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LAKE GEORGE TO REVIVE DIVING PROGRAM FOR HISTORIC SHIPWRECKS



PROVIDED PHOTO, BATEAUX BELOW

Photo courtesy of Bob Benway/Bateaux Below Underwater archaeologist Joseph W. Zarzynski, left, and scientist John Wimbush, right, conduct a biota survey at the submerged 1758 British military wharf at Lake George.

The town will provide \$10K for this program

LUKE MOSSEAU

lmosseau@poststar.com

LAKE GEORGE – A partnership between town officials and the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum will revive an educational diving program that explores at least three underwater, historic shipwreck sites on Lake George.

The three historic sites in the diving program include the "Sunken Fleet of 1758," seven boats used during the French and Indian War; the 1758 Land Tortoise, a floating

gunboat that has been designated a National Historic Landmark; and the motor launch Forward, which dates to 1906.

In order to fund an initial exploratory dive, the town will provide a \$10,000 match with an additional \$10,000 provided by the Champlain Valley National Heritage Partnership.

"The main function is to do an exploratory dive to revive the Heritage Preserve program. The program that used to exist

was quite a big one, spearheaded by Bateaux Below and with assistance from DEC," said Lake George Planning and Zoning Director Dan Barusch.

Barusch explained how the dives will create a "cataloged report for the state and the project partners — here's what's down there and here's the condition of all [the shipwrecks] since the last time we really went down there."

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"Sunken Fleet" historic marker on Lower Amherst Street in Lake George.

Provided photo, Bateaux Below

Diving

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"The town of Lake George was seminal in promoting the recognition and the protection of the bottom-of-the-lake boats, especially the colonial war boats," said Town Councilwoman Marisa Muratori. "Because of the relationship we have with the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum, they are going to help us preserve and do the work that needs to be done on these heritage sites."

The initial dive will take stock of what's below the lake surface using photography, videography and telemetry, which will then serve a new dive program with new informational literature, as well as new infrastructure around the 1758 Land Tortoise gunboat. "There is what we call

an underwater classroom surrounding it," Barusch said of the Land Tortoise. "There's stanchions, PVC pipes, signs — a whole ton of stuff down there for people to be able to go down and dive and look for themselves."

The last orchestrated dive to check out these historic sites was nearly 20 years ago, when it was organized by Bateaux Below, a nonprofit educational organization led by Joseph Zarzynski, who co-wrote "Lake George Shipwrecks and Sunken History." At the time, Bateaux Below played a significant role in preserving the shipwreck sites in Lake George, largely based on volunteer support who monitored the boats, with public outreach efforts administered by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation.

However, since New York State does not have an official underwater archaeology program, the Lake George shipwreck preserves were primarily open to visiting divers due to the efforts of Bateaux Below. The organization's volunteers provided divers and boats to open the preserves, monitor them, and close them for the off-season. The volunteers handled tasks like mooring cables, caring for underwater signage, cleaning litter, and establishing the trail lines that were all installed.

"Once Joe Zarzynski and [Dr.] Russ Bellico stopped with Bateaux Below, that whole program died. We are seeking to revive the program with DEC and be one of the agencies leading the charge, with the Battlefield Park Alliance and the Park Commission," said Barusch, who specifically

budgeted for the project's \$10,000 last year.

The Lake Champlain Maritime Museum has specialized in ongoing underwater archaeology since its founding in 1983, exploring various sites in Lake Champlain while also working with the National Heritage Partnership. It was in 1990 when similar underwater archaeologists discovered the Lake George shipwrecks one and a half miles from shore at a depth of 105 feet using side scan sonar. Reports indicate that the vessel may have slid from the shallows to a deeper section of the lake over the course of time.

During the French and Indian War, the 52-foot-long British warship Land Tortoise had approximately two masts, seven cannon ports and 26 oar holes. The ship's current condition is not known; however, the

wreck is well preserved in a part of the lake that is oxygen-enriched with little algae and visibility averaging 10 to 20 feet. According to documents, the masts are gone, and there's no rigging or armaments, leaving the ship's structural integrity intact. All of the preserved shipwrecks in Lake George are protected by state law.

As for the future funding for the program, Barusch says, "This will likely be a recurring expense for the town, but we are looking at having the Battlefield Park Alliance and the Lake George Park Commission chip in each year towards the program."

The initial \$20,000 will cover the program's first two years, with recurring expenses expected afterward for dives, running the program, and printing new literature. The current literature on these three

heritage sites is about 30 years old, according to Barusch.

The DEC may also contribute funds toward the project, but those dollars have not been budgeted and would likely come from a slush fund source.

Additionally, the historic Military Dock near the village has been suggested as a fourth heritage site for diving. At the order of British General James Abercromby, troops erected the pier at the height of the French and Indian War. The wooden-and-stone dock, located at the south end of Lake George, was recognized as a landmark in the early 1990s. The dock's remains are still submerged in the water by the shore.

Luke Mosseau is a staff writer. Contact: 518-742-3224, lmosseau@poststar.com.