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Discovering what lies at the bottom of Onondaga Lake

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By **Rick Moriarty/The Post-Standard**



Enlarge

Dennis Nett

What seems to be what's left of an old canal barge submerged on the westside of Onondaga Lake. Dennis Nett/The Post-Standard

At the Bottom of Onondaga Lake gallery (7 photos)

Syracuse, N.Y. -- Once one of the finest tugs on the state Barge Canal, the Stillwater met an inglorious end in 1940 in Onondaga Lake.

The 60-foot, steam-powered tug spent that harsh winter moored at the old Syracuse Barge Terminal, now known as the Syracuse Inner Harbor. Ice formed around the vessel, and when the ice melted, it pulled away caulking from between the tug's wooden planks. Water rushed in.

Declaring the sunken Stillwater a menace to navigation, the state raised the boat, stripped it of any valuables, towed it to Onondaga Lake and sank it. And that's where it sits today.

It's not alone. A recent archaeological study of the lake's murky bottom — the first one conducted — has revealed a wealth of other boat wrecks and historic shoreline infrastructure that harken back to the late 1800s and early 1900s, when Onondaga Lake played an important commercial role as part of the state canal system and a recreational role as home to numerous resorts.

The study, conducted for **Honeywell International Inc.** as it prepares to begin dredging the lake of industrial contaminants, used sonar and a magnetometer to scan the lake bottom for wooden or metal objects.

The scans pinpointed the location of eight definite boat wrecks, including the Stillwater, nine other likely boat wrecks and an Air National Guard fighter jet that crashed into Onondaga Lake in 1955, killing its pilot.

Researchers believe many of the submerged boats are the remains of vessels that hauled salt, coal and other cargo on the state's canal system in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Some are in shallow water close to shore and are visible in aerial photographs.

The locations of 20 submerged docks, piers, footings, navigational aids and pipelines also are documented, for the

first time, in the study. Many are the only remaining traces of the seven resorts that dotted the western and southern shores of Onondaga Lake until the 1930s. Industrial pollution in the water and the emergence of the automobile, which gave Syracusans easier access to more distant vacation sites, were blamed for the resorts' demise.

"It gives you a great perspective on the nature of how things evolve over the years," said Adam Kane, archaeological director for the **Lake Champlain Maritime Museum** in Vergennes, Vt., which conducted the study for Honeywell. "You go from a lake that is largely commercial in nature with the salt industry, turning towards recreational in the mid- and late-1800s, and then it turns more industrial into the 1900s."

It's that industrial period that spurred the survey of the lake's bottom. Honeywell, the successor to Allied Chemical Corp., which dumped mercury, benzene and other chemicals into the lake starting in the 1800s and continuing into the late 1900s, **plans to begin dredging 2.65 million cubic yards of the lake's bottom next year** as part of its estimated \$451 million, court-required cleanup of its predecessor's pollution.

The dredging, scheduled to start in May and expected to take up to five years, is planned for areas near the western and southern shores of the lake, where Allied and its predecessors, including the Solvay Process Co., dumped byproducts of their soda ash production. But researchers decided to survey the entire lake bottom in case the dredging was expanded.

Honeywell plans to pipe the contaminated sediments several miles from the lake to a waste bed off Airport Road in Camillus, where they will be buried in plastic tubes.

Federal and state law requires Honeywell to identify any underwater "cultural resources" that may be affected by the

dredging and subsequent capping of the bottom by layers of sand, stone and other materials. If any discovered artifacts are deemed to be historically significant, the company must devise a way to protect them.

According to the study conducted for Honeywell, 28 objects on the lake bottom, including four boat wrecks and seven possible wrecks, are in or within 100 feet of the planned dredging areas.

Historical value?

The West Side of Onondaga Lake

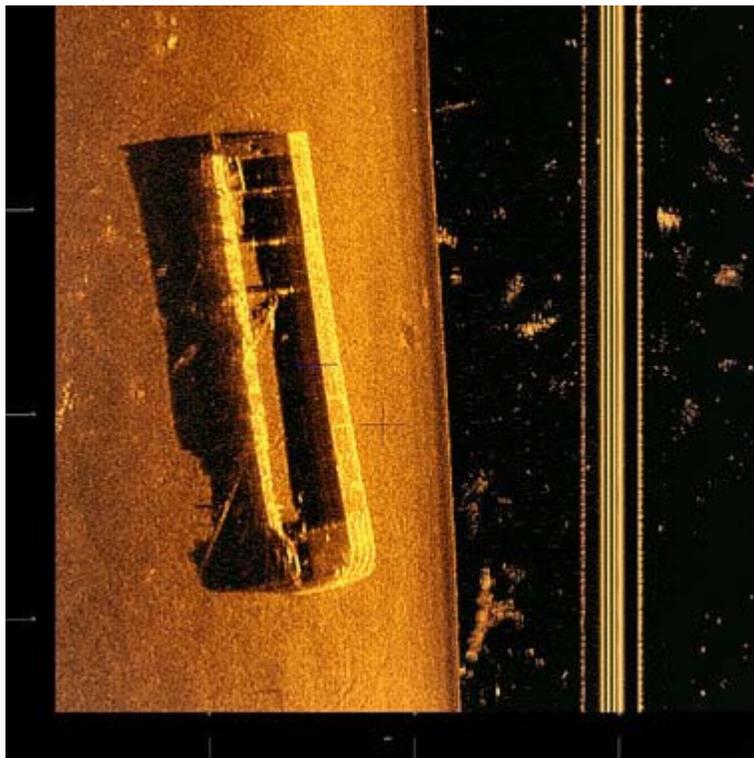
Reporter Rick Moriarty explores the west side of Onondaga Lake where Honeywell International, Inc. will begin dredging.

Kane said the next step is to determine whether

any of the objects are eligible for inclusion on **the National Register of Historic Places**. To be eligible, an object must be at least 50 years old, be intact enough to inform observers of its past and either be associated with a historical event, place or person, or represent a particular construction technique.

The Lake Champlain Maritime Museum plans to issue a second report this fall, giving its opinion on whether any of the underwater objects are historical and worthy of protection, Kane said.

The state Department of Environmental Conservation, which will oversee the dredging, will make the final decision after consulting with the state historic preservation office, said Kenneth Lynch, the DEC's regional director.



Courtesy of CR Environmental Inc.

This is a sonar image of Anomaly 13 (stave bowed canal boat).

Contractors hired by Honeywell will remove the contaminated sediment from the lake bottom with a hydraulic dredger, a powerful floating vacuum cleaner. Lynch said it might be possible to dredge around or under any wreck deemed historic. But he said the capping of the dredged area with multiple layers of sand and stone would likely destroy the vessel.

He said one option for protecting any historic boats is moving them out of the dredging area. If it is not possible to save them, the state might require Honeywell to document the boats' existence with detailed photographs and videos to create a historical record before the dredging and capping destroys them, he said.

Leave them be

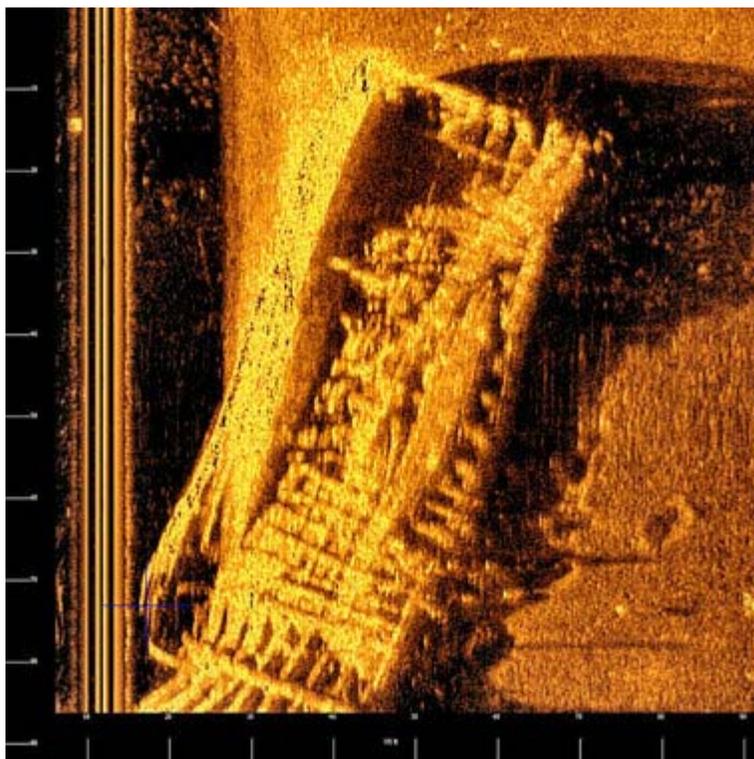
Kane said raising wooden boats after decades underwater is impractical in most cases because

the wood would dry out, warp and crack, turning the vessel into a "pile of wood chips" within 20 years.

“You’re often better off leaving them under the water,” agreed Dennis Connors, curator of history for **the Onondaga Historical Association**.

Kane said most of the vessels likely were sunk intentionally by their owners in the 1930s and 1940s.

Cargo hauling on the canal had been declining for years because of competition from railroads and the trucking industry. The Great Depression delivered the final blow to the canal’s commercial business, Kane said.



Courtesy of CR Environmental, Inc

This is a sonar image of Anomaly 20 (barge) in Onondaga Lake.

Some of the wrecks, including the Stillwater, are shown on navigational charts from the 1940s, he said.

Many of the submerged boats are in the southern section of the lake, where, even today, there is little boat traffic, and which, in the 1940s, was next to a heavily industrialized and ugly shoreline.

Kane said the boats were probably stripped of anything valuable before their sinking.

“There’s going to be no load of treasure on these boats,” he said.

Divers visited one of the larger submerged canal boats in 2007. Video taken during the dive showed a vessel to be intact up to its gunwales, standing at least six feet above the lake’s mucky bottom, according to the maritime museum’s study. Sonar scans show the boat to be 106 feet long and 25

feet wide.

The boat is just outside the planned dredging area, and its name is unknown. But researchers who viewed the video said the boat’s bow is stave-built — meaning it was constructed of vertically oriented planks. The museum’s researchers said that, to their knowledge, no other stave-bow canal boats have been archaeologically documented.

A Christmas tragedy

Among the other interesting discoveries was a boat that researchers said may be an ice boat that sank in the northern section of the lake, well away from the planned dredging area, near the old Rockaway Beach resort 106 years ago.

Ice boats were narrow recreational vessels with sails and skids that traveled on ice-covered Onondaga Lake in winters. In the early 20th century, ice boat racing was a popular sport on the lake.

On Christmas Day 1904, hundreds of spectators were watching when the Blitz crashed head-on with another ice boat, the Warner Brothers, as they raced on the frozen lake. Three men — two on the Blitz and one on the Warner Brothers — were killed, according to a story in The Post-Standard the next day.

“C.W. Dunn, one of the owners of the Blitz, was so broken up over the accident that he stated at the time that he would never repair the boat, neither would he ever own another iceboat,” the newspaper reported.

The wreckage of the Blitz apparently was left on the lake to sink when the ice melted. The Post-Standard reported March 27, 1905, that the Blitz was partially submerged near Rockaway Beach in the northwestern section of the lake. A week later, it reported that the boat had, indeed, sunk.

A jet in the lake

In addition to boats, there's at least one airplane on the lake's murky bottom.

An F-94 jet from what was then the 138th Fighter Squadron at Hancock Field, crashed in about 60 feet of water on Nov. 26, 1955. The pilot, Lt. John Kesel, 23, of Fayetteville, was killed.

An investigation found that Kesel, a student at Le Moyne College, became disoriented in a snow squall as he headed back to Hancock after a training mission. Divers recovered his body the next day, but Air National Guard officials decided not to raise the 8-ton jet.

Researchers with the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum said the jet did not show up on sonar scans but was found by a magnetometer, a device that detects metallic objects. They said it likely is buried.

There is no chance that the submerged jet will interfere with the Honeywell's dredging because it was found in the middle of the lake, off Lake View Point, outside the areas to be dredged.

The Stillwater, which also is outside the planned dredging area, is the only other vessel found in the archeological study whose actual sinking in the lake was documented.

Built around 1915, the Stillwater had gone down twice before it met its end in Onondaga Lake, according to a Sept. 15, 1940, story in the Syracuse Herald American. It sank in 1935 near Baldwinsville due to “general debility,” the story said.

The state raised it and auctioned it off for \$1.

On Feb. 11, 1940, the Stillwater sank again, this time in the canal terminal in Syracuse. Again, the state tried to auction it off. When no buyer could be found, the state raised the boat in September 1940, towed it out of the terminal and sank it in the lake, according to the newspaper account.

For the past 71 years, the Stillwater remained at the bottom of the lake — 60 feet below the surface, intact and invisible — until the sonar spotted it.

Contact Rick Moriarty at rmoriarty@syracuse.com or 470-3148.

» **Read the archaeological survey conducted for Honeywell International Inc. that identified sunken boats and other objects in Onondaga Lake**

Onondaga Lake Archaeological Survey

Underwater Archae

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