

Diving into History

**A ghostly boatyard lies below
Lake George's placid waters**

For most people, the word “shipwreck” evokes images of treacherous seas and lost treasure, not a popular lake in New York’s Adirondack Park. But in Warren County, on Lake George’s murky bottom, lie an estimated 300 shipwrecks, some more than 250 years old.

Three of the underwater sites are designated Submerged Heritage Preserves and are open to the diving public. Two of the preserve sites date to the French and Indian War (1756-1763). The third wreck dates to the early twentieth century and has been expanded as an “underwater classroom” where divers can learn more about the lake’s ecology.

The existence of the shipwrecks was first discovered in 1960 by two teenage boys who found a cluster of wrecks in 25 to 40 feet of water not far from the shore in the lake’s south basin. Subsequent archaeological and historic research revealed the find to be the remains of several British and provincial warships from the French and Indian War, part of a fleet of 900 *bateaux* (French for “boats”) the British used in the war against the French for domination of North America.

Intentionally scuttled to keep them out of French hands after the British defeat at Fort Carrillon (later called Ticonderoga) in 1758, most of the surviving bateaux are 25 to 36 feet long and 4 to 5 feet wide. Though all that remains are the bottom planks, some ribs and parts of a few other structures, they are still recognizable. Their dilapidated state reflects conditions at the shallow site, where sunlight and warm water have hastened the deterioration of the pine planks, oak framing and metal nails.

One cluster of seven sunken bateaux is called the Wiawaka Bateaux, named after the nearby Wiawaka Holiday House estate. The cluster was mapped from 1987-1991 by the research team Bateaux Below, Inc., and in September 1993, a shipwreck preserve called “The Sunken Fleet of 1758” was opened to feature the boats. Incredible remnants of history, all seven bateaux are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

In 1997, an eighth boat was added to the preserve—a full-size replica of an intact bateau was sunk in order to observe the destructive effects of water and time on a shipwreck. Then in 2007 and 2008, students and technology teachers from Maple Avenue Middle School in Saratoga Springs worked with Bateaux Below volunteers to build another replica bateau. This replica was then sunk in four feet of water in the southwest corner of the lake next to Blais Walkway, where visitors to Lake George Village can easily view it.

A few miles away from the Wiawaka fleet, but in much deeper water, a beautifully preserved once-floating gun battery—a *radeau* called the *Land*

Examining the *Land Tortoise*

Russell Bellico

Tortoise—can be seen in the lake’s eerie, filtered light. The flat-bottomed, seven-sided *Land Tortoise* is 52 feet long and 18 feet wide, with high, sloping bulwarks. Powered by 13 sets of oars, and equipped with 7 gun ports firing 24-pound cannonballs, the vessel has been described as an “ingenious war machine,” perfectly designed for battle in the calm waters of an inland lake.

Sunk at the same time as the bateaux, it has survived in better condition because the deeper water has lower levels of oxygen, light and temperature. The wooden fasteners, or tree-nails, that hold it together have proved more durable in lake conditions than metal nails, which are vulnerable to rust.

The *Land Tortoise’s* resting place was discovered on June 26, 1990. It was an exciting find for Bateaux Below’s amateur archaeologists who knew the British had built two large warships with a unique, seven-sided design, but believed that neither had survived. The *Land Tortoise* is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and also has the distinction of being only the sixth shipwreck in the nation listed as a National Historic Landmark.

Traveling a few miles north on the lake is another shipwreck, one that is 200 years younger. The well-preserved wreck of the *Forward*, one of the lake’s first gasoline-powered vessels, rests upright in the silt in 37-42 feet of water. Built of wood in 1906, the *Forward* was a sleek pleasure craft originally owned by the Bixbys of Bolton Landing. The boat was used for stylishly touring about the lake, and once transported a wedding party, and raced in the Hague Regatta. A local newspaper of the time described the boat as embodying “all the comforts of the modern yacht” with a mahogany-dressed deck and inside finish. The green of the lower hull and the white top sides are still visible, as are the two gasoline engines located amidships. The *Forward’s* wreck is listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places.

No one is quite sure how the once-glamorous *Forward* ended up at the bottom of the lake, but it is believed that it sank in the 1930s, possibly abandoned or having gone down in a fire. At approximately 45 feet long, 8 feet wide and 4 feet high,



The bow of the *Land Tortoise*

Russell Bellico

Diving down

Divers interested in visiting any of the historic Lake George shipwreck preserve sites should know that each site is marked with a round mooring buoy, which provides access to the site, and a barrel-shaped navigation aid buoy. Be sure to review the Diving Guidelines for Lake George's Shipwreck Preserves at www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/7830.html, and the Submerged Heritage Preserves Generic Mooring Plan at www.dec.ny.gov/lands/55492.html, prior to visiting any site.

The Sunken Fleet of 1758 — (Wiawaka Bateaux Cluster) found in 25 to 50 feet of water approximately one mile north of Lake George Beach on the east side of the lake. This intermediate dive is available on a first-come, first-served basis from Memorial Day into autumn. Dive boats and divers are required to tow the red-and-white dive flag.

The *Land Tortoise* Radeau — located in 105 feet of water in the south basin, nearly two miles north of Lake George Beach. This deep, cold-water dive is an advanced dive open from the second Saturday of June through Labor Day. Divers must sign in and be assigned a time slot at the DEC office at Lake George Beach (518-668-3352). A maximum of eight divers in a single party is permitted on site at any one time. There is a two-hour time slot allowed per dive followed by a one-hour site rest to allow bottom silt to settle. A safety/decompression stop is recommended and the water temperature at this site ranges from 35 to 45 degrees F.

The *Forward* Underwater Classroom — found in 25 to 45 feet of water approximately 1,500 feet east of Diamond Island in the South Basin of the lake. This is an intermediate dive available on a first-come, first-served basis from Memorial Day into autumn.

the wreck now serves as the central feature of the *Forward Underwater Classroom* shipwreck preserve. The “classroom” has a trail that leads divers through a series of stations where they measure and record underwater conditions such as temperature and water clarity and learn about zebra mussels, fish, plant life, archaeology, navigation and geology.

The resources in the Submerged Heritage Preserves are part of New York State’s cultural and historic legacy and belong to the people of New York. They are protected by law to preserve this heritage so that future generations can enjoy and learn from them.

The shipwrecks found in Lake George are delicate and should never be touched. In fact, Bateaux Below’s underwater archaeologist Joe Zarzynski points out that the upper part of the *Land Tortoise* is so soft that fingerprints can actually be seen in the wood, left by divers who did not understand the fragility of the 250-year-old waterlogged pine planks. Divers are taught that removing artifacts or damaging resources is forbidden by law and deprives others of the opportunity to view and study them. Fortunately, Zarzynski says, most divers are responsible, and area dive shops help educate divers.

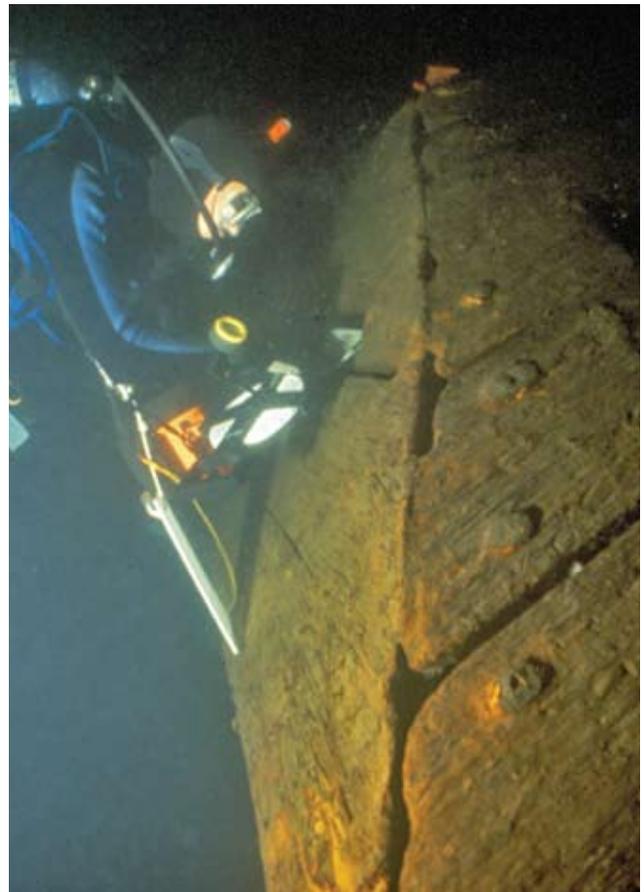
Non-divers can also experience the thrill of exploring Lake George’s underwater treasures. A documentary film by Pepe Productions, *The Lost Radeau: North America’s Oldest Intact Warship*, takes the viewer down more than 100 feet to document the discovery and history of this unique vessel. *The Lost Radeau* airs occasionally on PBS stations, or the DVD can be purchased at www.thelostradeau.com. Many public libraries have copies of the DVD. A new documentary, *Wooden Bones: The Sunken Fleet of 1758* (Pepe Productions), informs viewers about Lake George’s bateau wrecks.

Although many who marvel at the wonder and beauty of Lake George’s crystalline waters on a sunny day are unaware, what lies underneath is a prime example of the rich heritage and historic treasures that make New York an historical wonder as much as it is an outdoor lover’s paradise.

Elaine Bloom is a contributing editor to *Conservationist*.

Underwater Stewards

Lake George’s shipwreck preserves are open to visiting divers principally due to the efforts of Bateaux Below, Inc., a not-for-profit corporation that studies historic shipwrecks in Lake George. Bateaux Below volunteers provide monitoring, fund raising, maintenance and public outreach for the Submerged Heritage Preserves. They also prepared the nominations for listing the shipwrecks on the National Register of Historic Places. To find out more about Bateaux Below and the work they do, you can write to them at: Bateaux Below, Inc., P.O. Box 2134, Wilton, New York 12831.



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(Top) One of several cannon ports that grace the sides of the *Land Tortoise*. (Bottom) A diver inspects the hull of the *Land Tortoise*.