunately, for some,

the finding of a new wreck also represents an opportunity for souvenir collecting, financial gain and personal glory. This destructive minority has given rise to the adage "a wreck found is a wreck lost" among historians and has contributed to an unfortunate negative perception of avocational wreck hunting.

Despite these facts there remain a substantial number of historically important undiscovered wrecks as well as a large number of people

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WUAA Strategy Session

Thirteen members attended a "Reassessment Workshop" for the association on Saturday, April 19, 2005 at the Historical Society in Madison. Bob Korth started the meeting by introducing Ken Wiesner as our facilitator. Ken started with an organizational re-evaluation exercise.

Why is there a WUAA?

Members talked about some things WUAA has accomplished:

Projects

- Bullhead Point site
- Leathem Smith site
- Lac De Flambeau site
- Lumberman
- Niagara
- Selah Chamberlain

Publications and Education

- Published books
- Built data bases of information
- Public educational programs
- Archeological methods training
- Publish newsletter
- U/W archeology survey support
- WUAA Website

What does WUAA want to accomplish?

Ken collected various outcomes from the members, then the members ranked the goals by vote as to highest importance (all are important).

Most important

Create interest and awareness of maritime history in divers and non-divers alike.

Second importance

Capture and record maritime history for future understanding.

Third importance

Bring divers with similar interests together.
Maintain a grassroots organization for fostering the education and awareness of submerged cultural resources, maritime history and preservation of underwater archeology sites.

Fourth importance

Cooperation between WUAA and other organizations such as:

- Door County Museum
- Milwaukee Museum
- Wisconsin Maritime Museum

Lac De Flambeau Tribe Museum
State Historical Society
University of East Carolina
Texas A & M University
University of Wisconsin Seagrant

Mission Statement

It was found that only minor verbiage changes would be needed to update the statement. The overall mission remains the same as when the association was founded.

What are the strategies or tasks involved when working on projects?

These are the actions to work toward the outcomes listed above.

Most important

Increase the awareness, interest and understanding of underwater archeology and maritime history.

Educate communities as to their maritime history and local assets.

Promote WUAA for future growth in membership.

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Wisconsin's Underwater Heritage is published quarterly by the Wisconsin Underwater Archeology Association, a nonprofit association of individuals and organizations interested in studying and preserving the underwater cultural resources and historical sites of Wisconsin.

In addition to publishing this newsletter, the Association also holds semiannual meetings

and provides support to members' research and publication projects. Annual membership dues are \$15. For membership information write to the postal or email address below.

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WUAA Action Planning Meeting

An Action Planning meeting was held on May 7, 2005 at the State Historical Society in Madison. Eight members were in attendance. The following items were discussed.

1. Dick Boyd summarized the April 9th meeting.
2. A: Hank W. explained WUAA liabilities with projects. The non-stock corporate status protects liabilities of officers and members. This does not mean that individuals could not sue just as any individual could be sued for anything happening on their property or for what they do.
B: Russel L. will contact a member of the Chicago group to see how they handle liability.
- C: Hank W. and Dick B. will come up with recommendations dealing with:
 - Waiver
 - Experience for project
 - Medical background
3. Russel L. will ask Steve W. to forward to Dick B. and Brendon B. our newsletter mailing list so they can update the businesses on the list.
4. Brendon B. will chair a committee for planning workshop and meeting activities. Dick B. will assist. Anyone else willing to assist please contact Brendon at brendon@baillod.com.
5. It was decided not to become a nonprofit organization for IRS purposes at this time but to stay as a non-stock corporation.
6. Danny A. will contact Colin Z. about WUAA developing additional content on our web site. David N. and Brendon B. will assist. Anyone else interested in helping please contact Danny A. at djaerts@wisc.edu.
7. It was decided to pass on offering different levels of membership.
8. A: Bob Korth, from last meeting, will edit the Bylaws with a

purpose statement to include: "WUAA exists for preservation and conservation".

B: Hank W. will check over bylaws and articles for possible revision. Danny A. will locate WUAA articles.

C: It was brought up about adding Marine History to our name. Nothing was decided.

9. Russel L. will develop an inventory of WUAA past and present work, documentation, information and any physical materials.
10. Dick Boyd, Brendon B., Greg K. and Kimm S. will investigate possibility of an underwater survey course at the Ghost Ship Festival.
11. The promotion of WUAA with posters was postponed.
12. Dick B., Bob K. and Greg K. will develop a speaker bureau program.
13. Russel L. will work on officers job descriptions.
14. Russel L. and David N. will develop an information sheet for individuals who find a wreck and wish to gather information on it.
15. There is election of officers at the next meeting. The following members present were willing to continue in present position:
president: Russel Leitz
vice-president: Hank Whipple
board member: Dick Boyd
Other members need to be contacted about continuing or becoming secretary, treasurer and board members.
16. Next action planning meeting will be on August 6, 2005 at 9:00 am at the State Historical Society in Madison.

Great Lakes Underwater Archeology Conference

The Wisconsin Underwater Archeology Association (WUAA) will hold its First Annual Great Lakes Underwater Archeology Conference this October at Milwaukee in conjunction with the WUAA Fall Meeting.

The Conference will be a one day event that will feature an Underwater Archeology Workshop, Panel Discussions and Documentary Presentations concerning Great Lakes and Inland Underwater Archeology. The event will benefit the Wisconsin Underwater Archeology Association, a non-profit organization. For information about date, place and tickets, please visit www.wuaa.org.

Searching For Great Lake Shipwrecks

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enthusiastic about finding them. The intent of this short article is to suggest some logical pointers for locating undiscovered shipwrecks on the Great Lakes using historical records as well as common sense. I hope to explore a few general guidelines and suggestions for finding historic wrecks based on personal experience as well as the experiences of others.

A central concept that is important to our discussion is that of a search grid. A search grid can be thought of as a geographical area in which the remains of the vessel in question are believed to lie. The result of any serious historical research aimed at finding an undiscovered wreck is usually a search grid. At its simplest, a search grid is a box drawn on a map that shows a best guess as to a lost vessel's location. It is usually based on an analysis of many factors, but always represents an estimate.

A search grid is extremely important given the time and money involved in staging a search. Experienced wreck hunters are all

too aware of the short search windows afforded by weather conditions on the Lakes. Added to this limitation are the money and effort required to bring together the necessary equipment and personnel. Wrangling a boat, side scan sonar, magnetometer, ROV, drop camera and crew is in itself, a daunting task. Coupled with the above barriers to entry, arranging time away from family, work commitments and opportunity cost keep most people from ever doing serious wreck hunting. The cost for a weekend of searching can range well into the thousands of dollars and a bad weather forecast can scrap an expedition that took weeks and even months to plan. As such, few people will venture out on a wreck hunting expedition without a VERY good search grid in mind and lots of research under their belt. There are those who are fortunate to live near urban ports or on major shipping lanes where the wreck density is high. In these areas it is still possible to simply "mow the lawn" in

hope of running something over and make an occasional find. However, in most parts of the Lakes, it's a good idea to have a target or targets in mind and a good deal of preparation under one's belt.

When laying out a Great Lakes shipwreck search grid there are ten parameters that should always be factored into the mix. They may be derived from historical data, present observations, logical deduction, outright speculation or a combination thereof. The following examples are intended to show the use of each parameter based on real-world cases.

Last Known Position

Last Known Position (LKP) is one of the most important concepts in search theory and is usually the first factor considered. For our purposes, LKP is equivalent to the point at which the vessel was definitively last known to be. LKP is the base point from which all other analyses are made. In historical shipwreck research, LKP is usually a very rough figure. Depending on the technology of the day and the reporter's frame of reference, a given

Archival reference books: Beeson's Marine Directory 1891. Barnet's Coast Pilot 1868. Thompson's Coast Pilot 1869. Polk's Marine Directory 1884. author's collection



LKP may have significant error. A good case study in this regard is the big carferry *Pere Marquette 18*. She went down in plain view of two other carferries in 1910 on Lake Michigan. She is commonly reported to have gone down 19 miles East of Sheboygan. Given the implied accuracy of her position (19 miles, not 20 miles), we might assume that she'd be easy to locate. However, contextual information suggests that her LKP is probably not known with the accuracy implied. The run of the *PM18* was not her usual (she had been bound Ludington to Milwaukee, but turned to run for Sheboygan) and her master likely had only a general idea of his distance from Sheboygan. Likewise, the technology of the day did not allow for accurate position estimation. In 1910 position was still largely estimated by speed over time on a given course. As such, the *PM18*'s LKP is likely only known to within +/- 5 miles N/S and E/W. A plot of her course using modern techniques based on the reports of survivors strongly suggests that she is significantly south of Sheboygan, and not directly east as commonly stated. Beginning in the 1920s and 30s, Radio Direction Finders were placed in many Great Lakes vessels enabling them to more accurately fix a position, but few captains could be expected to triangulate a position if their ship was in peril. Consequently, even the resting place of the freighter *Jennifer*, lost 30 miles NE of Milwaukee in 1974, can only be gridded to within +/- 5 miles based on the LKP given in her USCG investigation file. Her crew was rescued by helicopter as another vessel stood by, but locational technology was still relatively primitive even in the 1970s. Following the inception of LORAN-C on the Lakes in 1980, pin-pointing locations over water become much more realistic.

Known or Probable Course

Known or probable course is also an important concept in search grid construction. In the case of many wrecks, we know the course the vessel was on with great accuracy. In other cases, it can be strongly inferred. Vessels on the Lakes lost money when they were overdue and masters were particularly conscious of taking the shortest route between two points. Navigational charts and "Coast Pilot" books for the Lakes have shown the courses for these routes since the 1850s and most captains didn't deviate significantly from them without good reason. As such, if we know where a vessel was bound to and from, we can often find the given courses for the day and plot the ship's path with relative accuracy. A good case in point is the steamer *L.R. Doty*, lost in 1898 on Lake Michigan. She was bound from South Chicago for the Straits of Mackinac by way of the Manitou Passage and would have certainly used the conventional steamer lanes of the day, which called for a course line to Point Betsie. As such, we have a relatively good idea of her course. We have an LKP from her consort, the *Olive Jeanette*, whom she cut loose just north of Milwaukee. Based on the steamer lanes of the day and the position reported by the *Olive Jeanette*, we can plot a fairly pragmatic search grid, placing the *Doty* about midlake off Milwaukee.

Time/Distance Analysis

Time/distance analysis is used to predict where a vessel might have been at a given time, given a particular speed. This concept has been used to grid vessels that went missing in storms. It is also necessary when plotting a grid for the *Pere Marquette 18*. We know the *PM18* traveled at about 12 mph under good conditions. She left Ludington at almost exactly midnight. At 3:30 her flooded flicker was discovered

and she was turned due south for 40 minutes to keep the waves from a following sea off her stern. She was then turned due west and ran until she foundered at 7:30 am, her speed decaying as she went. Based on the above data, one can make some logical inferences about the resting place of the *PM18*. Time/distance analysis is seldom used as a sole determinant. It is usually employed in conjunction with other data, including debris reports and wind/wave conditions.

Debris Scatter

Nearly all vessels that went down on the Lakes left some kind of debris. This is particularly true of the wooden vessels of the 19th century. In most cases the newspaper reports of the day related a good deal of information about the location of debris and bodies from shipwrecks. In many cases, wrecks have been located through careful analysis of debris patterns in conjunction with knowledge about current and weather patterns. A good example is the wreck of the *Kamloops* on Lake Superior. A good deal of debris from the wreck had washed up on the beach at Twelve O'Clock Point on Isle Royale. More importantly, the mate and stewardess had made it to shore alive in a fierce blizzard with temperatures of 20 below zero. The mate was found frozen in an upright position sitting on a log and the stewardess was found in a make-shift lean-to near the remains of a small fire. Clearly, the wreck had to be within a few miles at most of the ill-fated survivors. The location and condition of the bodies was well known, but it wasn't until 50 years after the accident that researchers deducted her location from these obvious clues. The wreck was indeed found within a few hundred yards of the location of the crews' bodies.

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Another case in Point is the *L.R. Doty* disappearance in 1898. She was last seen about midlake, just north of Milwaukee. Forty hours later, her debris was found 25 miles off Kenosha. Wind direction and intensity during the storm that sank her are well known. Given her LKP, the location of her debris, the wind direction and the elapsed time, we can make some substantive predic-

tions about her final resting place.

Weather, Wind and Waves

Weather, wind and wave conditions are important parameters to consider in conjunction with time/distance analysis. These factors have a great effect on the reliability of sighting reports, distance traveled over time and probable point of foundering. An important fact to consider in analyzing any Great Lakes ship-

wreck is the dominant wind pattern. On the Lakes, the wind moves from west to east over 80% of the time. Wind out of an easterly direction is quite rare on the Lakes. However, to know the specific direction and velocity of wind during an historical wreck, it is best to consult archival news accounts. A very fortunate instance of unusual wind conditions on the Lakes occurred during the *Lady Elgin* disaster. On September 8, 1860, the *Lady Elgin* was struck by the schooner *Augusta*, about 8 miles off Winnetka, IL. She broke up as she went down, casting over 600 people in the Lake. Had the wind followed its customary pattern, nearly all of them would have surely died. However, a rare north-east wind drove the *Elgin's* wreckage toward shore where some 160 people were saved. Sadly, at least 450 people died in the surf between Evanston and Winnetka. When the *Lady Elgin* was found, she had been driven exactly as one would have expected, given the wind and waves at the time. She was found just 3 miles from shore and considerably south of the point of the collision. In fact, one can draw a straight line in the direction of the wind between the point where the *Elgin's* stern had come ashore and the point where the wreck was discovered.

Visibility

The Visibility when a ship foundered is often very important in making an accurate analysis. Any locational references given to or from the ship should be filtered considering this criterion. If a vessel went down at night, any distance or identification information gleaned from physical observation must be given a significant margin of error. Likewise, any observations made in towering seas,

Archival news clip of L.R. Doty loss with illustration. author's collection



fog, haze, smoke, etc. must be given a wide berth. In December of 1864, the brig *Mahoning* was reported to have foundered "nearly opposite the Ulao Pier." However, the brig went down at night in rain and sleet. They could probably see the light on the end of the Ulao Pier, but few other light sources would have existed along the shore to show its contour and distance. Not surprisingly, the *Mahoning's* remains proved to be significantly north of the position given in the first hand reports.

Current

Often overlooked on the Lakes, is the effect of current. The Lakes all rotate in a known specific direction, and general maps of Lake currents have been made. In the absence of opposing wind and waves, it is possible to predict the direction that current will carry an object on the Lakes. All three of the western lakes have a pronounced counter-clockwise rotation, which is more noticeable near shore. Islands and peninsulas also effect the direction and intensity of the currents. Many local currents are particularly well known and hazardous on the Lakes. The Keweenaw Current on Lake Superior is an unusually shallow, fast moving current and was responsible for the loss of the Coast Guard Cutter *Mesquite* in 1989. The vessel was doing precision maneuvers at night and did not compensate for the dramatic current, which laid her on a reef. Likewise, many of the islands in northern Lake Michigan have erratic and strong surrounding currents. These currents must be taken into consideration for any debris scatter analysis.

Depth of Water

The depth of water is an important factor to consider from a number of perspectives. In the case of the *Pere Marquette 18*, a foundering depth of 400 ft was reported at the time of

her loss. Given the era of her foundering, the presence of other company vessels at the site and subsequent speculation about raising her, the depth of 400 ft may well have resulted from a lead line sounding at the site. The depth also fits well with her search grid. Depth must also be considered in terms of schooner masts. Often news reports mention the mastheads of a sunken vessel breaking the surface. In such cases, we can estimate the depth with relative accuracy if we know the vessel's length. Such is the case with the schooner *Garden City*, lost off Little Sable Point in 1858. The *Garden City* was 132 ft long and consequently, would have had a main top mast between 125 and 140 ft above her keel. We can say with relative certainty that the *Garden City* lies in 115 to 125 ft of water, based upon the news reports of the day. Just as often however, depths given in historical shipwreck accounts have proven to be wildly speculative. In general, I tend to discount newspaper reports of 19th century Great Lakes shipwreck depths unless they are less than 100 ft or are bolstered with specific explanation, such as visible masts breaking the surface.

Vessel Characteristics

Vessel Characteristics should be factored in when thinking about a ship's resting place. The main factors to consider here are the sailing characteristics of schooners versus steamers. Powered commercial vessels generally took the shortest route between two points, whereas sailing vessels were at the mercy of the wind. As such, when plotting a sailing vessel's location, one MUST consider wind direction and speed as well as the need to tack when sailing against the wind. Likewise, it might be useful to determine a steamer's likely cruising speed based on its engine characteristics and its size. Cargo is another interesting factor

to consider. Shifting grain cargos have been responsible for the loss of many Lake vessels. The loss of the schooner *Louis Meeker* is a good case in point. In August of 1873, she found herself becalmed off Little Sable Point, whilst bound for Buffalo with grain. A vicious squall swept down upon her from the west, but she was able to drop all her canvas before it hit. Despite being under bare poles, she was pushed over at 45 degrees and her grain shifted, pulling her over completely and filling her with water. She sank with her masts out of sight and has never been found. Likewise, lumber cargoes often served to keep an overturned schooner afloat by increasing its buoyancy, sometimes permitting the vessel to drift great distances before sinking. Conversely, iron ore cargoes, while preventing vessels from capsizing, also sent them to the bottom rather directly in the presence of a substantial leak.

Credibility of Information

Credibility of Information is probably the most important factor that can be considered in our analysis. All historical data must be considered suspect to some degree. This is particularly true of first person reports. People's interpretation of events is often clouded during times of great emotion, such as shipwreck, and their memory of events may be influenced by subsequent reports. Reporters of the 19th century often played fast and loose with the facts and shipping companies often suppressed unfavorable information. An example is the loss of the *Lady Elgin*. The death toll from the disaster is commonly given as 297. However, at least 450 persons have been verified lost by modern research and the count continues to rise. Then as now, many vessels were lost purposefully and informa-

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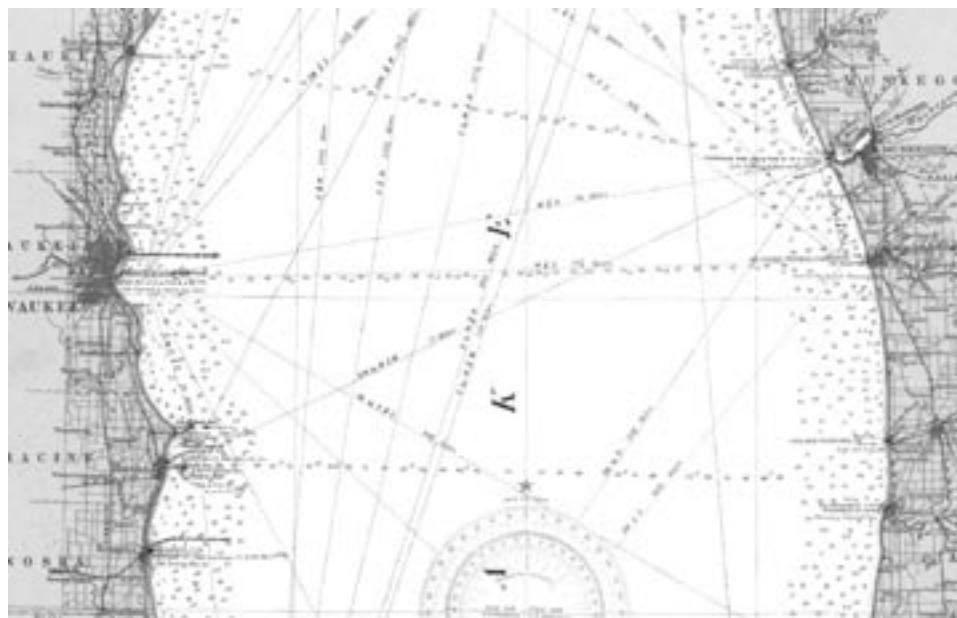
tion was often intentionally obfuscated by captain and crew. Likewise, many ships were reported "dashed to pieces" or "foundered in deep water" and somehow managed to be put back in service. As any researcher of Great Lakes shipwrecks can attest, the meaning of the terms "dashed to pieces" and "foundered in deep water" must have changed considerably since the 19th century! The use of secondary sources for research introduces many additional problems. The researcher making use of secondary sources is forced to rely on the original researcher's skill and integrity. MANY published works on Great Lakes shipwrecks contain highly dubious accounts and outright fabrications. Too often, these accounts are promulgated by authors who rely only on secondary sources and repeat the errors. The literature is consequently, littered with many wrecks that never happened. The most famous of these is the French ship *Le Jean Florin*, reported lost off Barcelona, NY in 1721 with a payroll of gold coins. Her loss appears in several books, databases and charts of Great Lakes wrecks, despite the well known fact that no decked vessels were on the western Lakes between 1679 and at least 1750, and Barcelona, NY didn't exist until almost 100 years later. The myth seems to have originated in 1964 from Adrian Lonsdale's Guide to Sunken Ships in American Waters, and is a reinvention of an actual shipwreck off Barcelona, Spain. It probably hasn't seen its last published repetition.

Many additional factors could be considered, but most will fall under one of the above categories. As a general rule, all of the above areas should be explored at some level

when plotting a search grid. After carefully considering all of the above areas of inquiry, one might base the size and shape of the search grid on the perceived margin of error for the data considered. As an example, the search grid for the schooner *Edna*, lost off Kenosha in 1887, was quite small. First person accounts from the US Lifesaving Service who rescued her crew, placed her directly off Kenosha harbor and her mast protrusion and sighted location suggested a depth of about 45 ft. Her subsequent grid was less than a mile square. Conversely, the search grid for the *L.R. Doty* is nearly 10 x 20 miles. The main factor of uncertainty in her case is whether or not she turned back to pick up the *Olive Jeanette*. In any event, her wreckage was found approximately 40 miles south of her LKP, about 40 hours after she was last seen. This suggests, but does not prove, that she foundered soon after she was last seen, and consequently leaves us with a fairly large search grid.

Above all, logic and common

Courselines for Lake Michigan Shipping Lanes 1905. Harry Zych collection



sense should be applied to the analysis of historical data for the development of a search grid. Many clues can be found by scanning the news microfilms, reading court transcripts, ordering investigation files, reviewing local histories and browsing original periodicals and reports. However, it is the researcher's task to assemble those clues into a logical, coherent picture that represents the most likely scenario and provides a grid with the highest chance of containing the search target. ■

WUAA Strategy Session

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Second importance

Training programs for underwater archeology methods.

Third importance

Gather and record underwater archeological information.

Providing information as historical markers and survey documentation.

Fourth importance

Assist the state and other groups.

What is not getting done?

1. Information dissemination and education to divers and non-divers alike.
2. Using related publications for articles.
3. Stock programs to promote WUAA awareness.
4. Lobbying and political/state support.
5. Outreach to DNR and community organizations to inform of shipwrecks/maritime history.
6. Remembering inland lake sites.
7. Doing some things that brought in members (Our World, workshops, Pearl Lake).
8. Speakers bureau not in place.
9. Survey of important historical shipwrecks (rather than convenient ones).
10. Survey work - due to lack of time, depth in water, organization and skills.

What are concerns regarding continuing WUAA?

1. Distance/separation of members and communities.
2. Insurance/liabilities.
3. Lack of continuity of interest and effort from members.
4. Leadership - rotation of new officers.
5. Local diving has changed and may be declining.

6. Membership renewal and new memberships (targeting non-divers too).
7. Should preservation of artifacts be part of WUAA business?
8. Status - non profit, not for profit, incorporated.
9. Subscription rates for just for the newsletter?
10. Technology is more sophisticated and more expensive.
11. Work with state historical society to continue?

What needs to be done for WUAA to continue and grow?

1. Schedule meetings and create action committees to accomplish our goals.
2. Add more non-member businesses to mailing list for advertisement of WUAA.
3. Re-establish non-profit status if expired.
4. Create content to host on WUAA website (increase traffic).
5. Discuss offering different levels of membership.
6. Edit WUAA purpose statement to include: 'WUAA exists for preservation and conservation'.
7. Locate all WUAA documentation and information and possibly redistribute to communities.
8. Inventory past and present work.
9. Decide on dates when bi-yearly meetings will be held.
10. Offer programs and talks at Ghost Ships.
11. Meeting ideas - have training or speakers for a fee, then have business portion after.
12. Promote club with posters to new markets (tourism departments, recreational departments, scuba and kayaking shops, etc.
13. Provide training presentations for dive shops - gives them some-

thing to help train new divers and also promotes WUAA.

14. Create a speakers bureau with some ready-made presentations.
15. Workshops - hold events to recruit more interested parties for membership growth.
16. Have at least one action planning meeting every year.

Book Reprinted

Great Lakes Archaeology by Ronald J. Mason, ISBN1-930665-46-6, paperback, 426 pages, is now available from the Blackburn Press.

Originally published in 1981, *Great Lakes Archaeology* is still the most comprehensive account of Great Lakes peoples, prehistoric, protohistoric and early historic. *Great Lakes Archaeology* is reprinted here with a brief review of post-1981 research and a list of recommended recent publications.

This and other archeology titles are available at www.blackburnpress.com/archeology.html. All of our books are also available at www.Amazon.com.

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Coming Events

Aug. 6-7, 2005 **Door County Maritime Museum Classic and Wooden Boat Show.** In Sturgeon Bay. For information check their web site at www.dcmm.org.

Oct. 2005 **Wisconsin Underwater Archeology Association Fall Meeting.** In Milwaukee. For information check the WUAA web site at www.wuaa.org.

Oct. 2005 **Great Lakes Underwater Archeology Conference.** In Milwaukee. For information check the WUAA web site at www.wuaa.org.

Nov. 11-12, 2005 **Gales of November.** At the Duluth Entertainment and Convention Center. For information, contact the Lake Superior Maritime Museum Association at www.lsmma.com.

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*For those interested in the study and preservation of
Wisconsin's underwater history and cultural resources.*