

On Saturday, June 12, 2004, Greg Ondus, Jacques Girouard, Cindy LaRosa, and Kevin Magee went diving aboard the "Southwind" of Osprey Dive Charters with Jim Herbert in Barcelona, NY. Despite strong winds and rain for several days beforehand, arriving in Barcelona revealed mostly sunny skies and calm seas. The boat was not crowded with only a total of about 9 divers, making for plenty of room to spread out and gear up. The day was sunny but cool with an air temperature of about 65 deg F, which allowed suiting up in comfort. A westward wind produced a 2' chop that made the boat, ladder, and mooring line move around a lot but otherwise seemed to make for pleasant dive conditions. The wreck was the "Oxford," a.k.a. the "Tiller Wreck" or "Crow's Nest." It is a wooden two-masted brig that sank in 1856 after colliding with the steamer "Cataract" southeast of Long Point. The lake bottom is at 155', but a depth of 165' can be achieved by descending into the crater at the bow, which is pointing southeast. The ship was carrying iron ore when it sank, which explains the extensive damage and crater at the bow.

Upon entering the water, a very strong westward surface current was encountered. In fact, it was too strong to swim against, requiring a dock pole and/or hand-over-hand pulling along the granny line to reach the mooring. Surface visibility was good at about 15'-25'. Descending to the wreck it was discovered that visibility was great at about 60'-80' of viz. Ambient lighting was present that made everything dim but viewable without a light. A light, however, helped pick out the details of the wreck. The "Oxford" is one of those wrecks that always seems to have good viz and lighting conditions. The mooring line is tied to the stern davit on the port side, which is at about 140' depth. The stern itself is in beautiful condition and completely undamaged. Hovering off the back, one can see that it rises completely out of the mud bottom, exposing the entire rudder and underside lines of the hull. The transom is attractively shaped and has davits for the yawl boat sticking straight out rearwards from the corners. The decking is completely intact on most of the ship, but the cabin is gone - blown off by escaping air during the ship's sinking. On the aft deck is a beautifully preserved and intact tiller, which is pointed straight ahead and appears ready to steer. Tillers are seen only on early sailing vessels since later ships used wheels. The tiller is a highlight of the wreck and is fairly large at about 10' in length. Notable are the additional structural braces where it attaches to the rudder post.

The deck slants downwards at about a 30-deg angle from the stern to the bow, and deadeyes are visible along both sides' railings, which are mostly intact and standing. Forward of the cabin hole is a large two-barreled hand pump and a cargo hatch. Forward of this is the main mast stub, which is broken off after a few feet. Forward of this is a centerboard winch and another cargo hatch opening. Afterwards, the deck and hull disintegrate into a jumble of boards at the bow at the bottom of the crater. In the crater can be seen the remains of the windlass with its below-deck supports propping it up. On the starboard side of the crater can be seen the cutwater, which originally attached to the stem. It is

lying on its side in profile, and carved into it where the bowsprit would be attached is a fiddle head or scrolled ram's head design much like the one found on the "St. James." Visible within the recesses of the design are the remains of white paint.

Fallen off to the port side near the bow is the foremast, which is pointing away from the wreck. It still has a massive square-rigged spar mounted to the mast just below the bracing platform, and the attachment swivel for the spar is visible. The mast rests pointing upwards diagonally against the spar. The spar points upwards diagonally in a perpendicular direction and goes upwards quite a distance. Above their junction on the mast is what appears to be a crow's nest, although it is actually a very elaborate bracing platform with many supports attaching the half moon-shaped platform to the mast. This elaborate structural bracing may have been common on early square-rigged vessels such as brigs and barques. This is in strong contrast to the simple crosstrees found on later schooners. Attached to the mast above the platform is a topmast, which is spliced onto the mast with steps and continues up for another 10'-15'. Another significant mast piece - possibly another spar or part of the mainmast - is also leaning up against the foremast, and the spattered remains of mast parts are visible on the bottom on the port side. This whole 'crow's nest' assembly is yet another highlight of the wreck and is viewable at about 145'-155'. Inside the bracing platform was found a burbot fish. This must be a favorite spot since a burbot has been seen by Kevin in this location every time this wreck has been dove. A second dead burbot was also seen on the bottom near the port stern and was covered in white mold or fungus.

The bottom temperature was 40 deg F, and no thermocline was detected, although it slowly warmed to about 60 deg F at the surface. Upon reaching 30'-40' depth during decompression, the strong surface current again became a factor and required everyone to hold onto the mooring line at their stops. It soon got very crowded at 20', and many had a hard time seeing their bottom timers and computers through the screen of bubbles created by the cluster of divers. However, deco was successfully completed by everyone, and a quick ride on the current to the stern followed. A great time was had by all, and given the bad weather in Lake Erie so far this year, the eastern basin is probably the only good place to dive for a while.