

Explorer, state square off over shipwreck

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FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

July 17, 2006

CHARLEVOIX -- A dispute over what could be the Great Lakes' most historic shipwreck has taken an ugly turn, with both sides filing briefs for yet another round in court, and the state trying to shut off fund-raising for the exploration company that claims to have found the wreck.

Meanwhile, at a news conference today, a team of marine archaeologists will release a report that gives the first scientific evidence that the wreck could be of the long-lost ship.

At the least, the report does not rule out the idea that the Griffon has been found.

Great Lakes Exploration and owner Steve Libert -- who hired the archaeologists -- think they have found the Griffon, the grand prize for shipwreck hunters and marine history buffs, and the oldest of Great Lakes shipwrecks. The vessel sank in 1679 on its maiden voyage, loaded with furs that were supposed to help fund a French explorer's expedition.

Libert, an amateur underwater explorer who has been fascinated by the Griffon most of his life, believes he found the wreck somewhere in Lake Michigan in 2001 -- but he won't say exactly where.

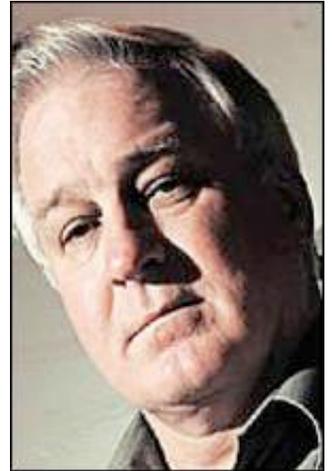
The archaeologists surveyed the wreck in May.

The Free Press obtained an advance copy of their report, which claims that carbon dating of wood samples from the wreck point to the "range of time" of the Griffon; magnetic and acoustic tests of the mostly buried wreck are consistent with a wooden boat, and the exposed part of the wreck, which Libert believes is the bow, does not have any metal nails or fasteners.

But the report concludes that more extensive research is necessary to determine whether the wreck is, indeed the legendary Griffon.

Both the state and Libert agree that the Griffon would be a major find with tremendous historical significance. And they agree that additional research should be done to determine whether it is in fact La Salle's famous ship, the first sailing vessel on the Great Lakes.

But that's about all they agree about. The State of Michigan claims all wrecks within its portion of the Great Lakes. The two sides are locked in a stubborn and



Explorer Steve Libert (2005 photo by CHIP SOMODEVILLA/Special to the Free)

Wreck of the Griffon

The Griffon was a 30- to 40-foot-long sailing vessel built by Rene-Robert Cavalier, Sieur de La Salle, the Frenchman who explored the Mississippi River Valley for France.

The first European sailing vessel on the Great Lakes, the Griffon left Green Bay, Wis., on Sept. 18, 1679, carrying 6,000 pounds of furs meant to help finance La Salle's exploration.

likely costly fight to see who gets to do the research.

"At this point, we're rather skeptical that this shipwreck is the Griffon," said Sarah Lapshan, chief information officer for the Department of History, Arts and Libraries. "We have yet to actually see it. Thus far we have not had the opportunity to have our underwater archaeologists even review it to assess it."

The state hasn't seen the wreck because Libert won't tell it where it is.

The Griffon sailed under the French flag; Libert and his attorney, Rick Robel, say that makes it a matter of international law, which would give the nod to France and their designated explorer, Libert. He's even willing to put off further research and wrangle with the court battle rather than fill out permits the state is demanding that require him to give the wreck's location.

"We can dive on it, that doesn't require permits," Libert said. "But I'm not going to let the state know where the location is."

Libert said the wreck belongs in a museum, but he wants to retain the rights to use his research and experience for such things as TV documentaries or books. He fears that the state will push him aside. Until the state gives him legal assurance that he will continue to be part of the research, he says he will not disclose the location.

Lapshan said the state wants to do the exploration. Libert and his backers, including David Parker of Rolling Hills, Calif., and the city of Charlevoix, doubt the state has the money to explore and raise the Griffon.

"It does belong to everybody, and I'd like to see it brought out," said Parker. "It's private funding that actually gets to the bottom of things." The state, however, says Libert never had any rights to the wreck in the first place. Bringing up samples from the wreck, a step necessary for further exploration, could be considered a criminal act, and punishable by a wide range of penalties, from a minor misdemeanor up to a 10-year felony.

Both sides say they are solely interested in either salvaging the wreck or, if that's not feasible, preserving it as a historical artifact.

"If it's found on our soil, it does belong to the people of Michigan," Lapshan said.

Libert, also said his interests are primarily historical and that his research will be done by qualified experts in underwater archaeology.

He's even lined up Charlevoix in his corner. The city is giving him space for such things as his news conference today, and it is allowing him to use city docks for his dive boats. Also today, the Charlevoix City Council will meet and discuss whether there should be further, nonmonetary support, Mayor Norman Carlson Jr. said.

"We're very much marine oriented; there's the French connection to Charlevoix," Carlson said. "The council is 100% behind this group. Frankly, it's good advertising."

The Griffon was never seen again. Its fate has tantalized historians and explorers ever since.

Some said the crew scuttled the boat and stole the furs. Legend has it that it was destroyed by an Indian curse. The most likely theory, however, is that it went down in a storm.

Peggy Walsh-Sarnecki

What's next

At a news conference at 11 a.m. today, marine archaeologists hired by Great Lakes Exploration owner Steve Libert will present the findings of a report on the wreckage of the Griffon. Both Libert and the State of Michigan have new briefs in U.S. District Court for the Western District of Michigan, in Grand Rapids. The case is expected to be heard within the next few months.

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