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Saturday, October 22, 2005

## Salvagers, state cut deal on sunken ship believed in Lake Michigan

Associated Press

GRAND RAPIDS -- The state and a salvaging company have agreed to work together to determine whether a 17th-century French vessel rests at the bottom of northern Lake Michigan.

After more than a year of legal maneuvering, the agreement was disclosed during a hearing Thursday in U.S. District Court. What has yet to be determined is whether the wreck of the Griffin belongs to Michigan or France.

Great Lakes Exploration Group LLC, led by its president, Steve Libert, believes it may have found the ship between Escanaba and the St. Martin Islands, near Wisconsin. The precise location has not been publicly revealed because of looting concerns.

The company and some state scientists will visit the site next spring and invite representatives from France and the Field Museum of Chicago to join them. Rick Robol, an attorney from Columbus, Ohio, representing the salvagers, told The Grand Rapids Press for a story published Friday that it may be possible to determine details about the wreck without bringing up pieces.

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

"Both sides have agreed to explore working together in an effort to identify the target," Allison Pierce, a spokeswoman for Attorney General Mike Cox, said Friday.

The Griffin -- also spelled Griffon in some references -- is considered by historians to be the first European trade ship to sail lakes Huron and Michigan. It was crudely built in 1679 in the wilderness near Niagara Falls by French explorer Robert de La Salle but sank, probably during a storm, during one of its first voyages.

La Salle was not on board, but the ship went down with five or six crew members and a load of furs, said Scott Demel, an archaeologist at Chicago's Field Museum.

Demel has been working on the project for a couple of years with Libert, who lives in Oak Hill, Va., but also has a home in northern Michigan's Charlevoix.

"We're pretty excited and hopeful that all these parties can work together," Demel said Friday.

Radiocarbon testing of an artifact found near the purported shipwreck site indicated that the item could have come from the same time period as the Griffin, he said.

Great Lakes Exploration filed a lawsuit in 2004 seeking to become custodian of what Libert believes is the shipwreck site. Trying to protect its

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interests, the state intervened, saying the debris found could be simply barn timber.

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

The U.S. Department of State 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 publicly displayed many of them.

The Texas experience "could become a model" for Michigan if the Griffin has been located, Robol said.

On the Net:

Libert's Web site for the project: <http://www.lasalle-griffon.org/>

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