

On Sunday, July 10, 2011, Cindy LaRosa and Kevin Magee drove to Barcelona, NY, to do an afternoon Lake Erie wreck dive with Captain Jim Herbert of Osprey Charters. Joining them was a full boat with a total of eighteen divers, including Greg Ondus, Jack Papes, John Gavroy, Pat Wolfe, Wayne Rush, Adam Poniknar, Dallas Edmiston, and Jim's helper John. The day was partly cloudy with an overcast haze, the waves were 2' with a SW wind, and the air was a comfortable 78 deg F. The trip was to the "St. James," an infrequently visited 2-masted schooner that is also one of the most intact and well preserved schooners in Lake Erie. It is located off Long Point in 160' of water and was originally known as "Mystery Schooner X." It was discovered in 1984 by Gary Kozak while he was looking for the famed "Dean Richmond," a wooden steamer. Since his sidescan clearly showed a schooner with two standing masts, Gary kept on searching instead. It wasn't until the 1990s that divers re-located this shipwreck and began investigating it. This wreck was eventually positively identified when its tonnage numbers were found on the forward hatch coaming.

The "St. James" was built in 1856 in Milan, OH, which is improbably located seven miles from Lake Erie and only reachable through the Huron River and a 3-mile long canal. Yet for a period from 1839 until 1864, Milan was one of the largest wheat-shipping ports in the Great Lakes and also a major ship-building center. At least 75 schooners were built and launched in its artificial harbor, which could accommodate twenty ships at once. After the railroads overtook the canal business, the town and its canal collapsed, and the harbor was left to drain back into dry land and fields in 1868. The "St. James" sank in October, 1870, with the loss of all seven of its crew while carrying wheat from Toledo, OH, to Oswego, NY. Since there were no survivors, the cause of the sinking is unknown, but given how little damage is evident on the shipwreck, it either foundered in a storm or simply sprang a leak.

As the divers proceeded to the wreck site, the seas further calmed to only 1', making for even better diving conditions. Upon entering the water, visibility on the surface was discovered to be a respectable 10'-15' with a water temperature of 70 deg F. Upon descending, the thermocline was found at 50' with 42 deg F water below it. Conditions on the bottom were disappointingly dark with only about 30' of visibility. The mooring was tied to the ship's starboard anchor at the bow. Both the port and starboard anchors are wood-stocked designs that are mounted to 90-degree style catheads on the railings. The ship lies upright with the hull, deck, and railings completely intact at about a 150' depth. The deck is about 10' off the bottom with large drifts of silt that come up to within a few feet of the gunwales amidships. Several feet of thick silt uniformly covers the deck, filling in all open holes and cavities. A windlass occupies the center of the bow's deck, and a covered companionway stands behind it with a small opening that leads below deck. This space is a chain locker that is mostly filled with silt. A pawl bitt is in front of the windlass, and on the forward side of the bitt is a pivoting rocker arm and connecting mechanisms that were used to ratchet the windlass to raise the anchors. The bowsprit is intact and reaches from the base of the pawl

bitt to about 10'-15' forward of the stem before the jib boom is broken off. Bobstay chains run from the stem to various points along the bowsprit. Underneath the bowsprit can be seen one of the highlights of the wreck, a decorative and photogenic scrollhead. This sort of decoration is rare to find on Great Lakes shipwrecks and is a major attraction of this wreck.

Another attraction is the standing foremast, which towers high above the wreck with crosstrees evident far at its top. This mast has a square fife rail around its base and a small double-spoiled winch flush against the backside of the mast. Mast hoops can be seen stacked at the base of the mast, belaying pins are still in the fife rail, and four deadeyes are on both railings adjacent to the foremast. Aft of the mast is a wooden pump with its handles missing but with a decorative housing. The first cargo hatch is aft of the pump with its hatch cover partially caved in and the hold mostly filled with silt. This is the hatchway where the tonnage numbers - now covered with zebra/quagga mussels - were located. Amidships is a capstan with a cylindrical style head, followed by another cargo hatch partially covered with a hatch cover. Behind this hatch is a square bitt for tying off the foremast's boom. When this wreck was first found, the mainmast was fully standing behind this bitt. However, in 2001 it was seen to be leaning noticeably aft. Within a year or two, the mast fell completely, and it now lies horizontally across the deck towards the port side of the stern. Thankfully, it missed the aft cabin when it fell. However, it almost completely destroyed the square fife rail around it, and the decking in front of the mast is heaved up along with a small double-spoiled winch that was formerly attached to the front of the mast. A fallen metal double-barreled hand pump can be seen behind the mast, and four deadeyes are on both railings adjacent to the foremast. Finally, a third cargo opening is behind the mast with its hatch covers still in place.

At the stern is an intact cabin with a collapsed companionway on the forward port side. The cabin is almost completely filled with silt and nearly impossible to penetrate. However, through missing boards along the cabin's sides, the interior can be examined. Another companionway into the cabin exists at the stern on the starboard side, and a large two-sheave block rests on the roof of the cabin here. Behind the cabin is the ship's wheel, which is buried halfway in silt in the middle of a large steering deck. This wheel and the intact cabin are additional attractions of this wreck. The stern of the ship is square, and the transom is completely exposed down to the rudder, which is turned to starboard. The underside shape of the hull is visible, and the transom is plain with no decorations. The port yawl boat davit can be seen sticking straight back from the corner of the transom, but the starboard one is missing. No signs of the yawl boat have ever been found, and it is possible the crew attempted to escape in it but did not make it to shore.

Booms and gaffs can be seen lying around the wreck. Their scattering seems to indicate the ship was rigged for sailing when it sank and the sails were not stowed or furled. One curious feature that remains unidentified is what appears

to be a vertical signpost-like object attached to the port railing next to the foremast. Kevin has never been able to identify it or its purpose. Because of a rolled neck seal and drysuit flood, Kevin cut the dive short at only 15 minutes of bottom time. Upon surfacing, a small cruise ship or large private yacht was seen cruising past in the distance. The biting black flies were out in force, requiring many to keep their drysuits on to prevent from being bitten. Bottom time was 15 minutes, total run time was 46 minutes, 20/35 trimix with 100% oxygen was used, and max depth was 157'.

It was also learned that despite his many years of diving Lake Erie, this was Jack Papes' first time on this signature wreck. Congratulations, Jack! Pictures that he took of the dive can be seen at the following location.

http://www.n2junkie.com/gallery/flash/lake_erie_flash_pages/20110710_st_james/