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Wood chunk may hold secret to 17th century Lake Michigan shipwreck

Posted by [Nate Reens](#) | [The Grand Rapids Press](#) July 01, 2008 06:35AM
 Categories: [Breaking News](#), [Top Stories](#)

GRAND RAPIDS -- Vacuum-sealed and frozen for four years, a thumb-sized piece of wood, possibly from the French sailing vessel the Griffin, was to be handed over to U.S. marshals today.

It marks a measured move -- the first step forward in a four-year court battle between the state and an Ohio diving and salvage group -- toward solving a 329-year-old international mystery that may end with the shipwreck being identified.

Steve Libert was expected to surrender the artifact, which has been carbon-dated to the 17th century, under a federal arrest warrant issued last month. The warrant also requires Libert to disclose the location to the state so it can inspect the wreckage.

Libert, a Virginia resident who heads Great Lakes Exploration Group, sought to keep the wood piece to protect his team's interest in the wreck.

"We've been fighting this long just to try and get the right to make an identification that it is the Griffin," Libert said. "We believe the rest of the ship, or its artifacts, are scattered."

Historians consider the Griffin to be the first European trade ship to sail lakes Huron and Michigan. It was built for French explorer Robert de La Salle and was carrying furs from Green Bay, Wis., when it disappeared in 1679.

Libert believes his group has found the vessel on the Lake Michigan floor, identified only as an area between Escanaba and the St. Martin Islands, near Wisconsin.

While the state has contended that Libert's piece of wood is nothing more than barn timber, it has fought to preserve the government's right to the potential find. The state lays claim to all shipwrecks discovered in its waters.

Since Libert filed suit seeking salvage rights in 2004, his group and the state have wrangled over the ship. Under federal law, ownership would belong to France, which supports Libert's salvage efforts and is prepared to send a team to help confirm the ship is the Griffin.

The U.S. Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals in April overturned U.S. District Judge Robert Holmes Bell's dismissal of the case. Bell ruled Libert's group didn't comply with his order to tell the state the exact location of the purported wreckage.

The appellate court reconciled centuries-old maritime law with the 21-year-old state shipwreck statute. It did not make a ruling as to salvage rights.



Steve Libert



Robert de La Salle built the Griffin as part of his plan to trade furs and find passage to the Far East. It was constructed in 1679 on the banks of the

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Great Lakes Exploration is seeking an order that allows it to recover other artifacts while preserving the scientific, historical and archaeological value.

Niagara River. The ship disappeared later the same year, after being loaded with furs in Green Bay.



"All the evidence, all the research points to it being the Griffin," Libert said. "There was never another recorded shipwreck in Lake Michigan for 134 years. If it's not the Griffin, we've got an even bigger find."

Libert hopes to use ground-penetrating radar and sonar equipment to determine what lies in the 1 1/2-mile area that his group has identified as possibly having Griffin materials.

If confirmed as the French vessel, Libert hopes to use his findings for books and a documentary. He hopes the salvaged items would be on display.

"We say that France has ownership, but we'd like to have it somewhere that people can see it," he said.

Another de La Salle ship, La Belle, was discovered in the mid-1990s in Matagorda Bay off the Texas coast. With approval from France, state archaeologists there recovered nearly 1 million artifacts, from human bones to muskets.

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