EXPEDITION REPORT

Lake Ontario Historic Shipwrecks

May 1 – October 31, 2015

The Explorers Club Flag # 202

Purpose: To research, locate, and document the undiscovered historic ships in Lake Ontario.

Background: For over 350 years ships have traversed Lake Ontario transporting goods and people. The remains of some of the oldest ships that still exist in the Great Lakes are located in Ontario. The oldest shipwreck discovered in the Great Lakes is the British warship, HMS Ontario that foundered in 1780 in Lake Ontario was located by our team in 2008. There were many sailing ships on the lake during the period from the late 1700’s through the early 1900’s. Some of these ships never made it to the port of their destination. Unfortunately, there are no drawings available of the construction of these old ships. By locating these historic shipwrecks we are able to provide details of their construction and cargo. As we examine our sonar and video recordings we are able to write the final chapter of these ships.

Results: The 2015 search for Lake Ontario Historic shipwrecks was more difficult this year due to unseasonable weather. In January we announced our discovery of several canal boats that should have never been transported on Lake Ontario. In late August after four months of searching our team located the oldest propeller driven steamship, Bay State, to have been found to date in Lake Ontario. These shipwreck discoveries received excellent coverage in the news media and on The Explorers Club blog. A brief summary of these discoveries are as follows:

Canal boats Discovered in Lake Ontario

Two canal boats that may date back to the mid 1800’s have been discovered in Lake Ontario shipwreck explorers, Jim Kennard, Roger Pawlowski, and Roland Stevens. The exploration team located the canal boats using DeepVision side scan sonar while searching for shipwrecks off Oswego, NY. Locating canal boats in Lake Ontario is an unusual event as these craft were not built for transportation on the open lake. Visual exploration of the canal boats was conducted utilizing both technical divers and an underwater remote operated vehicle.

The remains of a small shallow draft canal boat with a length of 65 feet and a beam of 14 feet was found with a portion of its stern torn away. There is no evidence of an upper deck, cabin, or any remaining cargo. It can be speculated that whatever cargo this canal boat was carrying probably caused the stern to break away during turbulent lake conditions.
Canal boat - remains

Diver exploring the remains of old canal boat in Lake Ontario
A canal scow with a length of 78 feet and beam of 14 feet was found with its entire port side torn away. This is a shallow draft vessel of around 4 feet. Here again, caught in rough conditions while crossing the lake the shifting cargo probably caused the side of the scow to collapse and the vessel to founder.

Both canal boats were found within a few miles of each other on a route approximately midway between Oswego and Sackets Harbor.

Read the detailed report and view the underwater video: 
Mid-19th Century Steamship Bay State Discovered in Lake Ontario

The steamship Bay State was discovered in the deep depths off the southern shore of Lake Ontario near Fair Haven, NY. Shipwreck explorers, Jim Kennard and Roger Pawlowski located the shipwrecked steamer Bay State utilizing a high resolution side scan sonar system. The Bay State is the oldest propeller driven steamship found to date in Lake Ontario.

It was nearly midnight on November 4, 1862, when the steamship Bay State departed Oswego, New York with a full cargo of general merchandise for Cleveland and Toledo. Within a few hours the winds coming from the west increased to gale force preventing the steamer from making headway to the Welland Canal and beyond to the ports in Lake Erie. On board the Bay State were between sixteen to eighteen persons, seven passengers along with officers and crew. There were no records kept of the crew so the exact number is not known. Based on the pieces of wreckage found on the floor of the lake, it appears that Captain Marshall had turned the Bay State around and was heading back to Oswego. This was the beginning of the end as the Bay State was starting to come apart depositing parts of the ship on the bottom of the lake. Within another quarter mile the steamship foundered. The wreckage and merchandise on board the ship washed ashore near the town of Oswego. Cart loads of these goods were gathered up by eager residents and quickly carried away. The life-boat and many papers from the steamer came ashore about three miles west of the city. Unfortunately none of the passengers or crew survived this terrible marine disaster.

Read the detailed report and view the underwater video:

Steamship Bay State shipwreck painting (Copyright: Roland Stevens)
Side scan sonar image of propeller steamship Bay State

Young America - sister ship of steamship Bay State (courtesy C. Patrick Labadie collection)
Shipwreck Discovery Team

Jim Kennard (FN ’13) has been diving and exploring the lakes in the northeast since 1970. He has found over 200 shipwrecks in the Great Lakes, Lake Champlain, NY Finger Lakes and in the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. Jim is the project director and operates the DeepVision Side Scan Sonar system.

Roger Pawlowski has been diving on shipwrecks in the northeast and Florida for the past 14 years. He is a retired Air Force Reserve pilot and flew missions in Desert Storm. Roger owns and flies the VideoRay Pro IV Remote Operated Vehicle.

Roland ‘Chip’ Stevens is a retired architect and working artist whose watercolors, many of which have been accepted into national exhibitions, are well known in the Rochester area. He has been a sailor for over 60 years. Chip views the sonar and video images and from them creates sketches and watercolors for our shipwreck reports.