

Scientists: Timber in Lake Michigan centuries old (Update)

June 18 2013, by John Flesher



In this photo made June 16, 2013, and provided by Great Lakes Exploration Group, diver Jim Nowka of Great Lakes Exploration Group inspects a wooden beam extending from the floor of Lake Michigan that experts believe may be part of the Griffin, a ship that sank in 1679. Crews are digging a pit at the base of the beam to see if it's attached to a buried ship. (AP Photo/David J. Ruck, Great Lakes Exploration Group)

A wooden beam embedded at the bottom of northern Lake Michigan appears to have been there for centuries, underwater archaeologists

announced Tuesday, a crucial finding as crews dig toward what they hope is the carcass of a French ship that disappeared in the 17th Century.

Expedition leaders still weren't ready to declare they had found a shipwreck or the long-lost Griffin. The ship, commanded by the French explorer La Salle, was never seen again after setting sail in September 1679 from an island near the entrance of Green Bay, in what is now northern Wisconsin, with a crew of a six and a cargo of furs.

But Michel L'Hour, director of France's Department of Underwater Archaeological Research, said the timber appears to be a bowsprit, which is a spur or pole that extends from a vessel's stem. It also appears to be attached to a hard surface below the lake bed.

"All the details could be interpreted as part of a bowsprit and there's no details which contract this hypothesis," said L'Hour, who inspected the beam Monday with two French colleagues. "It's why it's the main hypothesis now. A bowsprit which has been buried in the sediment of the lake for many centuries."

Scientists and divers began excavating last week at the base of the wooden beam, hoping to determine whether it is part of the Griffin. Steve Libert, a diver and shipwreck enthusiast who has searched three decades for the Griffin, discovered the timber in 2001 and recently obtained state and federal permits to probe beneath the muddy surface.



In this photo made Saturday, June 15, 2013, and released by Great Lakes Exploration Group, French underwater archaeologist Olivia Hulot jots notes while inspecting a timber jutting from the bottom of northern Lake Michigan that experts believe could be part of the long-lost ship the Griffin. Crews are digging a pit at the base of the beam to see if it's attached to a buried ship. (AP Photo/Chris Doyal, Great Lakes Exploration Group.)

The wooden beam extends 10.5 feet (3.2 meters) above the lake bed, and underwater excavators are opening a pit at the base of the beam to determine whether it's attached to anything beneath. In another key development Tuesday, they reported that a probing device had detected a hard surface 18 to 20 feet (5 ½ to 6 meters) below the lake bed.

"In essence, we have found a floor under that exposed wooden timber," said Ken Vrana, the project manager. "We have more excavation to do before verifying what that surface is."



Reid Lewis of Elgin, Ill., portrays the 17th century French explorer La Salle during his journey across the Great Lakes. Lewis and his companions previously retraced La Salle's voyage, and on Monday, June 17, 2013 they reunited in the Lake Michigan community of Fairport, Mich., where scientists and history buffs are searching nearby waters for his lost ship, the Griffin. (AP Photo/John Flesher)

Libert said he was excited by the reports and had "no doubt" the beam was part of a ship. But it remained uncertain when the team might be able to positively identify the vessel.

"I think that maybe Steve found the Griffin," L'Hour said at a briefing for reporters. "I can't be sure, which is why I'm waiting and waiting and waiting for the proof."

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