



## The Wrecks of Lake Champlain

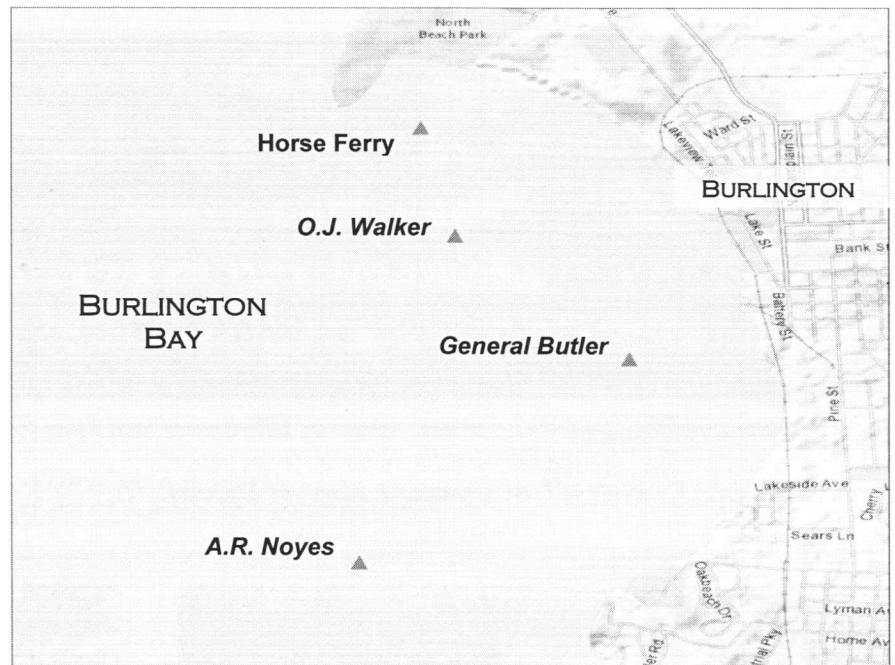
by Gary C. Kessler

Most recreational SCUBA divers do not have Lake Champlain on their "must see" list of dive destinations, but those with an interest in U.S. history and maritime archaeology should. Located between New York and Vermont, Lake Champlain is the sixth largest fresh water lake in the U.S.—and for three weeks in 1998 it was designated as a Great Lake.<sup>1</sup>

Lake Champlain is 125 miles long and 12 miles wide at its widest point, near Burlington, Vermont. It is also home to a large number of well-preserved wrecks that are, in some cases, several hundred years old. Cold, fresh water preserves wooden wrecks and most in Lake Champlain remained undamaged until the influx of zebra mussels in the early-1990s.

Despite the dozens of historically significant wrecks in the lake, only nine are open for diving as part of the Lake Champlain Underwater Historic Preserve. For visitors to the area, five of the wrecks are easily accessible from Burlington, with four being in the immediate vicinity of Burlington Bay. This article will focus on these five wrecks.

<sup>1</sup> The designation was a matter of politics. The National Sea Grant (NSG) program funds zebra mussel research in the Great Lakes, but not in Lake Champlain where they have been a problem since the early 1990s. Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy thus sponsored a bill in March 1998 designating the lake as a Great Lake. A political compromise "undesignated" the lake, and NSG research monies were made available.



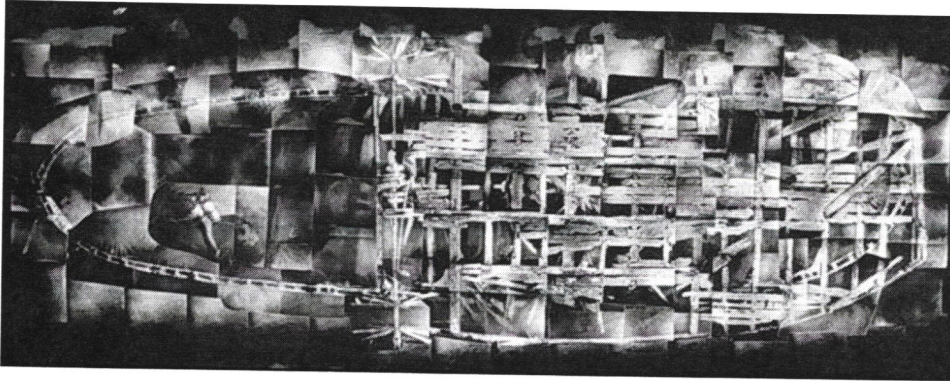
Location of four of the wrecks in Burlington Bay mentioned in the text.  
Map by the author.

### Horse Ferry

Perhaps the best known—or at least best documented—wreck in the lake is the Horse Ferry. Animal-powered boats were used in North America in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and this wreck, discovered in 1983, dates back to 1830-1840. As the name implies, the Horse Ferry was a horse-powered vessel used to transport people and cargo on the lake; it is reportedly the only known wreck of such a vessel in North America. Zebra mussels have caused significant damage to the wreck, but the hull, side paddles, turnstile, and gearing



*A horse ferry across Lake Winnisquam, New Hampshire.  
Image from <http://www.paddleducks.co.uk/smf/index.php?topic=6544.0>.*



*Photomosaic of the Horse Ferry wreck. Image by Hill, Shares, and Floss for the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation, Courtesy of Lake Champlain Maritime Museum.*



*Port side of the Horse Ferry. Photo by the author.*

are still largely intact. The wreck is 63 feet (19 m) long and lies in about 50 feet (15 m) of water.

#### *O.J. Walker*

Two other wrecks are close to the Horse Ferry in the bay. The *O.J. Walker*, a schooner-rigged canal boat, was built in Burlington in 1862. The *Walker* went down in a severe windstorm in May 1895. The crew abandoned the ship as it took on water, after which the boat tipped, dumped its cargo of brick and tile, righted itself and, finally, sank. The 86-foot (26-m) boat landed on its keel in about 65 feet (20 m) of water. Its hull, mast, and boom are mostly intact, with brick debris and a handcart lying near the vessel; an intact anchor is visible at the bow and the helm is still visible at the stern.

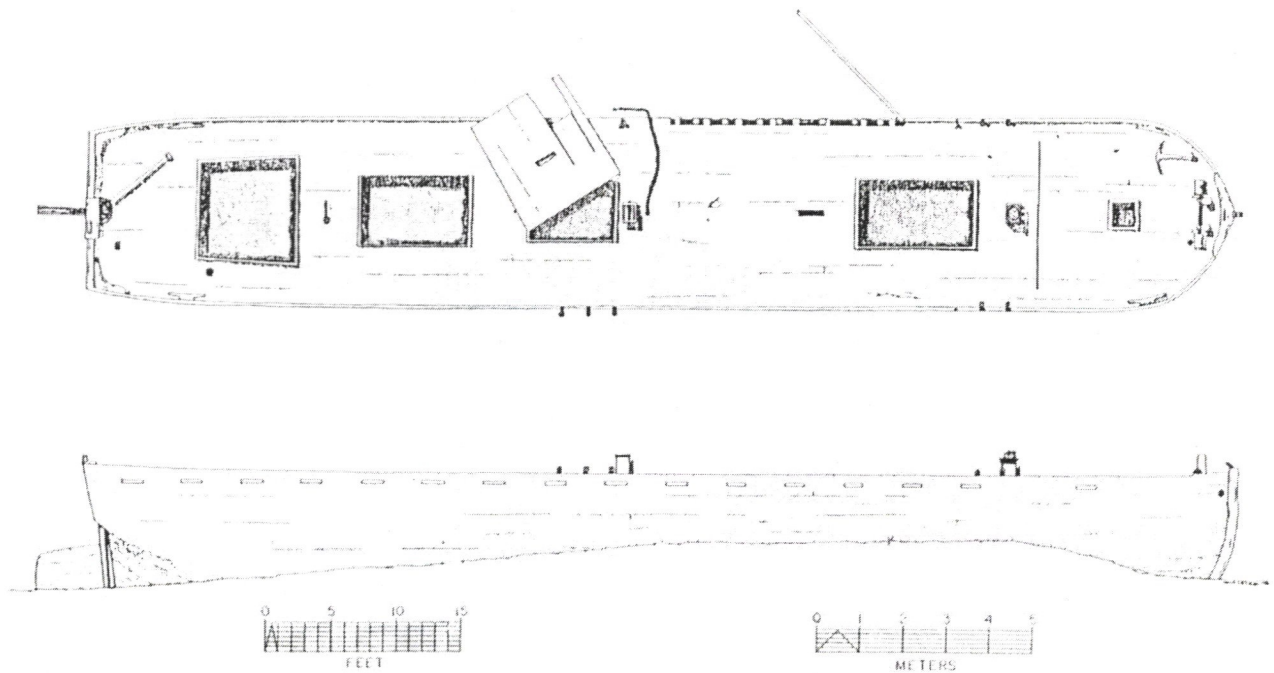
#### *General Butler*

Another wreck in Burlington Bay is the *General Butler*, also a sailing canal boat. Built in 1862 across the lake from Burlington in Essex, New York, the *Butler* sank in a winter gale in December 1876. As the boat approached Burlington, the ship's steering mechanism broke. Unable to maneuver, the ship struck the south end of the breakwater. One by one the five crew members were able to jump onto the breakwater as the waves lifted the boat over the rocks. Once on the jetty, however, the crew was still

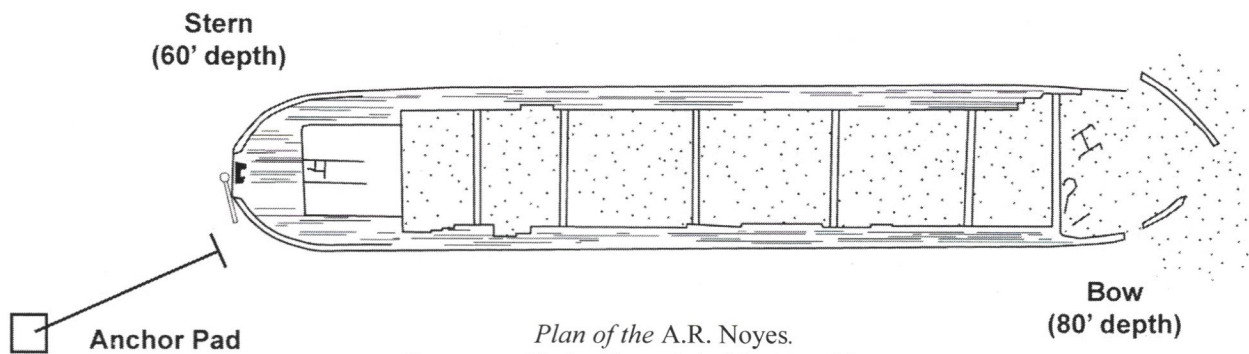
exposed to harsh weather conditions and freezing water; they were saved by a father and son who rowed a 14-foot (4-m) lighthouse boat to the breakwater to bring the crew back to the harbor. The hull is mostly intact and an anchor is still visible on the wreck, as is debris from its cargo of marble. The wreck is 88 feet (26 m) long and sits in about 40 feet (12 m) of water.

#### *A.R. Noyes*

At the south end of Burlington Bay is the standard canal boat *A.R. Noyes*, also known locally as the Coal Barge. Canal boats were the most common type of commercial vessel on the lake in the 1800s, first appearing in about 1823 and used until the early 1900s. Standard canal boats have no form of propulsion, and thus need to be towed. These boats were also sometimes the home to families of so-called *canalers*. The *Noyes* was one of a series of canal boats being towed to



Plan (above) and elevation (below) of the General Butler.  
 Courtesy of Lake Champlain Maritime Museum.



Plan of the A.R. Noyes.  
 Courtesy of Lake Champlain Maritime Museum.

Burlington by the tug *Tisdale* when several broke loose; the *Noyes* was the only one to have sunk. The stern of the 90-foot (27-m) wreck lies in about 60 feet (18 m) of water, while the bow lies in 80 feet (24 m) of water. This is a very fragile wreck, and while the stern end is relatively well defined, the bow end rapidly disintegrates into a debris field.

#### Phoenix

North of Burlington Bay, near the base of the former Colchester Reef Lighthouse, is the wreck of the steamboat *Phoenix*. Built in 1815 by the Lake Champlain Steamboat Company, the *Phoenix* was the second commercial steamboat on Lake Champlain.

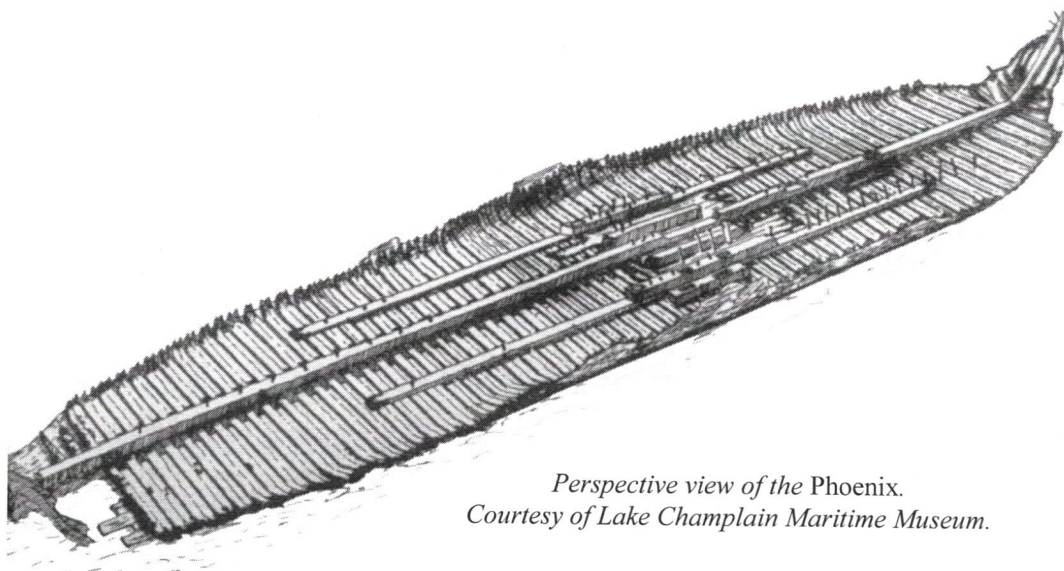
On September 14, 1819, the *Phoenix* left Burlington for Plattsburgh, New York—a run of approximately 20 miles (32 km)—at 11 p.m., with 46 passengers and crew, when fire broke out. All but 12 people on board

(including the captain) were able to get to lifeboats. They were rescued in the morning, but six people died in the frigid waters. The boat itself burned to the waterline and sank. It is unclear whether the fire was an accident or sabotage by a competitor. All that remains of the wreck are the very bottom of the hull, some planking, and some of the charred frames. The bow of the 146-foot (44-m) boat lies in 60 feet (18 m) of water and the stern in 110 feet (33 m).

#### Other Wrecks

There are four other marked wrecks in Lake Champlain:

- Sloop Island canal boat (Wreck Z): Built in 1873, probably sank in 1915; evidence that a family of three lived on board.



*Perspective view of the Phoenix.  
Courtesy of Lake Champlain Maritime Museum.*



*Iron bar recovered by archaeologists from Texas A&M University in Shelburne Bay. Photo by A. Apple, WCAX.*

- Diamond Island canal boat (Stone Boat): Very little known about this wreck; ran aground carrying a load of quarried stone, either after accidentally separating from her tow or purposely run aground to save the cargo after taking on water.
- Lake schooner *Water Witch*: Built as a steamboat in 1832, converted to schooner in 1835, foundered in gale in 1866 while carrying a load of iron ore; the captain, wife, and two children survived the sinking, but the youngest child died.
- Steamboat *Champlain II*: Built in Burlington as *Oakes Ames* in 1868 to ferry railroad cars; renamed *Champlain II* in 1874 and converted to a passenger vessel; ran aground in 1875 near Westport, New York; the only one of the nine wrecks in the Preserve that is actually in New York waters.

Although these are the only marked wrecks in the lake, history continues to be found. In June 2016, evidence of four steamboats that were scuttled as long as 180 years ago was found by a team of archaeologists from Texas A&M University in the Shelburne shipyard. One never knows what secrets the lake continues to hold.

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Lake Champlain diving, even in the summer, has its challenges. The water is cold, with a several degree thermocline as shallow as 15-20 feet (4.5-6 m). Visibility is low, often being less than 15 feet (4.5 m). And there are zebra mussels to contend with on several of the wrecks. That said, the historical significance of the wrecks and the interesting dives make them noteworthy and worth the effort. It is always a good idea to get local information, and there are several dive shops in Burlington that can assist you.

*For additional reading the author suggests:*

*Shipwrecks of Lake Champlain.* Lake Champlain Maritime Museum (LCMM) [http://www.lcmm.org/shipwrecks\\_history/shipwrecks/shipwrecks.htm](http://www.lcmm.org/shipwrecks_history/shipwrecks/shipwrecks.htm)

*When Horses Walked on Water: Horse-Powered Ferries in Nineteenth-Century America* by K.J. Crisman and A.B. Cohn. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C. (1998).

"Heyday of the Horse Ferry" by D.G. Shomette. *National Geographic*, 176(4): 548-556 (1989).

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