

Cleveland Underwater Explorers (CLUE) is proud to announce the existence of yet another new wreck in Lake Erie off the Cleveland area. This report describes the wreck for the first time, and a tentative identification is made. This is the fourth wreck to be announced by CLUE.

CLUE, 2005-09-16 - New Wreck Dive Report

On Saturday, July 30, 2005, David VanZandt and Kevin Magee located a new wreck in Lake Erie. The discovery was made while attempting a sidescan survey from Dave's boat "Sea Dragon" in rough seas. The seas had built from tolerable 2' waves to choppy 3'-4' waves and whitecaps during the long transit from Cleveland to the search area. Since it had been such a long trip, it was decided to at least try and do some searching while in the area. As luck would have it, a wreck was located almost directly under the boat's path within the first 15 minutes. The area being searched was based on the research of Jim Paskert, CLUE's chief researcher. Jim based his starting position from detailed notes and calculations made many years ago after doing extensive research on a particular ship and the accounts of its sinking.

The ship in question is the "Cortland," perhaps the most sought after wreck in Lake Erie's west-central basin. The "Cortland" was a 170'-long barkentine built by Mr. A. G. Huntley of Sheboygan, Wisconsin, in 1867 and was lost on the night of June 20, 1868, after her infamous collision with the "Morning Star," a side paddlewheel ship carrying cargo and passengers from Cleveland to Detroit. The "Morning Star" sank very quickly and took many lives with her. The "Cortland" drifted about 3/4 mile southwest and sank an hour or two later. The cause of the accident was due to the absence of the "Cortland's" green navigation lantern, which had been taken down for cleaning by the first mate, leaving the "Morning Star" unable to see her. Ironically, the mate was returning the lantern to the rigging when the collision occurred and was killed when the "Morning Star" impacted the "Cortland" on the starboard side just behind the mizzen mast where the lantern was hung. Over the next few months the newspapers chronicled the recovery of bodies, the salvage, and the eventual raising of the "Morning Star," which sank again at some distance from the collision site while being towed to shoal waters for repairs. Several subsequent salvage attempts were unsuccessful. The "Morning Star's" final resting place was located in modern times and is known to be 8 miles north of the mouth of the Black River at Lorain, OH, but the location of her original sinking and the location of the "Cortland" have remained elusive.

The "Cortland" was heavily salvaged soon after the sinking, and early divers reported she lay nearly on her side on a soft mud bottom in 12 fathoms (72 feet) of water. Despite early optimism, however, she was never raised. Prior to her sinking, the "Cortland" was less than a year old and built only two years after the

end of the Civil War. No expense was spared when she was built, and she was one of the largest and best appointed sailing vessels on the Great Lakes at that time. It was also one of the earliest examples of the large sailing vessels that would come to dominate Great Lakes trade for the next decade. Jim's research revealed many unusual features on the "Cortland" such as the presence of a scrolled figurehead, two capstans - one amidships and one forward, a forecastle cabin behind the foremast, and a (topgallant) forecastle deck at the bow. There was also known to be a bell mounted to the forecastle deck since accounts reported it was rung in warning by the "Cortland's" watch right before the fatal collision. Many unsubstantiated claims have been made over the years that the ship had been located, but no proof has ever been presented to verify these rumors or claims.

Being too rough to dive the day the wreck was discovered, diving was postponed until conditions were more favorable. The first dive occurred the following day on Sunday, July 31, 2005. Since then, many dives have been made on the wreck in varying conditions from the usual 3' of visibility to 10'-15' of visibility on one particular day. The wreck lies in 60' of water and actually consists of two individual parts, the bow and stern. They are separated by about 100' running roughly south to north. There is almost no wreckage lying in between, and the two parts are separate dives where the boat must be relocated before diving each piece. The bow lies towards the south, and the stern lies towards the north. What happened to the amidships section is unknown. It could possibly indicate heavy salvage of the cargo of iron ore. This is somewhat backed up by the fact that the bow and stern centerlines do not line up with each, indicating a rather violent removal of the center section. Unfortunately, there is no mention in the archives of its cargo being salvaged - just the rigging, masts, and equipment. Another possibility is that the heavy load of iron ore weighed unequally on the hull due to the ship lying at an extreme list, causing the amidships cargo section to collapse under the strain. This broken hull could then have been buried under the heavy silt. Given the heavily sunken nature of the bow and stern sections, this is certainly a possibility.

The bow rests at about a 45-degree angle on its starboard side with its starboard gunwale buried. The port side stands about 6' high off the bottom. Present is a large and distinctive waist-high forecastle, and the wreck ends immediately aft of the forecastle with a few hanging boards and one spar lying perpendicular across the width of the ship at the break. There is no additional wreckage visible on the bottom after the break. A windlass is mounted on the main deck up against the forecastle. Anchor chain is still wrapped around its drum and runs into the mud. On top of the forecastle deck on the centerline is a large square post rising from the forecastle's edge. The top of this post has several fore-and-aft rows of metal studs sticking out of its flat top. Two curved metal arms come out of the post on each side and hang aft over the windlass. At first these were a mystery until the object they supported was discovered on a clear visibility day lying towards the bottom wedged between the windlass spool and the edge of the forecastle. This

item is a large flared bell! It is heavily encrusted, however, so no inscriptions can easily be read. Attached to the forward side of the post is a horizontal pivoting bar with mechanical stops. Below each end of the pivoting bar is a small hole in the deck large enough for a rod to pass through. This is probably an unusual (early) style of hand pump. Immediately forward of the bell/pump post is a capstan mounted to the middle of the forecastle deck. This is another unusual feature since most Great Lakes sailing vessels had only one capstan mounted on the main deck amidships.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the forecastle deck is that it is not solid but instead grated with lengthwise slats with drainage spaces in between. Five small cross pieces give this grated floor lateral strength. This design is reminiscent of early- to mid-1800 oceangoing sailing vessels but was not a common feature on Great Lakes vessels. The centerline of the forecastle deck is not grated but a solid wood piece. Looking under the forecastle deck reveals mostly debris inside, but anchor chain can be seen running from the windlass to the port hawsepipe, and a fallen pipe under the bell/pump post is probably a piston barrel from the hand pump. Running diagonally across the forecastle deck from the bell/pump post to each side are the catheads. The port cathead hangs high off the bottom, and the starboard one's tip is buried in the mud with some chain wrapped around it. Lying loose on the deck next to this cathead is a two-sheave block with a large hook. Nearby on the gunwale is a hearteye. Two pieces of modern debris - a small log and white plastic bucket - can be seen stuck up underneath the wreck's hull on this side. The bow's gunwale has several line chocks and blocks attached. Examining the port side, the anchor chain can be seen to hang down from the hawsepipe a foot or so and then abruptly end without an anchor.

At the very tip of the bow is a large bowsprit. It has pulled out from the stem by several feet and fallen down to the starboard side, but it is still attached and held partially in place at an angle between the knightheads. The jib boom is attached, and a flat board separates the bowsprit from the jib boom. This board is decoratively curved and flared where it would have attached to the stem. A block is attached to the top of the jib boom, and the jib boom has a metal collar and is broken right where it dives into the mud bottom at the end. Looking under the bowsprit, a separate wood piece comes straight out from the bow's stem and narrows in a series of steps to a long, narrow scrolled figurehead that almost looks like an eagle's head in shape. This was another exciting find!

The stern is not as interesting or exciting as the bow, especially after the bell and figurehead were located. It is almost completely buried with only a little bit of the transom and port side exposed. Only about 6' of the transom's length is exposed before it plunges at about a 45-degree angle into the silt. A wooden cleat and line chock are mounted to the transom, and an attractive carved lip is visible along the top of the transom. The transom blends into the port side with a transom knee, and then the port side collapses into exposed frames (ribs) with

some decking folded down into the interior. No railing is present, but the cabin hole and its combing are visible along the edge of the decking. As soon as the cabin hole ends, so does the wreck. A belaying pin board appears to be lying on the bottom in this area. About 20' away from the end of the cabin, a roughly 8'x 8' piece of decking and support frames can be found sticking out of the bottom. It is unremarkable in appearance, and there are no other pieces of debris to be found.

Although no definite means of identifying this wreck were found, there are many strongly circumstantial clues that suggest this is indeed the wreck of the "Cortland." The first is its condition on the bottom. It would appear the center cargo-carrying portion of the ship was either heavily salvaged and/or has collapsed to make it all but disappear. The ship lies at an extreme starboard angle on the bottom, the side upon which the "Cortland" was struck and as described by early divers. Second, its style of construction is unusual and reflects more of an early oceangoing style of construction. The "Cortland" was one of the first large sailing vessels on the Great Lakes, and it makes sense it would have shared more in common with its oceangoing brethren since the Great Lakes building style had yet to be firmly developed. Third, there are specific equipment pieces that match known equipment on the "Cortland." This includes the forecastle, forward capstan, bell, and scrolled figurehead. Fourth, there are specific construction techniques that match known construction techniques used in the "Cortland." This includes the use of double bolting on each plank, a feature noticed on the decking at the stern. This also includes the presence of a square stern with a transom knee. It is hoped that once the bell is cleaned next season, it will provide a positive identification of this wreck as the "Cortland." This was a richly appointed ship, and it is highly probable the name was affixed to the bell. Although no firm measurements can be made of the beam or length of the ship due to its collapsed nature, Jim has obtained detailed construction specifications, including the frame spacing, frame dimensions, and planking thickness, for the "Cortland" that might provide additional circumstantial evidence to its identity. Unfortunately, the last few dives had less than 1' visibility and were pitch black, meaning the dive season is probably at an end for this wreck this year.

It should also be noted that the presence of the figurehead, bell, blocks, hearteye, and other items strongly suggests this wreck is a virgin and was not found earlier. Earlier divers would have almost certainly taken these items. No moorings, ropes, dive gear, nets, or even snagged fishing tackle were found on the wreck, and it appears to have been completely undisturbed. Much credit for finding this wreck goes to Jim's research, without which finding this small and difficult target would not have been possible. Also, some diligence, determination, and a little luck helped.

[About CLUE](#)

CLUE was founded by David VanZandt and Kevin Magee in 2003. The team added Chief Researcher Jim Paskert in May, 2004. Our purpose is to research, locate, and explore the shipwrecks of the Great Lakes with an emphasis on Lake Erie. The team consists of individuals experienced in archival research, Great Lakes history and ship construction, underwater survey techniques and equipment, mechanical and electrical engineering, and recreational and technical scuba diving. The team is dedicated to finding, exploring, and documenting the submerged history found on the bottom of the Great Lakes.