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# LAKE GEORGE MIRROR

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## OUR SUBMERGED HERITAGE

# After Years of Neglect, a New Deal for Lake George's Submerged Heritage Preserve

*Chris Sabick, executive director, Lake Champlain Maritime Museum, which will assist Lake George assess, repair and maintain the lake's Submerged Heritage Preserve. Photo provided.*

By Anthony F. Hall

Lake George's Submerged Heritage Preserve – the underwater park that opened in September, 1993, the first of its kind in New York State – will be revitalized under the auspices of a new coalition comprising the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum, the Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance, the Town of Lake George, the Lake George Park Commission and New York's Department of Environmental Conservation.

According to historian, archaeologist and author Joe Zarzynski, who helped found Bateaux Below in 1987 to document and protect Lake George's underwater heritage, the shipwreck preserve system originally included mooring buoys to prevent dive boats from dropping anchors on shipwrecks, trail lines set up around each site and underwater interpretive signage.

However, the infrastructure has not been inspected by professional maritime archaeologists or historians for at least twenty years.

At its July 13 meeting, the Lake George Town Board voted to appropriate $10,000 toward a $20,000 project that will include a preliminary assessment by dive teams from the Vergennes, Vermont-based Lake Champlain Maritime Museum of the current state of the shipwreck preserves.

According to Dan Barusch, Lake George's Director of Planning and Zoning, a grant from the Champlain Valley National Heritage Partnership is the source of the remaining $10,000.

Ultimately, the coalition will restore the infrastructure supporting the sites, enabling them to function, once again, as "underwater classrooms."

"There's a lot to see for those able to dive and visit the sites themselves," said Barusch.

The project's managers are also likely to revise and update the collateral publications originally drafted by Bateau Below and the DEC to provide histories of the sites, reading lists, dive regulations, emergency information, archaeological drawings and maps showing the location of each shipwreck preserve.

Annual appropriations by the Town of Lake George and its partners will, in all likelihood, be required to maintain the Submerged Heritage Preserve, Barusch said.

"I am so pleased that the Town of Lake George is stepping up to re-establish this important aspect of the area's maritime heritage," said John DiNuzzo, president of the Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance. "Utilizing the Maritime Museum's expertise makes sense, given its experience in protecting Lake Champlain's underwater artifacts and managing access to them."

DiNuzzo said the Alliance will play an active role in the revitalization of the Submerged Heritage Preserves.

"Since so much of Lake George

Battlefield Park's history is tied to the pathway from the head of the lake northward to Ticonderoga, we will be working to promote the awareness and preservation of our submerged heritage," said DiNuzzo.

Joe Zarzynski credits his Bateaux Below co-founder, Russ Bellico, with catalyzing the revitalization of the Submerged Heritage Preserve.

After Bateaux Below disbanded in 2011, three groups under the supervision of the Department of Environmental Conservation - a dive charter, a dive club and a dive shop – attempted to replace the non-profit organization as stewards of the preserve.

"Unfortunately, over the years the management of this shipwreck preserve system, fell apart," said Zarzynski.

Thanks to Bellico, the author of "Empires in the Mountains: French and Indian War Campaigns and Forts in the Lake Champlain, Lake George, and the Hudson River Corridor," as well as four other histories of the region, an ad hoc group was established to pressure the DEC and other state agencies to oversee the preserves.

"We are lucky that the Town of Lake George, the Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance, the State of New York, and others have emerged to try to repair and manage these submerged cultural resources. It will be a challenging task. But just because these shipwrecks are 'out of sight' to 99% of the population does not mean they should not be properly managed," Zarzynski said.

Among other underwater dive sites, the Submerged Heritage Preserve includes "The Sunken Fleet of 1758" and the "Land Tortoise: A 1758 Floating Gun Battery." That seven-sided radeau, "Land Tortoise," lying in 107 ft. of water, is recognized as "North America's oldest 'intact' warship." In 1998, the Land Tortoise was designated a National Historic Landmark, only the sixth shipwreck with awarded that status.

"The Sunken Fleet of 1758" preserve consists of seven flat-bottomed boats resting 20 to 40 ft. below the surface. It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1992. A 23-ft.-long three-fourths replica of a colonial bateau was added to the preserve in 1997.

The seven bateaux of "The Sunken Fleet of 1758" are all that remain in Lake George of a fleet that William Pitt, Britain's wartime leader, ordered to be built for the campaign that would ultimately end in the capture of Quebec and the expulsion of the French from North America. In the winter of 1758-59, however, they lay at the bottom of the frozen lake, deliberately scuttled, protected from the enemy. There, roughly 40 of them remained, more or less undisturbed, until 1960, when two young divers came upon them while exploring the waters off Hall's boatyard.

Three bateaux were recovered from the lake by a team from the Adirondack Museum (known today as Adirondack Experience) and transported to Blue Mountain Lake, where they were treated with polyethylene glycol (PEG), a wood preservative. One bateau was placed on display, where it remained until returned to New York State, its proper owner.

According to Zarzynski, the three bateaux retrieved from the lake, and a collection of disarticulated remnants also found in the lake, are now in the collections of the New York State Museum.

The Lake George Battlefield Park Visitor Center displays a fragment from one of the sunken bateaux on loan from the state.

According to John DiNuzzo, the visitor center also includes diorama of Abercromby's 17,000-man 1758 flotilla and a model of the radeau Land Tortoise.