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Salvagers, state cut deal on sunken ship

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By Ed White
The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS -- After more than a year of litigation, the state of Michigan and a salvage group agreed to work together to determine if the Griffin, a French vessel dating to 1679, is resting in northern Lake Michigan.

The cooperation was disclosed at a hearing Thursday in federal court. Still unsettled: If it is the wreck of the Griffin, who owns it -- Michigan or France?

"Ownership might be hotly contested or the parties may reach an agreement that benefits everyone," Rick Robol, attorney for Great Lakes Exploration Group, said outside court.

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Great Lakes Exploration and state scientists will visit the site next spring and invite representatives from France and the Field Museum of Chicago. Robol said it may be possible to determine the wreck's age and identity without bringing up pieces.

For example, he said, "there may be cannons aboard."

Assistant Attorney General James Piggush declined to comment.

Great Lakes Exploration believes it may have found the Griffin between

Escanaba and the St. Martin Islands, near Wisconsin. Because of fears of looting, a precise spot has not been revealed.

Historians consider the Griffin to be the first European trade ship to sail lakes Huron and Michigan. It was built for French explorer Robert de La Salle but disappeared, probably in a storm, while loaded with furs.

Great Lakes Exploration, led by Virginia diver Steve Libert, filed a lawsuit in 2004 seeking to become custodian of the site. The state has intervened, saying the scattered debris simply could be barn timber.


Michigan typically has authority over abandoned ships, but France has expressed a strong interest.

The U.S. State Department is prepared to argue that France owns the wreck, if it is the Griffin, because La Salle was sailing under authority of a king, Robol said.

La Salle's other ship, La Belle, was discovered in the mid-1990s off the Texas coast. With approval from France, state archaeologists there recovered nearly 1 million artifacts, from human bones to muskets, and have publicly displayed many.

The Texas experience "could become a model" for Michigan if it is the Griffin, Robol said.

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