2015

The Sunken Vessels of Chauncey and Yeo in Lake Ontario

Ben Ford

Follow this and additional works at: https://orb.binghamton.edu/neha

Part of the Archaeological Anthropology Commons

Recommended Citation
Ford, Ben (2015) "The Sunken Vessels of Chauncey and Yeo in Lake Ontario," Northeast Historical Archaeology: Vol. 44 44, Article 8. Available at: https://orb.binghamton.edu/neha/vol44/iss1/8

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in Northeast Historical Archaeology by an authorized editor of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact ORB@binghamton.edu.
Introduction

The naval campaigns on Lake Ontario were important in terms of controlling the North American interior and the War of 1812 in general, as both sides struggled to control this natural inland highway. But the campaigns were largely strategic, with the squadrons of Isaac Chauncey (American) and Sir James Lucas Yeo (British) often jockeying for position, rather than engaging in pitched battles. At the beginning of the war, the British had a small squadron of four vessels (Royal George, Earl of Moira, Prince Regent, and Duke of Gloucester) and dockyards at Kingston and York (now Toronto), while the Americans had only one purpose-built warship, Oneida, and no dockyard (Malcomson 1998). Responding to this situation, in September 1812 Chauncey established a naval shipyard at Sackets Harbor, New York, under the supervision of Henry Eckford (Figure 1). By late 1814, the Sackets Harbor naval station was home to approximately 2,500 sailors and marines, and would produce nearly ten warships by the close of the war (Gibson 2012d). The British matched the Americans, as both sides strove to control the lake. Robert Malcomson (1998) provides an excellent history of the war on Lake Ontario, and, along with Kevin Crisman (2014b), Malcomson (2004) places the Lake Ontario theater within the larger naval struggle for control of the Great Lakes and Lake Champlain.

Naval power was central to controlling the Great Lakes and, by extension, the interior of North America during the War of 1812. On Lake Ontario, the naval conflict took the form of an arms race with virtually no actual engagements. As a result, few vessels were lost during the war. With the signing of the Rush-Bagot Agreement, however, both belligerents sold vessels and put others in storage, resulting in the wrecks of lost or abandoned war vessels all over the lake. Many of these vessels have been located and studied over the last century. This paper reviews the vessels that have been studied, discusses what has been and what can be learned from these vessels, and notes some of the shipwrecks that are still to be found.

In many ways ship construction was the war on Lake Ontario. With the exception of a few skirmishes and amphibious attacks, there were no all-out battles on the lake; instead, it was something of a “cold war,” or what Malcomson (1998: 225) has termed: “the war of the dockyards,” as the shipbuilders at Kingston and Sackets Harbor worked to give their commodores a significant advantage in vessels and cannon. This advantage never came; the shipyards were too evenly matched, and neither Chauncey nor Yeo would risk an engagement that he could not definitely win, because both understood the importance of Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River for controlling the interior. Additionally, the naval operations were regularly subjugated to army needs, meaning that both commodores were often fulfilling support roles, rather than pursuing their own agendas (Malcomson 1998; Crisman 2014d). The result was much maneuvering of squadrons during the sailing season and feverish construction throughout the war. Very few vessels, consequently, were lost during the war, but many naval shipwrecks from the period exist. This article summarizes the archaeological potential of the squadrons of Chauncey and Yeo.

Wartime Losses

Only three vessels were lost during the war. The converted merchant schooners...
Hamilton (ex-Diana) and Scourge (ex-Lord Nelson) capsized during a storm on 8 August 1813. Their demise was recounted in a dramatic style by Ned Myers in telling his life’s story to James Fenimore Cooper, eventually leading to the vessels’ discovery in a state of spectacular preservation in 1973 (Cain 1983; Nelson 1983; Cooper 1989; McAllister 2008; Moore 2014a). Another converted merchantman, Magnet (ex-Governor Simcoe and ex-Sir Sidney Smith), was run aground and blown up by the British 10 mi. west of the Niagara River on 5 August 1814 in order to avoid capture by American vessels Lady of the Lake and Sylph (Malcomson 1998:291–292). Additionally, there is likely a wealth of War of 1812 bateaux, Durham boats, and other small craft littering the bottoms of Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River. For example, General James Wilkinson’s disastrous 1813 invasion of Canada left a trail of sunken small craft from Sackets Harbor to the Salmon River near Fort Covington, New York (Ashdown 2012). However, this article focuses primarily on the larger, armed, sailing vessels produced by the primary shipyards at Kingston and Sackets Harbor.

It should not be surprising, however, that the naval War of 1812 on Lake Ontario produced only the wrecks of Hamilton and Scourge, the smithereens of Magnet, and a number of yet-undiscovered small craft. During the Battle of Lake Erie, where Oliver Hazard Perry and the Americans bested the British squadron in an intense three-hour battle of 15 vessels, not a single one was sunk. Recent archaeological work, by the Great Lakes Historical Society, to identify where the battle took place looked for concentrations of iron shot on the lake floor, not shipwrecks. The comparatively more cautious strategies of Sir James Lucas Yeo and Isaac Chauncey allowed the majority of the vessels on Lake Ontario to survive the war and return to their respective dockyards to await their various fates. Thus, the naval stations at Kingston and Sackets Harbor, which figured so prominently during the war, were also important in the postwar lives of these vessels and the archaeological search for what remains of the squadrons of Chauncey and Yeo.

### Dismantling the Squadrons

The first vessels to leave the squadrons were the small vessels. Not long after peace was declared, the Americans sold the merchant vessels they had bought or seized and then armed at the beginning of the war to bolster their forces. In some cases these vessels were sold back to the same merchants who had owned them before the war (Palmer 1984a). These were the sister vessels of Hamilton and Scourge, and included Duke of Gloucester, which
the Americans had captured at York. Either originally built as merchant vessels or small enough to be adapted to the ports and economies of the time, these vessels were readily employed as trade rebounded on the lake.

The larger vessels were retained while the details of the peace were sorted out. With the signing of the Rush-Bagot Agreement of 1818, which limited the armament of Great Britain and America to one vessel on the lake of not more than “100 tones burthen and 18 pounder gun,” the status quo that had persisted throughout the war was formalized, and it was time to disarm Lake Ontario (Malcomson 1998, 2004). The warships were placed in ordinary, or storage, at their respective dockyards. They were securely moored and cleaned, their decks were boarded over to keep out water, and they were staffed with a skeleton crew for maintenance and to man the pumps (FIG. 2). Neither side was initially prepared to get rid of its squadron; the vessels represented a substantial investment, and it was an uneasy time between America and Britain.

Despite having crews to maintain them, decay began to set in, and plank seams began to open up. Ship keepers on both sides of the international boundary would periodically find one of their charges resting on the bottom of the harbor, usually listing heavily to one side—neither a natural nor healthy position for a vessel. By the early 1820s, most of the American vessels at Sackets Harbor were being described as “sunk and decayed,” and there was an increasing call for their removal (U.S. Congress 1823, 1824) By 1825, much of the American squadron had been broken up and removed (Hugunin 1825). Anything usable from the vessels was taken: fittings, nails, and bolts for the iron; wood was likely sold for firewood or as scrap. The stored vessels, with the exceptions of Sylph, Madison, and Oneida, which were refitted as merchant vessels, were nearly wiped clean from the archaeological record. A similar pattern took place at Kingston during the early 1830s, resulting in the breaking up of most of the British squadron (Moore 2006, 2014b).

In the case of both nations, the destruction of the squadron included vessels left on the stocks. The battle for lake supremacy had gone on right up to the declaration of peace and, in some cases, for a few weeks afterward (Gibson 2012d). The British left Canada and Wolfe on the stocks, and both were dismantled in the early 1830s (Moore 2006). It is likely the American ship Chippewa was also broken up at approximately the same time (Gibson 2012d). The massive 2,948 tons burden, New Orleans, however, remained on Navy Point at Sackets Harbor until the winter of 1883/4, becoming something of a tourist attraction.

Nonetheless, the destruction of the squadrons was not complete. Due to chance, entrepreneurship, and a bit of laziness, the remains of approximately a dozen British and American warships endure. Of these, seven have been discovered, and a similar number may still remain to be found. Tables 1 and 2 summarize the disposition of the two squadrons (Palmer 1984a; Malcomson 2004; Moore 2006, 2008, 2014a, 2014b; Swayze 2011; Gibson 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2012d; Kopp 2012; Lardas 2012; Amer 2014; Crisman 2014a, 2014b, 2014d). Where there is a question about the fate of a vessel or the identity of a wreck, the disposition is modified with a question mark.

Figure 2. American squadron in ordinary at Sackets Harbor, ca. 1816. New Orleans is in the barn-like structure on the right that dominates Navy Point (Hall 1818). (Image courtesy of Library and Archives Canada.)
One of the jobs for future archaeologists and historians is to locate the remains of the vessels marked as “missing” or to show definitively that they were destroyed with no chance of physical remains.

Archaeological Remains of the Lake Ontario Squadrons

As Canadian archaeologists have done a much better job of locating and identifying the physical history of the British squadron, it is appropriate to begin with the wrecks north of the international boundary. *St. Lawrence* was a massive 102-gun ship, measuring 191 ft. long. It would have looked at home among the largest ships in the British saltwater navy, but never saw action, as it was operational for only the last months of the war. After being laid up at Kingston for almost 20 years, the “immense uncouth ark” was sold to Robert Drummond, who had it pumped out and towed from Navy Bay on the east side of Kingston to the Morton Brewery west of town (Moore 2006: 28, 2014b). The ship was then sunk parallel to the shore, cut down to facilitate access from the water, and attached to land with a pier in order to make it a cordwood wharf for refueling steamers. Constant impacts from loading steamboats and the ravages of waves and ice clearly took a toll on the hull, as today all that remains is the lower portion of one side of the vessel. Because neither the keel nor enough of the ends survive, it is unknown which side of the vessel is present (Moore 2006, 2014b).

While *St. Lawrence* was moved west, two other vessels were moved east and sunk in Deadman Bay. *Burlington* and *Kingston* were both placed in ordinary at the Kingston Naval Yard and then sold in 1832, but they were not moved until sometime between 1839 and 1843. At that time they were pumped out and towed to a more out-of-the-way location east of Point Henry, where they were deposited. These wrecks have been well studied by Preserve Our Wrecks, Parks Canada, and Texas A&M University (Moore 2006, 2014b; Walker 2006). In conjunction with *St. Lawrence, Burlington* and *Kingston*, because they are so well preserved, provide the best evidence of how the British were building vessels on Lake Ontario. The lower hulls of both vessels survive from the keel to the turn of the bilge on the port side and from the sternpost nearly to the stem. It was this good state of preservation that finally allowed both wrecks to be identified after being un- and misidentified into the late 20th century (Moore 2006, 2014b). These wrecks are open for diving by the public and are accessible to scuba divers interested in the War of 1812 period.

Two additional British vessels may have been identified near the Kingston dockyard. *Montreal* and *Charwell* (ex–Earl of Moira) are known to have waited in ordinary alongside *St. Lawrence, Kingston*, and *Burlington* before being disposed. The hulk of *Montreal* may have been towed out of Navy Bay and deposited in deeper water, as what is known as Guenter’s Wreck closely matches the dimensions of Montreal in many ways (Moore 2008, 2012). The likely remains of *Charwell* have also recently been tentatively identified within Navy Bay (Moore 2008, 2012; Kopp 2012). While very promising, these wrecks require further study to identify them definitively as War of 1812 vessels. Finally, the Browns Bay vessel is often discussed in conjunction with Lake Ontario War of 1812 shipwrecks. The wreck raised from Browns Bay is likely the remains of *Radcliffe*, a gunboat launched in 1817 and eventually converted into a merchant sloop (Amer 2014).

Two American wrecks also have been studied by Canadian researchers. *Hamilton* and *Scourge* both sank north of the international line, in approximately 300 ft. of water. Their depth led to phenomenal preservation, with masts, figureheads, and armaments intact, making these wrecks international stars when they were discovered in 1973 (Nelson 1983). The U.S. eventually transferred the wrecks to the City of Hamilton, Ontario, and they were made a Canadian National Historic Site. The sites are protected under the Ontario Heritage Act, which regulates diving, submersible, and survey operations in their vicinities. This is particularly appropriate, as these wrecks are war graves, with skeletons noted during the initial survey. More recently, both shipwrecks were surveyed between 2007 and 2013 using sonar systems to create three-dimensional records of both vessels’ exteriors. This investigation found that the vessels were infested with quagga mussels (*Dreissena rostriformis bugensis*) (Moore et al. 2011; Moore 2014a). These invasive mussels cause deterioration of
Table 1: Disposition of the American Lake Ontario War of 1812 Fleet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vessel</th>
<th>Alternative names</th>
<th>Built</th>
<th>Guns</th>
<th>Disposition</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oneida</td>
<td>Adjutant Clitz</td>
<td>1809</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Missing?</td>
<td>Ordinary at Sackets Harbor. Sold 1825, renamed Adjutant Clitz. Abandoned at Clayton ca. 1837</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madison</td>
<td>General Brady</td>
<td>1812</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>Ordinary at Sackets Harbor. Sold 1825, cut down to 302 tons, General Brady. Still in use 1829. Does not appear in records of known losses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Pike</td>
<td></td>
<td>1813</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Destroyed</td>
<td>Ordinary at Sackets Harbor. Broken up and removed 1825</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lady of the Lake</td>
<td></td>
<td>1813</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>Remained in service following the war. Sold 1826. Packet between Niagara and Toronto. Lost Dec. 1826, 3 miles from Oswego. Rediscovered July 1827. Possibly refloated as a vessel named Lady of the Lake was sold at Kingston in 1835</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylph</td>
<td></td>
<td>1813</td>
<td>10 to 18</td>
<td>Missing?</td>
<td>Ordinary at Sackets Harbor. Sold 1825. Sunk off Clayton 1843</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jefferson</td>
<td></td>
<td>1814</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Known wreck</td>
<td>Ordinary at Sackets Harbor. Sold 1825, but never removed. Hull in Sackets Harbor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jones</td>
<td></td>
<td>1814</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Destroyed</td>
<td>Ordinary at Sackets Harbor. Sold 1825 and removed 1825 or 1829</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mohawk</td>
<td></td>
<td>1814</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Destroyed?</td>
<td>Ordinary at Sackets Harbor. Sold 1825 and removed ca. 1829, likely broken up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superior</td>
<td></td>
<td>1814</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Destroyed</td>
<td>Ordinary at Sackets Harbor. Sold 1825 and removed 1825 or 1829</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chippewa</td>
<td></td>
<td>Building 1815</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>Destroyed</td>
<td>Never launched. Likely broken up circa Nov. 1833</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td></td>
<td>Building 1815</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>Destroyed</td>
<td>Never launched. Broken up 1883/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armed Barges</td>
<td></td>
<td>1814</td>
<td>1 to 2</td>
<td>Destroyed, missing</td>
<td>Placed in ordinary at Storrs Harbor. One broke its mooring and drifted onto a sandbar. The others were sold and likely broken up ca. 1825</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armed merchant vessels (11)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1804 to 1811</td>
<td>2 to 10</td>
<td>Destroyed, missing, known wrecks</td>
<td>Hamilton and Scurge lost in storm 1813; others sold 1815 and either fade from historical record or are known to have been run aground and destroyed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Crisman 2014 a, 2014c, 2014d; Gibson 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2012d; Lardas 2012; Malcomson 2004; Moore 2014a; Palmer 1984a; Swayze 2011
## Table 2: Disposition of the British Lake Ontario War of 1812 Fleet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vessel</th>
<th>Alternative names</th>
<th>Built</th>
<th>Guns</th>
<th>Disposition</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charwell</td>
<td>Earl of Moira</td>
<td>1805</td>
<td>10 to 16</td>
<td>Known wreck?</td>
<td>Ordinary at Kingston. Sold 1837. Likely Navy Bay Wreck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magnet</td>
<td>Governor Simcoe, Sir Sidney Smith</td>
<td>1808</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Destroyed</td>
<td>Destroyed to avoid capture, August 1814</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niagara</td>
<td>Royal George</td>
<td>1809</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Destroyed</td>
<td>Ordinary at Kingston. Hauled out 1820s, broken up and removed 1830s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netley</td>
<td>General Beresford, Prince Regent</td>
<td>1812</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Destroyed</td>
<td>Ordinary at Kingston. Hauled out 1820s, broken up and removed 1830s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montreal</td>
<td>Sir George Prevost, Wolfe</td>
<td>1813</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Known wreck?</td>
<td>Ordinary at Kingston. Sold 1832. Possibly Guenter’s Wreck near RMC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Star</td>
<td>Lord Melville</td>
<td>1813</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Destroyed</td>
<td>Ordinary at Kingston. Hauled out 1820s, broken up and removed 1830s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burlington</td>
<td>Vittoria, Princess Charlotte, Wreck Baker</td>
<td>1814</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Known wreck</td>
<td>Ordinary at Kingston. Sold 1832. Sunk in Deadman Bay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kingston</td>
<td>Prince Regent, Wreck Able</td>
<td>1814</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Known wreck</td>
<td>Ordinary at Kingston. Sold 1832. Sunk in Deadman Bay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psyche</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1814</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Destroyed</td>
<td>Ordinary at Kingston. Hauled out 1820s, broken up and removed 1830s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Lawrence</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1814</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>Known wreck</td>
<td>Ordinary at Kingston. Sold to Robert Drummond 1832. Used as wharf at Morton Brewery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Building 1815</td>
<td>118 planned</td>
<td>Destroyed</td>
<td>Never launched. Broken up 1830s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wolfe</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Building 1815</td>
<td>118 planned</td>
<td>Destroyed</td>
<td>Never launched. Broken up 1830s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gunboats</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Various</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Destroyed, known wreck</td>
<td>Broken up and removed 1830s, except Radcliffe (Browns Bay Vessel)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes: Amer 2014; Kopp 2012; Lardas 2012; Malcomson 2004; Moore 2006, 2008, 2014a, 2014b*
Northeast Historical Archaeology/Vol. 44, 2015

wood and metal, and their added weight could speed the almost inevitable collapse of the shipwrecks.

While Hamilton and Scourge were converted merchant vessels, only one purpose-built Lake Ontario American warship has been archaeologically investigated, the brig Jefferson. Jefferson was sold with much of the American squadron in 1825, but was only partially salvaged, if at all. By 1825, the hull was lying on its port side behind Navy Point at Sackets Harbor, possibly allowing salvagers to break up the exposed starboard side (Fig. 3). If they did not, locals seeking firewood almost certainly did. Naval shipbuilding had nearly deforested the region around Sackets Harbor, and wood had to be transported several miles, at a steep cost, for many years after the war. The rest of the hull, however, remained largely undisturbed in Sackets Harbor into the 20th century. During the first quarter of the 1900s, the stern was dynamited by the New York State Militia in a spate of harbor clearing. Additionally, the construction of Navy Point Marina in the 1960s resulted in pilings being driven through the wreck. Some of the pilings passed harmlessly through gun ports, but others damaged the hull. Jefferson’s remains were investigated in the 1980s by Kevin Crisman, providing the foundation for the understanding of American shipbuilding on Lake Ontario during the War of 1812 (Crisman 1989, 2014a). This wreck is also the most accessible of the War of 1812 vessels. With permission, it is possible to walk out on the marina docks and see portions of the hull lying on the marina bottom, making this vessel a very tangible part of War of 1812 heritage.

The fact that Jefferson survived in Sackets Harbor after it was sold and supposedly broken up raised the question of whether other wrecks are still in the area. One other large vessel, likely Mohawk, remained in the harbor until 1829, when William Vaughan was contracted to remove it (Mordecai 1828a, 1828b, 1829). It is not clear how he removed the vessel, however. One possibility is that he refloated the already-demasted hull and dumped it in the middle of Black River Bay, just outside Sackets Harbor, where the water is approximately 60 ft. deep. A side-scan sonar, magnetometer, and sub-bottom profiler survey of Black River Bay was conducted to test this proposition. The survey revealed no wreck or portion of a vessel consistent with Mohawk (Ford et al. 2012; Gibson 2014). It appears that the hull was dumped in this location, but is no longer present; was deposited farther out in the lake; or, most likely, was broken up in the harbor and removed.

Similar to Mohawk, there was some possibility that 15, 75 ft. long armed barges built by the Americans near the end of the war were still extant. Like much of the squadron, the armed barges were placed in ordinary in 1815, but at Storrs Harbor, rather than Sackets Harbor. Near the end of the war, the U.S. developed a second shipyard at Storrs Harbor, approximately 3 mi. northeast of Sackets Harbor, to build Chippewa, which was never completed (Gibson 2012d). One of the armed barges broke its mooring in a storm sometime before 1818 and drifted onto a sandbar near the junction of Muskellunge Creek and Black River Bay (U.S. Naval Forces on Lake Ontario 1818; Gibson 2012d). The location of this armed barge is indicated on an 1829 chart and possibly appears as a small, unnamed obstruction on another chart seven years later (Vinton 1829; Stockton 1836). After 1836, the wreck was no longer indicated on charts, and it is unknown whether it was covered by the shoal, removed, or destroyed. The remaining 14 armed barges were still in Storrs Harbor in 1825, but resting on the bottom when they were sold (Adams 1825). At least three of these vessels were later removed to Sackets Harbor, but the fate of the rest is unknown (Gary Gibson 2014, pers. comm.). In order to investigate the possibility that these boats were allowed to remain in Storrs Harbor after they were sold, a magnetometer and “shuffling” survey was conducted in the harbor. The results of the survey were negative, suggesting that the armed barges had been removed from the harbor. As for the 15th armed barge that wrecked on the sandbar, a magnetometer survey and ground penetrating radar survey conducted from the frozen lake surface suggested that something was buried near where the 1829 chart marked the wreck. An excavation in this area, however, did not uncover any evidence of a shipwreck. It is possible that this armed barge is still buried in the bay, but its location remains unknown (Ford et al. 2012).
While it is becoming clear that New Yorkers were brutally effective in clearing warships from their harbors during the 19th century, there is still the potential that vessels sold out of the service may survive as shipwrecks. *Madison* was sold in 1825, cut down to 302 tons, and renamed *General Brady*. The vessel was still in use in 1829, but fades from the historical record and does not appear in records of known losses (Swayze 2011; Gibson 2012b). This brig, which was two times larger than most of the merchant vessels operating on Lake Ontario, may have been too large to be viable. However, size alone may not have been the cause of its short career. *Oneida* and *Sylph* also were nearly 300 tons and served merchants for more than a decade after being sold out of the service, so it is equally possible that the postwar modifications that reduced *Madison* from 580 to 302 tons may have affected its sailing qualities. *Madison* likely ended its career, similar to many smaller merchant vessels, in a breaker’s yard; however, it may have also been abandoned in some quiet bay, waiting for an archaeologist to stumble across its hull and to raise questions about its odd construction.

*Oneida* and *Sylph* also were converted to merchant vessels, but their final resting places are better known. Both vessels eventually found themselves in the lumber trade, one of the major industries on Lake Ontario in the early 19th century. Both vessels were abandoned in the late 1830s or early 1840s off Clayton, New York, a major lumber port, where sticks of timber were assembled into rafts to be floated down the St. Lawrence River to Montreal (Palmer 1984a, 1984b). It is unclear, however, what happened to these vessels after they were abandoned. It is possible that one was largely broken up and eventually buried in fill near the current site of the Wooden Boat Museum, while the other may have been incorporated into a pier (Watertown Herald 1888; Gibson 2012a, 2012c). There is a local tradition that *Oneida* is located beneath the municipal dock in Clayton; however, the possible remains have not been seen since the 1970s (McCarthy 2009).

Lastly, *Lady of the Lake* still may remain to be found. This small schooner was built for speed and appears again and again in the historical records, all over the lake, carrying information and keeping tabs on the British. *Lady of the Lake* was purchased by John Rodgers of Oswego in 1826, and after a season of serving as a packet between Niagara and
Northeast Historical Archaeology/Vol. 44, 2015 141

steeply from the keel to the turn of the bilge, offering less water resistance, but sacrificing provision space and safety. While these vessels were also shallower than oceangoing warships, they were, nonetheless, designed to operate in the open lake and to dock in the few deep harbors at places like Kingston, Sackets Harbor, and Niagara, not to take advantage of the more common shallow harbors around the lake. With their home ports always within 193 mi., it was possible to build shallow but sharp hulls because they did not have to carry many provisions (Crisman 2014c). Clearly, both sides were modifying what they knew of ship construction to match the environment and needs of naval warfare on Lake Ontario. They were building specific vessels for specific uses in specific parts of the lake. While these vessels were fast and handy, these characteristics came at the cost of safety. The Jefferson crew was forced to jettison half its guns in an 1814 storm to keep from sinking, and a recent study of the American schooners Newash and Tecumseth on Lake Huron reinforces just how prone to capsizing these vessels were (Crisman 1989, 2014a; Gordon 2009; Gordon, Hoskins, and Heinold 2014).

Similarly, both shipyards were working under incredibly demanding construction schedules; turning out vessels in months, sometimes weeks. Based on the known archaeological examples of Jefferson, Kingston, Burlington, and St. Lawrence, the shipbuilders were building solid vessels, but to save time they often opted to replace complicated joinery

Toronto was returning to Oswego when it was lost in a December storm (Colton 1876; Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation 1911). Interestingly, the wreck was noted the following August, 3 mi. from Oswego, in “deep water ... masts and booms lying at her sides where it would seem they had been lashed previous to her sinking” (Freeman’s Advocate 1827). It is unknown whether the wreck was allowed to remain on the bottom after its discovery, or it was refloated and put back into service. Finding this shipwreck, if it remains, would address the mystery of its loss, while simultaneously adding considerably to the understanding of American War of 1812 ship construction and the development of the Baltimore-clipper vessel type.

The Value of War of 1812 Shipwrecks

While there is clearly room for more work on Lake Ontario War of 1812 ships and shipwrecks, archaeologists can begin to see patterns in the available data. In many ways the American and British shipbuilders paralleled each other throughout the war. As Robert Malcomson (1998) has effectively argued, each side was matching the other, gun for gun, and in many ways the vessels existed as a byproduct, a way to get guns onto the lake. The parallels run deeper, however, and both sides had similar responses to the strategic advantages and limitations of operating on the lake. Both sides were building vessels with sharp hulls (Moore 2012) (FIG. 4). A sharp hull is one that slopes steeply from the keel to the turn of the bilge, offering less water resistance, but sacrificing provision space and safety. While these vessels were also shallower than oceangoing warships, they were, nonetheless, designed to operate in the open lake and to dock in the few deep harbors at places like Kingston, Sackets Harbor, and Niagara, not to take advantage of the more common shallow harbors around the lake. With their home ports always within 193 mi., it was possible to build shallow but sharp hulls because they did not have to carry many provisions (Crisman 2014c). Clearly, both sides were modifying what they knew of ship construction to match the environment and needs of naval warfare on Lake Ontario. They were building specific vessels for specific uses in specific parts of the lake. While these vessels were fast and handy, these characteristics came at the cost of safety. The Jefferson crew was forced to jettison half its guns in an 1814 storm to keep from sinking, and a recent study of the American schooners Newash and Tecumseth on Lake Huron reinforces just how prone to capsizing these vessels were (Crisman 1989, 2014a; Gordon 2009; Gordon, Hoskins, and Heinold 2014).

Similarly, both shipyards were working under incredibly demanding construction schedules; turning out vessels in months, sometimes weeks. Based on the known archaeological examples of Jefferson, Kingston, Burlington, and St. Lawrence, the shipbuilders were building solid vessels, but to save time they often opted to replace complicated joinery

---

**Figure 4. Simplified midship profiles of Oneida, Jefferson, and Burlington.** Note that Burlington and Jefferson have more rise to their floors and sharper bilges than the pre-war Oneida. Profiles are based on Chapelle (1949), Crisman (1989), and Moore (2006); not drawn to scale. (Figure by author, 2013.)
with more wood (Crisman 1989, 2014a, 2014c; Moore 2006, 2012, 2014b). In Jefferson, for example, the curved timber knees that support the deck in most wooden vessels built before and after the War of 1812 were replaced with a heavy clamp that attached the deck to the sides. Omitting the knees saved time because there was less timber to shape, but also made Jefferson less durable, especially in rough weather (Crisman 1989, 2014a). Similarly, neither the British nor the Americans took the time to cut limber holes—the little notches in the frame bottoms that allow water to drain toward the pumps. This omission, again, shaved time off construction, but, in combination with the green timber used by both shipyards, made rot an imminent inevitability. The British vessels also demonstrated a surprising amount of variation in hull construction (Moore 2006, 2014b), suggesting that individual shipwrights were given a free hand to solve design and logistics problems, rather than relying on standard protocols. Thus, the vessels of both sides were fast to build, fast to sail, but neither entirely safe nor durable. As Noah Brown put it in describing the vessels he was building on Lake Erie:

[W]e want no extras; plain work, plain work is all we want. They are only required for one battle; if we win, that is all that will be wanted of them. If the enemy are victorious, the work is good enough to be captured. (Malcomson 2004: 90)

These hull designs and expedient decisions, as well as the size of the vessels, made it difficult for the Americans to sell their vessels after the war. The Lake Ontario warships of America and Great Britain were built specifically for war, not the average ports or cargo needs of merchant vessels. A vessel that was prone to capsize spectacularly or to rot quietly from the keel out was not necessarily a good investment, even at a reduced cost. While removing the cannon and reducing the amount of sail would have made these vessels less dangerous, it is not unreasonable to hypothesize that hull design contributed to the loss of Lady of the Lake, remembering that it was a notably fast vessel in a squadron of vessels that regularly traded speed for safety. Lady of the Lake is also notable because its size (89 tons) put it in the range of merchant vessels of that period. The merchant vessels purchased or seized by the Americans at the beginning of the war averaged 78 tons displacement, and by the third decade of the 19th century the average lake vessel displaced only 150 tons (Minnesota Historical Society 2012). Thus, it is little surprise that Lady of the Lake, Oneida (262 tons), Sylph (300 tons), and the modified Madison (302 tons) were the only American vessels that were purchased by merchants; the next-smallest vessels were Jefferson and Jones at 500 tons displacement (Gibson 2012b; Lardas 2012). Cargo shipments at this time were generally small, and filling a large vessel simply meant more risk of loss and that fewer ports could be served. While the Americans had some success disposing of their smaller vessels to local merchants in 1825, the Royal Navy did not attempt to sell any of its vessels until 1831, when St. Lawrence was sold. By the time the Royal Navy held a second auction in 1836, the remaining vessels were likely so decayed that they were only suitable for scrap. Radcliffe, the sole British War of 1812-era vessel converted to merchant service, was likely sold between 1831 and 1836 (Amer 2014). The final parallel between the squadrons of Chauncey and Yeo was the difficulty in getting rid of the vessels. Even when the vessels were sold or a contract was taken to remove them, buyers seem to have been inclined to leave many of the hulks lying around long after they were to have been removed.

If the remains of Oneida or Duke of Gloucester can be identified, or the wreck of Charwell substantiated, it will allow for a comparison between vessels built before the war and those built during it (Kopp 2012). These vessels, all launched between 1805 (Earl of Moira) and 1809 (Royal George and Oneida), were purpose-built warships designed to operate on Lake Ontario, but were not subject to the exigencies that dominated the wartime arms race. A comparison of these vessels will shed light on how drastically hull design and construction was adapted during the war. If it is ever possible to record the interiors of Hamilton and Scourge, this comparison can be expanded to understanding differences between merchant ships and warships on Lake Ontario before the war. Furthermore, if more of the American wartime vessels (Madison, Sylph, and Lady of the Lake) can be identified and studied, this will allow a fuller comparison of British and American adaptations.
Northeast Historical Archaeology/Vol. 44, 2015 143

Eckford designed and oversaw the construction of eight warships, all of which had unique characteristics that identified them as Eckford designs created specifically for the Great Lakes (e.g., sharp, fast, and shallow hulls) (Crisman 1989, 2014a, 2014c; Malcomson 2004). For his smaller armed barges, Eckford had access to plans drafted in 1813 by William Doughty, the chief naval constructor of the U.S. Navy during the War of 1812 (Malcomson 2004). The introduction of centrally planned construction can be traced to the 17th century in the Royal Navy, but the U.S. adopted the practice more slowly (Winklareth 2000). For example, Noah Brown used the Doughty draught to build the row galley Allen on Lake Champlain, but made several alterations to the design to simplify the construction and to adapt to shortages in particular shapes of wood (Emery 2003, 2014).

It is unknown whether or how Eckford changed the Doughty plan to accommodate issues of available materials, time constraints, the environment of Lake Ontario, or his ego. Analysis of the Doughty draft, Allen, and a Lake Ontario armed barge would contribute to a better understanding of how this early attempt at centralized control of ship construction was put into practice, how effective it was, and how it led to the development of the more formal modern navy.

Similarly, the massive accumulation of labor and materials required to build, not only the 15 gunboats, but also the 6 warships begun, if not completed, during 1814, argues for significant organization on the part of the U.S. Navy and Henry Eckford. There has been no study of how this organization translated into vessels, but other fleets built under times of war stress, such as Benedict Arnold’s Lake Champlain fleet of the Revolutionary War and the Emergency Fleet of World War I, suggest the employment of systematized construction to speed shipbuilding (Bratten 1997; Winklareth 2000; Thiesen 2006). Systematized construction burgeoned as the 19th century progressed, and shipbuilding became more industrialized. Ultimately, ship construction transitioned from a craft to an industry, and the American Lake Ontario squadron, the armed barges in particular, may represent an early stage in that transition. There is much more to be learned from these vessels.
Acknowledgments

This article is a synthetic work based on the efforts of several excellent historians and archaeologists. I gratefully acknowledge the scholarship of Gary Gibson, Robert Malcomson, Jonathan Moore, Kevin Crisman, Dennis McCarthy, Richard Palmer, and David Swayne. I am also indebted to the National Geographic Society, Waitt Grants Program; the Institute of Nautical Archaeology; Indiana University of Pennsylvania; the Great Lakes Historical Society; and the College of Charleston for their support of the Mohawk and armed-barges investigations.

References

Adams, Samuel W.
1825 Letter to William Bainbridge, 6 June. Microfilm, RG45, National Archives of the United States, Washington, DC.

Amer, Christopher

Ashdown, Dana William

Bratten, John
1997 The Continental Gondola Philadelphia. Ph.D. diss., Department of Anthropology, Texas A&M University, College Station. University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, MI.

Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation
1911 Master Abstracts of Enrollments Issued at Lower Great Lakes Ports, 1815–1911. Microfilm, M2107, National Archives of the United States, Washington, DC.

Cain, Emily
1983 Ghost Ships, Hamilton and Scourge: Historical Treasures from the War of 1812. Beaufort, NY.

Chapelle, Howard I.
1949 The History of the American Sailing Navy. Bonanza, NY.

Colton, Hamilton

Cooper, James Fenimore

Crisman, Kevin J.


2014b Coffins of the Brave: Lake Shipwrecks of the War of 1812. Texas A&M University Press, College Station.


Emery, Eric

Everts, L. H., and J. M. Holcom

Ford, Ben, Katie Farnsworth, M. Scott Harris, and Carrie Sowden

Freeman’s Advocate
Gibson, Gary M.

Goldenberg, Joseph A.

Gordon, LeeAnne
2009 “Newash and Tecumseth: Analysis of Two Post-War of 1812 Vessels on the Great Lakes”. Thesis. Department of Anthropology, Texas A&M University, College Station.

Gordon, LeeAnne, Sara Hoskins, and Erich Heinold

Hall, Francis

Hugunin, Robert
1825 Letter to William Bainbridge, 23 March. Microfilm, RG45, National Archives of the United States, Washington, DC.

Kopp, Nadine

Lardas, Mark

Malcomson, Robert

McAllister, Michael

McCarthy, Dennis

Minnesota Historical Society

Moore, Jonathan
2006 Archaeological and Historical Investigations of Three War of 1812 Wrecks at Kingston, Ontario: HMS St. Lawrence, HMS Kingston and HMS Burlington. Manuscript, Ottawa, ON.

Moore, Jonathan, Brandy Lockhart, Ryan Harris, Nancy E. Binnie, and Darren Keyes
Mordecai, Alfred
1828a Letter to Hiram Steele, 20 August. Microfilm, RG77, M65, Roll 2, p. 401, National Archives of the United States, Washington, DC.
1828b Letter to Hiram Steele, 3 September. Microfilm, RG77, M65, Roll 2, p. 409, National Archives of the United States, Washington, DC.
1829 Letter to Hiram Steele, 7 May. Microfilm, RG77, M65, Roll 2, p. 588, National Archives of the United States, Washington, DC.

Nelson, Daniel A.

Palmer, Richard F.

Stockton, William
1836 Map of the Mouth and Bay of Black River Jefferson County N.Y. National Archives of the United States, Washington, DC.

Swayze, Dave

Thiesen, William H.

U.S. Congress
1823 Senate Document 1, December 1. Senate, 18th Congress, 1st session, Washington, DC.
1824 Navy Commissioners Office, Senate Document 30, February 3. Senate, 18th Congress, 1st session, Washington, DC.

U.S. Naval Forces on Lake Ontario

Vinton, Lieutenant R.
1829 Sketch (a Vue) of the Mouth of Black River and Waters Adjacent, Jefferson County, New York. Microfilm, RG77,? Civil Works Map File D77, National Archives of the United States, Washington, DC.

Walker, Daniel

Watertown Herald

Winklareth, Robert I.

Author Information
Ben Ford
Department of Anthropology
Indiana University of Pennsylvania
McElhaney Hall, Room G-1
ben.ford@iup.edu