

# WRECK DIVING™ Magazine

...uncover the past

## In This Issue

Azores • *Eros* • Guadalcanal (Part 2) • HMHS *Britannic*  
Shipwrecks of the Egyptian Red Sea • *Tacoma* • *Washington*



## The Million-Dollar Dive

Possibly the single greatest wreck dive ever made.  
HMHS *Britannic*, 100 years after its sinking

## Treasure of the Sloop, *Washington*

The oldest, fully-intact, commercial sailing vessel to have been lost and found in the Great Lakes

ISSUE 40 US\$12.99

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*Issue 40*  
A Quarterly Publication



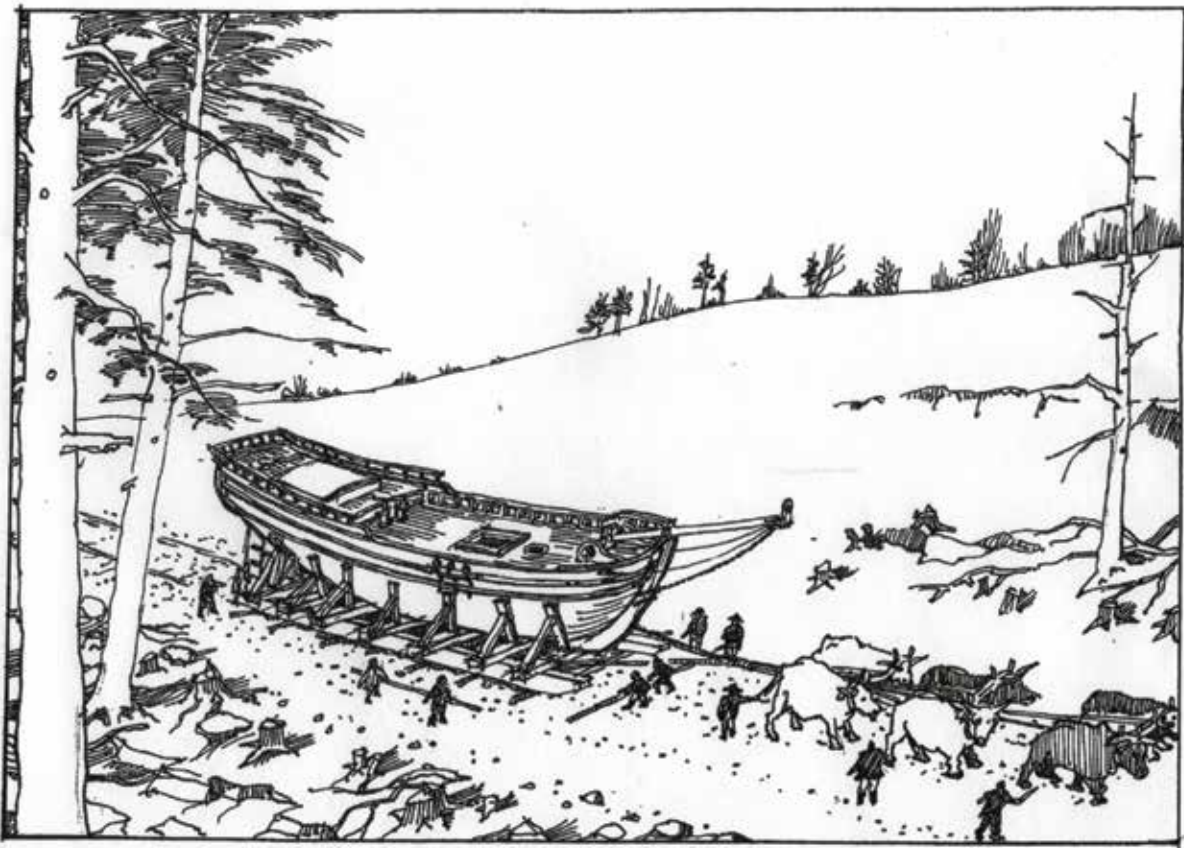
Artist conception of the sloop *Washington* under sail.  
© Copyright: Roland Stevens

# Treasure of the sloop Washington

Text By Jim Kennard

“**T**he cargo of this ship includes a large quantity of valuable antique chinaware worth at least \$100,000 in which some of the plates alone are worth \$500 each. The strong box with gold bullion and coins are worth \$100,000 to \$250,000.” “WOW!” I said, as a young diver reading this for the first time in one of the Great Lakes treasure books, “If I could find this ship, I could retire by the age of 30.” Forty years later I retired. In the 1960s as diving became a popular sport, authors began writing books about treasure that could be found on ships in oceans and lakes around the world. As each decade passed, new treasure book authors would typically add another “0” to the previously stated value of the goods that might be found aboard these ships. The ship that my treasure book was referring to was called *Lady Washington*.

I began my recreational diving career in 1970. After a few years of diving on several known shipwrecks in the St. Lawrence River and Lake Ontario, I wanted to find shipwrecks that no one had been on before. I was working at General Dynamics in Rochester, NY, when a fellow engineer and diver told me about a very special machine called side scan sonar that would create an image of the sea floor similar to an aerial photograph. With this machine, one could identify bottom features such as sand waves, rock outcrops, logs, and shipwrecks. In the ‘70s, fewer than 100 of these units existed in the world. There were only a couple of companies manufacturing side scan sonar units and their main customers were oil, gas and geophysical survey companies. I requested a quote to buy a unit and was floored by the price of \$40,000. My house didn’t even cost



The sloop *Washington* being portaged around Niagara Falls.  
Copyright: Mark Peckham





that much! Not deterred by the price, I was determined to have one of these sonar units. By the mid-'70s, I had built my own side scan sonar unit from a surplus Navy facsimile recorder, homemade circuit boards, and a used side scan sonar towfish I bought from an upstart manufacturer, Klein Associates. I had begun my career as a shipwreck explorer and, with a few improvements along the way, utilized my side scan unit for the next 30 years.

After a few years of searching in Lake Ontario, it became apparent that most of the shipwrecks in my area were not located in recreational, divable depths. To complicate matters, conducting a sonar search prior to 1980 on a lake the size of Ontario was very difficult without using expensive positioning equipment. (Once LORAN C was usable in the Great Lakes, searching for shipwrecks became feasible for the budget-minded shipwreck enthusiast.) In order to find more accessible wrecks in the '80s and '90s, my diving partners and I headed to Lake Champlain and the New York Finger Lakes for many great diving adventures. In 2002, I returned to search Lake Ontario with a new search partner, Dan Scoville, an accomplished technical diver. We could now seek out shipwrecks in depths of the lake beyond those in the recreational diver range. In 2008, Dan and I discovered the oldest shipwreck

ever found in the Great Lakes, the British warship HMS *Ontario* (*Wreck Diving Magazine* issue #16). The *Ontario* is too deep for even extreme technical diving but, with the use of a remote operated vehicle designed and built by Scoville, we were able to bring back images of this very historic ship. The shipwreck treasure books had the *Ontario* carrying a \$500,000 payroll in 1780! The *Haldimand Papers*, the primary reference for all British correspondence for military activities on Lake Ontario covering the period when HMS *Ontario* was transporting goods and personnel, never makes any mention of a payroll, only the tragic loss of the ship and the people it was carrying from Fort Niagara to Fort Haldimand.

To be effective in locating these lost ships, one needs to become a shipwreck detective. I spent many days and nights during the winter months searching for information contained in old newspaper accounts and in the archives of area libraries and historical societies. I would continually ask myself, "Where in the world did these authors get their information on the treasures they claimed were aboard ships we were discovering?" I soon learned that you can't believe everything you read in the treasure books or on the internet.

During the past 14 years, our



**Top Photo:** Sunken wreck of the sloop *Washington*.  
Photograph by Roger Pawlowski

**Right Center to Bottom:** The side scan sonar image of the sloop *Washington*.  
Image by Jim Kennard

Side scan sonar image of the sloop *Washington*.  
Image by Jim Kennard

Looking into the silt-filled hold of the sloop *Washington*.  
Photograph by Roger Pawlowski

shipwreck team has searched for shipwrecks off the southern shore of Lake Ontario in New York State. Many of our shipwreck discoveries are described in articles located on our website, [www.shipwreckworld.com](http://www.shipwreckworld.com). In June 2016, our team (Jim Kennard, Roger Pawlowski, and Roland Stevens) searched for shipwrecks in deep water off Oswego, NY, utilizing high-resolution, *Deepvision DE-340* side scan sonar. It was nearly at the beginning of our search grid that we came upon what appeared to be a sunken sloop. We made a number of scans with the side scan but the conditions were not ideal for deploying the underwater remote operated vehicle (ROV). From the sonar imagery, we felt that we had found the sloop *Washington*, but would have to wait another three weeks before the conditions on the lake were good enough for imaging with the ROV and confirmation of the actual wreck.

To obtain the best imagery of the shipwreck, we waited for a very calm day when the sun would be directly overhead. This allows natural light to illuminate a wreck so that the entire ship can be captured in the video image. Our video survey was conducted using a *VideoRay Pro IV* underwater remote operated vehicle using two video cameras, the regular, internal camera and an external, high-definition color camera. The ROV approached the shipwreck from the bow where a long, protruding bowsprit came into view. Pawlowski piloted the ROV following the bowsprit forward to the starboard side of the ship where an anchor was seen hanging from the side. As the ROV moved up along the wreck, the chain plates were clearly visible. In the bow area is a log-type windlass now covered with quagga mussels as is almost all of the ship. A small hold is located just forward of the windlass. The single mast of the sloop is still standing tall, but the sails and rigging have long since rotted away. Just behind the mast is another hold larger than the one in the bow area. Behind the hold is what remains of a double bilge pump. The cabin has been extensively damaged, with its roof lying just off to the port side of the ship. The long boom for the main



Sloop *Washington* mid-ship showing the log windlass, a portion of the mast, a hold, and boom lying across the deck. Photograph by Roger Pawlowski

The sloop was initially built to transport people, their belongings, and supplies from the southern end of the portage at what is now Chippawa, Ontario, near Niagara Falls.

sail lies across the deck and off to the port side. As the ROV approached the aft end of the ship, it became obvious that the sloop went down stern first, as there is considerable damage in that area. The roof of the cabin was probably torn off when the sloop hit the bottom of the lake floor. After the initial wreck survey, Pawlowski maneuvered the ROV to the middle of the ship and set it down on the deck. He was then able to take a radar-like image of the sloop from which we were able to obtain precise measurements. The overall length of the sloop is 53 feet with a beam of 16 ½ feet. The depth of the sloop from the deck to the bottom of the keel has been estimated to be nine feet.

Construction of the sloop *Washington* began in 1797 on 4 Mile Creek by Connecticut carpenter Eliphalet Beebe for the Pennsylvania Population Company, an organization that was developing a tract of land just north of Erie, Pennsylvania. The *Washington* was a small sloop with a carrying capacity of 36 tons. The sloop was initially built to transport people, their belongings, and supplies from the southern end of the portage at what is now Chippawa, Ontario, near Niagara Falls. On September 15, 1798, the sloop was launched just north of the present day city of Erie, PA. Its maiden voyage was to Fort Erie for

supplies. The Pennsylvania Population Company took ownership of the sloop a month later on October 12th. Two names were proposed for the sloop, *Washington* and *Lady Washington*. The name *Washington* was chosen by the ship's largest shareholder, Robert Hamilton, a merchant from Queenston, Ontario. It appears, however, that the sloop continued to be referred to as *Lady Washington* by some. Thus, there began the confusion by treasure book writers on the proper name of the sloop *Washington*.

For the next three years, the *Washington* sailed the eastern end of Lake Erie making frequent trips to Fort Erie to move merchandise and settlers between New York State, Canada, and Erie, Pennsylvania. By the end of the season in 1800, it was determined that the operation of the sloop was actually losing money and the ship was put up for sale. In November 1801, the *Washington* was sold to a group of merchants from Queenston, Ontario. In the winter of 1802, the sloop was transported around Niagara Falls over the portage road (a trail on land between two bodies of water) from Chippawa to Queenston and launched in Lake Ontario, making it the first ship to have sailed both in Lake Erie and Lake Ontario. For the portage, the ship was mounted on runners and, with the use of rollers, was pulled by teams



of oxen for a distance of approximately eight miles to its destination. The trail between Chippawa and Queenston, called Portage Road, now carries motorized vehicles.

For the next two years, the *Washington* would typically transport furs and local merchants from Niagara to Kingston, Ontario. Then the sloop would return to its home port with an assortment of goods such as flour, salt, tools, and household items. From the records that exist for 1803, it appears the *Washington* was making a trip nearly every month to Kingston starting in early April until its final voyage in early November.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of November, 1803, the sloop *Washington* sailed out of Kingston harbor on her final return trip to Niagara. On board were the crew, consisting of Capt. Murray, Peter Bouville, and John Neach, along with several passengers, including Niagara merchants John Dun and John Boyd. After their departure, a severe storm developed on Lake Ontario. Sailing vessels arrived at Niagara and, not finding the *Washington*, assumed that she had made it to the port of Oswego, NY. Soon afterwards, ships coming from that port brought the news that several articles of cargo, pieces of wreckage, and her yawl were found on shore near Oswego.

An advertisement was published in the *Upper Canada Gazette* on December 10, 1803, by Mr. Quetton St. George, a merchant from York (Toronto, Canada) who owned a large portion of the cargo aboard the sloop *Washington*. This is our best description of the type of material being transported. It reads: "Mr. St. George is very sorry that he has not received his East India goods and groceries. He is sure they are at Oswego and should they not arrive this season they may be looked for early in the spring." The cargo, with an estimated value of \$20,000, had been purchased by Messrs. Robinson and Martin of Albany, New York, and Mr. St. George.

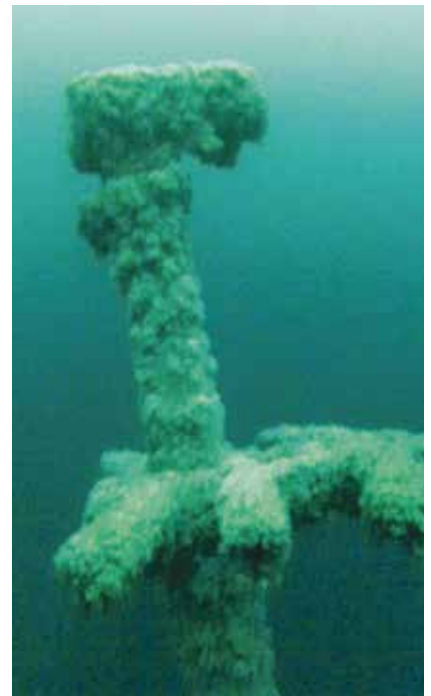
The sloop *Washington* is the oldest, fully-intact, commercial sailing vessel to have been lost and found in the Great Lakes. The oldest military ship, HMS *Ontario*, was lost in 1780 and was discovered by our team in 2008. The

*Washington* was the first ship to sail on both lakes Erie and Ontario. Previously there was no drawing or half-hull model of the sloop *Washington* for archaeologists to study. Now, with imagery and measurements, there is a better understanding of the design of this very rare, 18<sup>th</sup>-century sailing vessel. The survey of this historic shipwreck was funded by a grant from The National Museum of the Great Lakes of Toledo, Ohio.

I have since come to realize that the real treasure aboard these shipwrecks is the *historic treasure* that we are finding and that any monetary treasure is only found on the pages of the shipwreck treasure books.



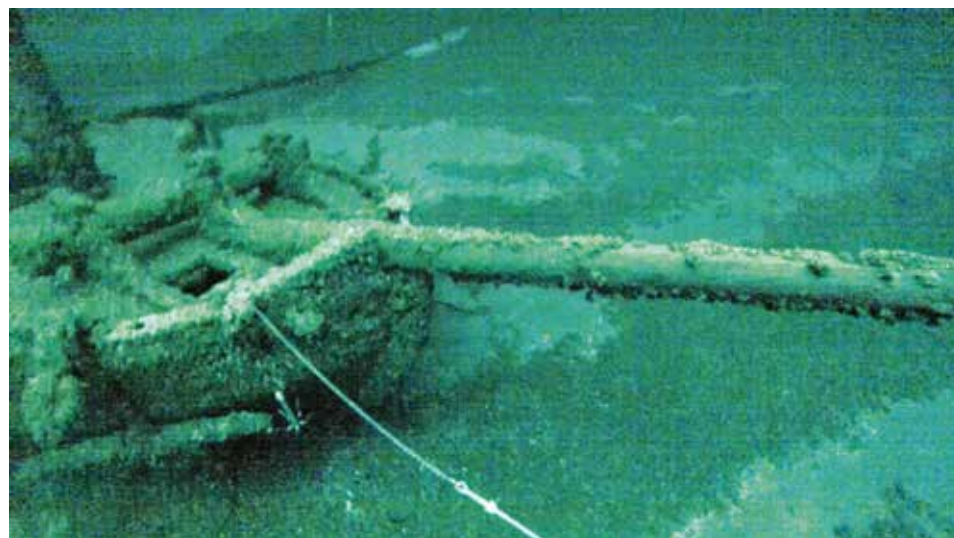
**Right:** Remains of the top of the single mast.  
Photograph by Roger Pawlowski



**Center:** Sloop *Washington* mid-ship showing the chain plate (lower right) log windlass, a portion of the mast, a hold, boom lying across the deck, bilge pump next to boom, and the cabin roof remains.  
Photograph by Roger Pawlowski



**Bottom:** Sloop *Washington* bow area showing the log windlass, forward hold, and bow sprit.  
Photograph by Roger Pawlowski



## Shipwreck Discovery Team

**AUTHOR / Jim Kennard** has been diving and exploring the lakes in the northeast since 1970. He has found over 200 shipwrecks in the Great Lakes, Lake Champlain, NY Finger Lakes, and in the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers over the past 40 years. In 1983, he discovered a unique, horse-powered ferryboat in Lake Champlain. *National Geographic* featured the ferryboat in their October 1989 issue. In May 2008, Jim Kennard and Dan Scoville discovered the 236-year-old, British warship HMS *Ontario*, the oldest shipwreck ever found in the Great Lakes. Kennard is a Fellow member of The Explorers Club and the sonar owner / operator.

**Roger Pawlowski** has been diving on shipwrecks in the northeast and Pacific for the past 15 years. He is a retired Air Force Reserve pilot and flew missions in Desert Storm. In 1980, while flying a practice mission over Lake Ontario, he witnessed a small aircraft plunge into the lake. His details of the incident and location helped Kennard locate the aircraft which was several miles from shore and in over 100 feet of water. Pawlowski is an electrical engineer and runs his own engineering consulting business. He is the owner / operator of the ROV and survey boat.

**Roland 'Chip' Stevens** is a retired architect and working artist whose watercolors, many of which have been accepted into national exhibitions, are well known in the Rochester area. A sailor for over 60 years, Stevens has a love of the sea, as reflected in his seascapes. A number of his paintings of shipwrecks discovered by the team have appeared in news stories and publications. Based on the ROV video recording and side scan sonar imaging, Stevens created watercolor paintings of the sloop *Washington* as it appears today on the bottom of Lake Ontario and what it may have looked like while under sail.



Shipwreck exploration team (L to R) Roland Stevens, Jim Kennard, Roger Pawlowski, holding The Explorers Club expedition flag.

“The sloop *Washington* is the oldest, fully-intact, commercial sailing vessel to have been lost and found in the Great Lakes.





Photograph by Lily Mak

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Photograph by Brad Sheard



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