

# Wisconsin's UNDERWATER HERITAGE

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June 2009

## Shipwrecks In Review

by Dr. Richard Boyd

**A**s WUAA has done at periodic intervals, again we briefly review notable happenings in the discipline of underwater archeology, with emphasis on shipwrecks and wreck research. Special attention is usually paid to discoveries or projects on the Great Lakes, but events of interest occurring worldwide are often mentioned. This review does not pretend to be totally comprehensive, but rather examines some of the more exciting or important events over the past several years.

Perhaps the most significant shipwreck find in many years occurred in 2008 out on Lake Ontario. Wreck hunters Ken Kennard and Dan Scoville located a sunken British warship from the Revolutionary War era, the *HMS*

*Ontario*. This vessel was built in 1780 at Carleton Island Dockyard, a major Royal Navy base in the St. Lawrence River. It was a 2-masted sloop, measuring 80 by 25 feet, and armed with 22 cannons, making it the largest British warship on the Lakes.

Initially, the gunboat was mostly a workboat, used to ferry soldiers, supplies, and prisoners around the area. In October of 1780, her crew of 40 Canadians was transporting 60 Redcoats with 30 American prisoners across the Lake when she was struck and sunk by a violent snowstorm. No one survived and the precise location of the accident remained unknown. In May 2008, Kennard and Scoville located the *Ontario* resting totally intact in 500 feet of water, so her identity had to be confirmed by imaging with an ROV. This culminated over a decade of on-again, off-again searching. The pristine wreck will no doubt be put off-limits for sport TEK diving due to her historical importance (oldest shipwreck on the Lakes) and grave site status.



Image courtesy of Bowling Green State University



Other Revolutionary War ships that were scuttled by their own crews have recently been found out on the East Coast. In this instance, the British sank four of their vessels in 1778 as a barrier reef to prevent the French fleet from seizing Newport, RI. The tactic reportedly worked, and archeologists have now found remnants of these sunken merchantmen.

Up on Lake Superior, it was confirmed that the *Benjamin Noble*, a long sought "ghost ship," had indeed been discovered after decades of fruitless searching. As mentioned in past reviews, wreck hunters Ken Merriman, Jerry Eliason and associates thought that they had found the *Noble* several years ago, but this vessel turned out to be the tug *Thomas Friant*. However, sonar scans in the same area detected another even deeper target. Rebreather dives have confirmed the identity of that vessel lying on its side in over 300 feet of water and imbedded in a very muddy bottom. It is indeed the *Noble*! Interestingly, the location of this ghost ship is closest to the Wisconsin shore of western Lake Superior, whereas much of the prior searching had

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## Association News

### Action Meeting

An Action Planning meeting was held on Saturday, April 18, 2009 at Brendon's house in Marshall, WI.

The first item of discussion was this season's field work. Russel Leitz and Steve Wagner will continue their work in the Bailey's Harbor area. Kimm Stabelfeldt is again leading the Fireboat project in Milwaukee, which they expect to complete this summer. Dick Boyd is collecting information from divers at the Clay Banks site.

Brendon Baillod and Lee Hintz will migrate the association web site to a new server and will set up service to allow on-line financial transactions such as paying membership dues.

The underwater survey workshop held at Ghost Ships was a success. Future sites and dates for the workshop were discussed. Plans are also proceeding for an in-water survey class. Dick Boyd and Greg Kent are working on a mock shipwreck. Dick Boyd is also close to having an

underwater survey equipment kit ready for sale by WUAA.

Plans are being made for the Underwater Archeology and Maritime History Conference to be held on Oct. 24, in Milwaukee.

The next meeting will be on Saturday, Sept. 19. Contact us at [wuaa@mailbag.com](mailto:wuaa@mailbag.com) for more information.



*WUAA Underwater Survey Techniques Workshop.  
Photographs by Steve Wagner.*



## 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 \$20. For membership information write to the postal or email address below.

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## Shipwrecks In Review

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been concentrated along the Minnesota coast off Knife River.

One of the most significant deep-water wreck discoveries on Lake Superior occurred in late summer 2007. While actually looking for the steamer *Clemson*, the research group from the Whitefish Point Marine Museum found the long-lost freighter *Cyprus*, sunk in October 1907. Along with the *Noble*, both the *Cyprus* and the *Clemson* have been sought for many years and the circumstances surrounding their sinkings have remained great nautical mysteries. The *Cyprus* disappeared at night at an unknown location off Deer Park (Superior's south shore) during what was considered to be only a "mild storm." A new 420-foot steel vessel (launched in August 1907), the *Cyprus* departed Superior WI with a load of iron ore on October 10 and headed toward Whitefish Bay. A northwest storm blew up after the vessel had passed the Keweenaw Peninsula, but the

*Cyprus* proceeded without any apparent trouble. However, further down lake, the passing freighter *George Stephenson* reported that the *Cyprus* was emitting a red wake, indicating that bilge water was reaching the ore before being pumped out! Unfortunately, the *Stephenson* was limping along with boiler trouble and was in no position to catch or aid the *Cyprus*.

Undoubtedly, the *Cyprus* had suffered a serious leak that progressed until the freighter listed, causing the cargo to shift, and the hull to "turn turtle" and sink. The sole survivor of the accident, Second Mate Charles Pitz, confirmed this scenario, reporting that the craft took several hours to founder. The freighter was headed toward shore at the time, but never got there, forcing the officers and crew to take to the life boats. Pitz was the only person to make it through the pounding surf alive, after which he collapsed on the remote beach. Luckily, he was found by a shore patrol from the Deer Park Lifesaving Station.

To date, the direct cause of the sinking has not been determined. Many thought that the hatch cov-

ers had failed, but Pitz denied this. Perhaps some kind of hull failure occurred, but no one really knows. Of course, this event has special relevance to Wisconsin because Pitz was from Manitowoc and his descendants are still prominent marine businessmen. The Pitz family has been a longtime supporter of Manitowoc's nautical history and the maritime museum located there.

In late 2006, sport divers first visited the 352-foot steel freighter *Aurania*, sunk in deep water near Isle Parisienne in Lake Superior. A team of three TEK divers descended to her deck at 425 feet. One in the famous cluster of shipwrecks in Whitefish Bay, the *Aurania* was sunk by pack ice in 1909 and settled in 460 feet of water. It remains the only steel-hulled vessel ever to be sunk by ice on Lake Superior. Charter Captain Bill Prince led the expedition. These *Aurania* dives came almost 20 years to the day after a small team of divers, including this writer, Bill Prince, and Capt. Tom Bathey sat over that very wreck, studied a sonar scan, and speculated about if and when sport divers could ever reach shipwrecks at these extreme depths.

WUAA Underwater Survey Techniques Workshop.  
Photographs by Steve Wagner.



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(Unfortunately, Bill Prince died unexpectedly in spring of 2008 from a massive heart attack.)

It has been said that 'shipwrecks are where you find them.' Just to prove that's often true, remnants of an unknown vessel were discovered off Park Point in Duluth by ice skaters in 2007. Peering through ice into 10 feet of clear water, two skaters spotted the wreckage only 300 feet offshore. Investigations of this site by divers indicate that the wreck is probably the *B. B. Inman*, a famous old harbor tug that sunk in 1929. It apparently went unnoticed all these years because of a heavy sand cover that was recently removed by fall storms.

Of interest to Lake Superior shipwreck devotees and nautical historians is the fact that the maritime archival center at UW-Superior is about to get a new repository. Some years ago when Pat Labadie retired after 30 years as director of the Lake Superior Marine Museum at Duluth, the large collection of marine historical materials that had been amassed under his guidance was transferred to the Dan Hill Library at the University of Wisconsin campus in Superior to be conserved by archivist Laura Jacobs. Shortly thereafter, plans to expand the Dan Hill facility gelled and construction got underway, which will give the collec-

tion a modern state-of-the-art home. Hopefully, the new library will be operational in late 2009.

In Wisconsin, at Middle Eau Claire Lake near Barnes, an unusual underwater archeological puzzle occurred in late 2006. Here, a tourist at a local resort discovered some nearly fossilized animal bones submerged in lake gravels off Silver Beach Resort. Next to these remains was found a Clovis-type spear point, a stone tool generally considered to be around 10,000 years old! The skeleton was identified as an elk by archeologists from UW-Milwaukee who also noticed cuts on the bones consistent with butchering. An association between the bones and spear point was immediately inferred. Unfortunately, carbon dating of the elk showed it to be only 500 years old. The dating test was repeated in 2008 and found to be correct. So what happened here? Two possibilities come to mind: the bones and spear point are totally unrelated and the whole matter is just a coincidence, or more likely, the ancient spear point was found and "recycled" by the elk hunters five centuries ago!

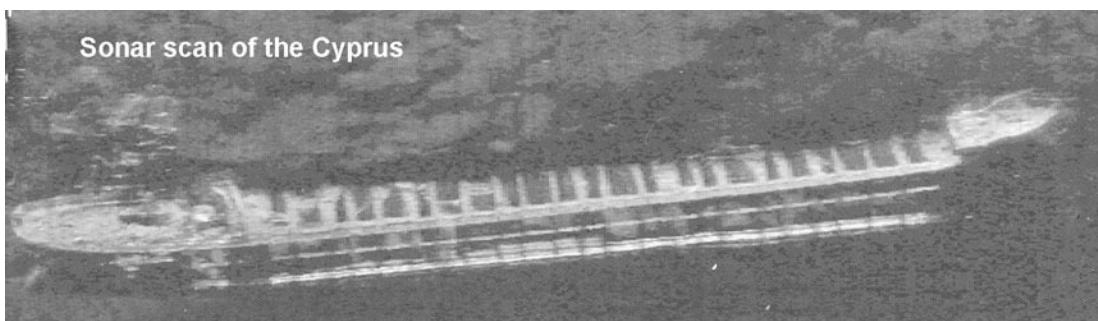
On Lake Michigan near Sheboygan, WI perhaps the hottest news in several years was the discovery of the wreck of the *Robert C. Pringle*, once a well-known passenger vessel in Milwaukee. Actually, the *Pringle* was one of those "lost & found" wrecks, which was found several times and then lost several times. Many years ago,

commercial fishermen snagged an obstruction in 300 feet of water south of Sheboygan, losing part of their net in the process. This event was reported to local wreck diver and historian, *Steve Radovan*, who recorded the approximate location. Over many years, Steve refined that location, but since diving to 300-foot depths was not yet possible, no further action occurred until 2003. That year several wreck hunters, including Steve, Harry Zych, Brendon Baillod and Dick Boyd used Harry's side scan sonar to locate and define the craft. Scanning conditions were poor that day, but a wreck resting in 285 feet of water was clearly profiled. It appeared to be a large schooner and was surmised to be the *Mediterranean*.

Several years passed, and in May 2008, TEK divers finally visited the wreck. Much to everyone's surprise, it was the 103-foot converted tug, the *Robert C. Pringle*, resting upright, totally intact, and in pristine condition! The craft had been built in 1903 at Manitowoc as a powerful commercial vessel, sporting a triple expansion engine. Christened the *Chequamegon*, she eventually spent several years as a tourist boat, transporting weekenders from downtown Milwaukee to Whitefish Bay Resort. Pabst Breweries owned this popular hotel, famous for frivolous weekend activities, and so the *Chequamegon* was often called the "Beer Boat."

Years later, the craft was converted to a heavy-duty tug, but was lost in 1922 under very suspicious circumstances while towing another vessel at night. The crew, all of whom escaped the sinking tug, claimed that the boat had hit some floating debris that ruptured the hull, causing rapid flooding that sunk

Sonar scan of the *Cyprus*



the heavily insured *Pringle* in 15 minutes flat! Interestingly, as confirmed by divers today, the excellent condition of the wreck and the lack of any obvious hull damage suggest a scuttling rather than a collision. Radovan and Baillod gave an excellent presentation on this new wreck at the recent 2009 Ghost Ships Festival in Milwaukee.

Also in Lake Michigan, another big story was the discovery of the 209-foot passenger steamer *Michigan*, sunk in over 275 feet of water. This vessel was basically a sister ship of the steamer *Wisconsin*, lost in a 1929 storm off Kenosha and a longtime popular dive site. The *Michigan*, however, was another iron-hulled vessel lost to damage by heavy ice. In 1885, while trying to aid another ice-bound ship off Grand Haven, MI, she succumbed to hull damage and foundered. Found several years ago by Michigan Shipwreck Research Associates, its location was kept secret for some time to allow initial exploration and survey work to progress without interference. The vessel sits upright in remarkable shape with most of its cabin structure intact, a highly unusual event. The site location was released in spring of 2007 and many TEK divers are expected to visit the unsullied wreck. It is hoped that the intact vessel will remain unpilfered, but that

may be wishful thinking, as recent evidence in Wisconsin suggests.

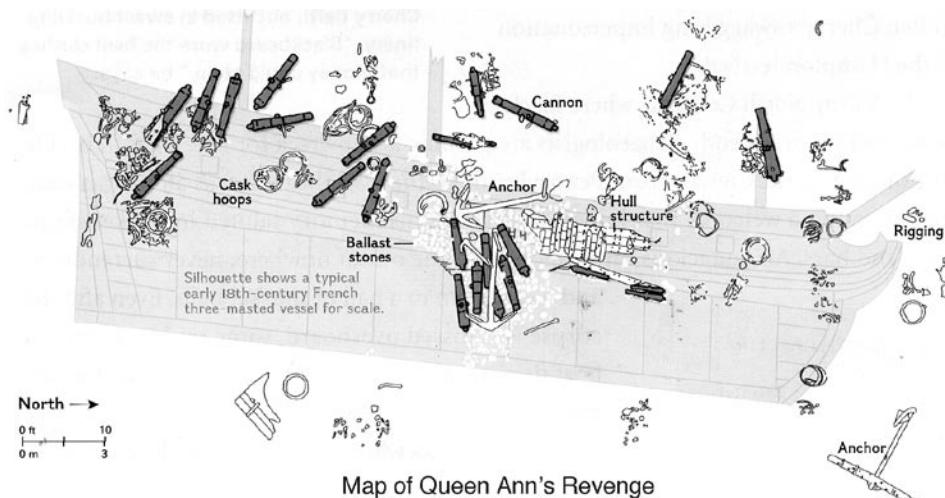
As the TEK-diving era rapidly developed over the past two decades, it quickly became apparent that numerous deep, pristine shipwrecks would soon be accessible not only for exploration, but also for possible vandalism. Many in the dive community hoped that those visiting these virgin ships would be respectful and not remove artifacts or be otherwise destructive. When compared to the 1950s when souvenir collecting was the norm, most of today's shipwreck divers view sunken vessels as historical sites to be visited, photographed and studied, rather than ravaged. Unfortunately, it seems that some TEK divers have not become truly enlightened and still cannot resist the urge to "take something for their mantle!"

This "gold fever" affliction has once again manifested itself in Wisconsin waters on the historical wreck *Gallinipper*. A merchantman schooner from the 1840s, possibly used in the fur trade, this ship's scroll figurehead has recently disappeared. This is the second violation of this deep wreck ... its wheel vanished several years ago! Obviously, even 300-feet of frigid water does not protect these vessels from individuals who harbor hi-tech skills, but exhibit low-grade ethics.

In Michigan, talks continue about a legislative proposal by a state senator to designate some 39,000 square miles of State bottomlands as a Great Lakes State Park. Several embryonic bills on this matter would also create a Great Lakes Park and Salvage Advisory Committee that would develop guidelines for recovery or salvage of any shipwreck in State waters. (Of course, Wisconsin had such a committee for many years, but the governor disbanded it as a money-saving measure.) It is hoped that promotion of Michigan bottomlands as a tourist attraction might aid the State's ailing economy. Considering Michigan's present sad financial status, it's hard to see any new underwater programs getting launched.

Down in North Carolina, the debate goes on over the identity of the wreck thought by many to be the flagship of the pirate Blackbeard, a.k.a. Edward Teach. Nearly three centuries ago, near the Caribbean island of St. Vincent's, this dreaded buccaneer captured a large French slave ship that he reworked, outfitted with 40 guns, and renamed the *Queen Ann's Revenge*. Then with arguably the largest and most powerful pirate ship afloat, Blackbeard ravaged shipping from the Caribbean to New York State. In 1718 his vessel reportedly grounded on a hidden sandbar in Beaufort Inlet (North Carolina) and eventually sunk. Blackbeard abandoned the derelict and went into semi-retirement until the Royal Navy caught up with him later that year. History records that 5 pistol shots and 20 sword cuts were required to finish him off!

This pirate wreck has been sought "on and off" for decades by various research teams. However, the inlet has changed significantly over the centuries, so old descrip-



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tions of the sinking are now geographically inaccurate. In 1996, sonar detected a suspicious mound in 20 feet of water that turned out to be a ballast stone pile containing two massive anchors and at least 12 cannons. David Moore, a nautical archeologist instrumental in finding this vessel, has conducted extensive salvage work on the site under the supervision of North Carolina's archeological officials. Although thousands of artifacts have been recovered over almost a decade, nothing has been found that conclusively proves that the wreck is indeed *Queen Ann's Revenge!*

Most retrieved items, such as the bell, can be confidently dated to the early 1700s, consistent with Blackbeard's time frame, but nothing yet found is a "smoking gun." To complicate matters, another pirate vessel, the *Adventure*, was also lost in this area and has never been found. Furthermore, one of the recovered cannons has an eroded inscription that may read "1730," a date totally inconsistent with the Revenge, which sank in 1718. Thus research, salvage, and debate over this shipwreck goes on, still awaiting a final answer!

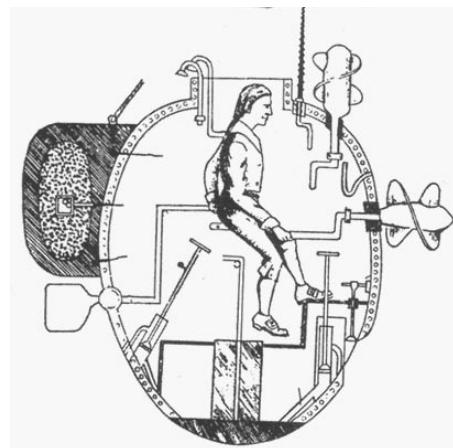
Down in Florida, underwater researchers from Florida State University continue their search for offshore-submerged sites that may yield clues to North America's first inhabitants. Many scientists are now skeptical of the long-accepted theory that man first entered North America only from Asia via a Bering-Straits land bridge. This theory has been modified to propose that people entering through Alaska may have followed a split route, which took

some down the West Coast and others into the Great Lakes region.

Today, other experts think that certain people also arrived by sea from Europe, perhaps 18,000 - 20,000 years ago, navigating along ice-covered Atlantic shorelines to various points where they could move inland. This pushes back man's arrival in the New World by 6,000 – 8,000 years, which seems in better accord with recent dating of certain East Coast terrestrial sites. During the Ice Age, so much water was tied up in glacial ice that many Florida shorelines extended 4 miles further out than they are today. This submerged land mass contains many prehistoric habitation sites. Underwater archeologists have discovered at least 40 of them to date that are providing valuable information about America's very first settlers.

Over the past several years, the Canadian authorities have tightened up the rules and restrictions regarding TEK diver visitations (including ROV or side scan probes) of certain wrecks that harbor human remains or have immense historical significance. These new regulations were prompted by the relatives of sailors lost on the *Edmund Fitzgerald* who became concerned about careless divers or thrill-seeking adventurers molesting underwater grave sites. Special permits will now be needed to dive the *Fitzgerald* or the *Hamilton* and *Scourge* (War of 1812 wrecks in Lake Ontario). Permits for TEK sport dives will no longer be granted.

In the world of museums, the Mariners Museum at Newport News, VA, has largely completed its \$30 million *USS Monitor* Center. Back in 1987, NOAA selected this museum as the custodian of all *Monitor* materials; then in 1998, Congress selected the facility as one of two National Maritime Museums. The permanent 40,000 square-foot-exhibit, called



*The submarine Turtle*

Ironclad Evidence: Stories from the *USS Monitor* and the *CSS Virginia*, has four themes that examine vessel construction, life aboard ship, the famous battle and the ultimate fate of both gunships. Besides ship drawings, models, documents and personal accoutrements, 40 actual artifacts from the vessels themselves are on display. The anchor and chain from the Monitor greet visitors at the entryway.

On the topic of warship artifacts, much attention has been focused on the discovery, salvage and conservation of the Confederate submarine, *Hunley*.

While the *Hunley* was the first submarine to sink an enemy vessel, it was not the first American wartime submersible. That would be the *Turtle*, an egg-shaped wooden craft created in 1775 by David Bushnell. The *Turtle* was actually deployed in 1776 against the 64-gun British flagship Eagle, anchored in New York Harbor. The submersible approached the warship at night, submerged some distance away, and attempted to attach a 100-pound bomb to the gunboat's hull. The auger-system designed to secure the explosive failed, the *Turtle* slipped off the hull, and popped to the surface, but managed to escape pursuing Redcoats. It was later destroyed by a British attack while being transported up the Hudson River.

While no remnants or plans of that sub survived, a group of artisans have recently reconstructed the craft using written descriptions and information sent by Bushnell to Thomas Jefferson, another early inventor. As part of a project at Boston College of the Arts, several staffers enlisted the aid of students, archeologists, blacksmiths, glass-blowers, timber farmers and various historians to recreate the vessel using the same materials and techniques used by Bushnell himself. The hull was formed by mating two hollowed-out halves of a huge Sitka Spruce tree, especially harvested for this project. When finished, the submersible had a 7-foot high, teardrop-shaped hull and was equipped with a conning tower, snorkel, rudder, two hand-driven screw propellers, a ballast system and a CO<sub>2</sub> exhaust tube. The group took their replica "to sea" and it performed as originally described.

On the international front, *Archaeology Magazine* ran an interesting review in the July/ August issue 2007 lamenting the status of the maritime law on the high seas

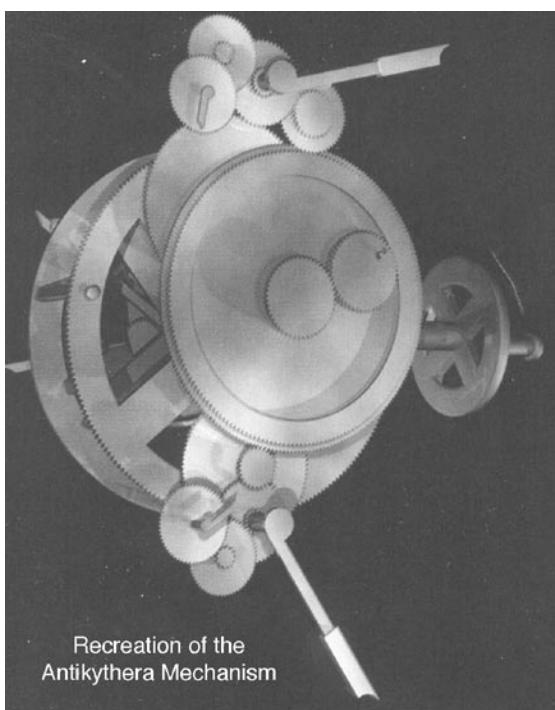
as it pertains to submerged cultural resources. The simple fact is that it's still "finders-keepers" when a shipwreck or other historical entity is discovered in international waters. Despite the fact that most valuable retrieved artifacts can usually be identified as to their point of origin, little or nothing can be done by that country or culture to reclaim such materials. The article does a great job of reviewing this situation with respect to various treasure finds. Several TV specials have recently featured the high tech equipment being employed by international treasure hunters who unfortunately confuse using cutting-edge technology with doing cutting-edge science. Conversely, in terrestrial archeology, repatriation of various looted artifacts is becoming commonplace, augmented by several international agreements regarding cultural materials removed from archeological sites.

In Israel, the submerged bones of a woman and child were recovered from a sunken, 9,000-year old habitation site. Surprisingly, lesions on the bones led researchers to conclude that the child had tuberculosis, the oldest detection of that disease by some 6,000 years! Recent DNA tests have confirmed that finding.

A strange and ancient underwater artifact has finally been identified. As most archeological enthusiasts know, many decades ago a sponge diver found a shipwreck loaded with bronze and marble statues off the Greek island of Antikythera. Among the many artifacts recovered was a corroded clump of wood and metal fragments that at one time was some sort of complex machine. Close examinations in the 1970s and 90s, including X-ray

studies, showed an extremely complicated 30-gear mechanism of great precision. Recently, a multinational research team subjected the device to 3-D computerized tomography (CT) scans, which allowed them to reconstruct the intricate mechanism and to decipher some of the engravings on its casing. They are now confident that it is a 2,200 year old astronomical computer, not only capable of tracking the relative positions of the Earth, sun, moon and planets on a yearly basis, but also fully able to predict eclipses! It is the world's oldest geared bronze device, but its inventor remains a mystery.

In England's Thames River, some 50 miles east of London, underwater dredging to improve navigation channels uncovered an ancient wreck. Preliminary data indicates that it may be the *Royal Merchant*, an armed commercial vessel that fought the Spanish Armada in 1588. In that era, Britain armed some of their merchantmen to help ward off the giant Spanish fleet that was preparing to invade England. In fact, the *Royal Merchant* was the flagship of a "merchant squadron" that assisted Sir Francis Drake in his preemptive strike on Spain's fleet in the port of Cadiz (1587). Research to identify the wreck is underway and only a few possible candidates remain. However, this merchantman had 10 cannons aboard and contained a cargo consistent for the *Royal*. If true, it would be only the second shipwreck from the Tudor-era ever to be discovered; of course, the famous warship *Mary Rose* was found and salvaged in the 1970s. ■



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

## Coming Events

June 13-14, 2009	<b>Lighthouse Walk</b> , Door County, WI. For details check the Door County Maritime Museum web site at <a href="http://www.dcmmm.org">www.dcmmm.org</a> .
August 29-30, 2009	<b>WUAA Baileys Harbor Survey Project</b> . If you are interested in participating contact Russel Leitz at <a href="mailto:wuaa@mailbag.com">wuaa@mailbag.com</a> .
September 12, 2009	<b>McDougall's Dream Dinner and Silent Auction</b> , on board the <i>SS Meteor</i> Whaleback Ship Museum, Superior, WI. For information check the Superior Public Museum web site at <a href="http://www.superiorpublicmuseums.org">www.superiorpublicmuseums.org</a> .
September 17-19, 2009	<b>Association for Great Lakes Maritime History Annual Meeting</b> , in Bay City, MI. For more information visit their web site at <a href="http://www.aglmh.org">www.aglmh.org</a> .
October 24, 2009	<b>Wisconsin Underwater Archeology Association and Maritime History Conference</b> , at Discovery World in Milwaukee, WI. For further information check the WUAA web site at <a href="http://www.wuaa.org">www.wuaa.org</a> or email <a href="mailto:wuaa@mailbag.com">wuaa@mailbag.com</a> .
November 6-7, 2009	<b>Gales of November</b> , in Duluth, MN. For information check the Lake Superior Marine Museum Association web site at <a href="http://www.lsmma.org">www.lsmma.org</a> .