**Showcasing the DNR: Preserving Michigan’s underwater heritage**

**By CASEY WARNER**

**Michigan Department of Natural Resources**

With a nickname like the Great Lakes State, it’s clear that Michigan has strong ties to the four mighty lakes that surround it.

For hundreds of years, these inland seas have provided a transportation route for people living, playing and doing business in Michigan.

Vessels from canoes to steamers to schooners and modern ore freighters have sailed the Great Lakes through the years. Many ships sank before reaching their destination due to storms, shoals and human error.

An estimated 6,000 vessels have been lost on the Great Lakes, about 1,500 of them in Michigan waters. These shipwrecks remain remarkably preserved by the lakes’ cold, fresh water, offering a unique look at Michigan’s maritime history.

**Cold storage**

“Shipwrecks in the Great Lakes are very uniquely situated, and they’re preserved incredibly well compared to most shipwrecks in marine environments. It’s basically because there’s no salt in the water and there are no critters in the water that directly eat these kinds of things,” said Wayne Lusardi, state maritime archaeologist with the Michigan History Center, in the documentary “[Sunken Treasure](https://youtu.be/7hmWt0TQnRo),” produced by the Michigan Underwater Preserve Council, Inc. The council is a private, nonprofit organization that manages a system of state-designated underwater preserves created to protect and interpret Michigan’s shipwrecks.

The cold, clear waters of the Great Lakes have preserved the most intact collection of wooden shipwrecks in the world, and Michigan’s waters hold the greatest concentration of those wrecks, according to Ron Bloomfield, who serves on the council and works as collections manager/faculty with the Museum of Cultural and Natural History/Museum Studies Program at Central Michigan University.

“In salt water, wood disappears fairly rapidly,” Bloomfield said. “There are many vessels in Michigan’s waters that still have viable wood surviving after almost two centuries on the bottom.”

Though the Great Lakes waters preserve the shipwrecks, some with their masts still upright, bringing parts of the wrecks to the surface compromises them – iron rusts, wood dries out and crumbles, paper yellows and fades.

Until about 40 years ago, it wasn’t uncommon for divers to take artifacts from the wrecks to keep as collectors’ items.

“Each shipwreck is a time capsule representing a specific, sometimes tragic moment. To see them, whether through a clear-bottom canoe or diving goggles, is to sense the lives of people from the past,” said Sandra Clark, director of the Michigan History Center, part of the Department of Natural Resources. “Because Michigan wants future generations to explore, research and enjoy them just as we do now, we have protected them.”

In 1980, Michigan adopted laws protecting the shipwrecks on its Great Lakes bottomlands – no one can bring anything up from them without a permit, issued by the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy, based on a clear plan for how the item will be preserved and shared with the public.

In recent years, recognizing the importance of protecting the shipwrecks’ historic resources, Great Lakes divers have fostered a dive ethic known as, "Take nothing but pictures; leave nothing but bubbles."

**Michigan’s underwater preserves**

Also in 1980, a system of volunteer-managed underwater preserves was created. Today there are [13 preserves around the state](http://www.michiganpreserves.org/default.htm), from the Keweenaw Underwater Preserve at the tip of the Upper Peninsula to the Southwest Michigan Underwater Preserve near the state’s southern border. These preserves include approximately 7,200 square miles of Great Lakes bottomland – an area larger than the states of Connecticut and Rhode Island combined.

One of the preserves, Thunder Bay in the northeastern Lower Peninsula, was designated a national marine sanctuary in 2000. The [Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary and Underwater Preserve](https://thunderbay.noaa.gov/), managed through a state/federal partnership between the Michigan History Center and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, is the only freshwater sanctuary in the national system.

Thunder Bay features the Great Lakes Maritime Heritage Center in Alpena, a free visitor center with exhibits and activities, and the Great Lakes Maritime Heritage Trail along northeast Michigan’s Lake Huron shoreline.

**Settlement connections**

“One of the best things about our preserves is the tie-in with various stages of Michigan's history of settlement. From the earliest Mackinaw boats and wooden schooners, through changes in sail configuration from square-rigged sails to fore-and-aft schooners, the development of swinging keels to allow entry into shallow harbors, and on to the first under-powered side-wheel steamers, then to propellers, the changes from small hatches between masts to the clear deck plan on the modern bulk freighter, and the transition to iron and steel vessels,” said Dan Friedhoff, who serves on the Michigan Underwater Preserve Council and on the board of directors for the Straits of Mackinac Shipwreck Preserve.

There are examples of each of these stages of shipbuilding advances within Michigan’s underwater preserve system, sometimes all within a single preserve.

“Some areas also have interesting geologic dive sites, with clay banks, rock mazes, or underwater cliffs and waterfalls from ancient river systems,” Friedhoff said.

Bloomfield agrees that the resources contained within the preserves – including other cultural and natural features as well as shipwrecks – provide a unique historical perspective.

“They are a capsule history of Michigan’s settlement, growth, and prosperity. In one preserve alone – Straits – you have a large modern freighter lost in 1965 (Cedarville) resting not too far from a 110-foot-long brig that was lost in 1856 (Sandusky),” he said. “The rest of the collection includes vessels of many shapes and sizes that traversed the waters of the Great Lakes from the early settlement of Michigan through the present day hauling goods, foodstuffs, people and their possessions, and raw products like iron ore and wood, both significant to Michigan’s economic wellbeing.

“This juxtaposition of older and more recent wrecks is found in most of the other preserves as well.”

Small items, such as plates, bells, ships’ rigging, cargo and other artifacts that often remain where they were left many years before, also help tell the stories of the shipwrecks and their times.

“The shipwrecks here that are from the middle 19th century, some are literally intact just as if they can still sail again if you took the water out of them. The masts are still standing, the rigging is still in the mast, the artifacts may be distributed about the deck or in the cabin,” Lusardi said in “Sunken Treasure.”

“And it’s a fantastic opportunity to see the vessels like this that are so well preserved.”

It’s an opportunity that brings divers from far and wide to visit Michigan.

**Divers’ delight**

“Our preserves are known to hold some the finest dive sites in the world – including intact wooden wrecks, unheard of in saltwater diving – drawing in divers from around the globe,” Friedhoff said. “Photos from Michigan preserves are featured in dive magazines worldwide, and when people travel this far to dive our wrecks, they often extend their visits to experience shipwrecks in multiple preserves, to the benefit of nearby businesses and tourist attractions.”

Most of the underwater preserves have dive charter services. There are boat ramps, marinas and other facilities for divers with their own boats. Shore-access diving also is available from many preserves.

Many of the popular dive sites are marked by buoys that volunteers with the Michigan Underwater Preserve Council have placed.

The Michigan Underwater Salvage and Preserve Committee, which advises the DNR and other state agencies on policies and permits concerning shipwrecks on Great Lakes bottomlands, has been working to secure funding and permits to put more buoys on wrecks for the safety of the wrecks and divers.

The Great Lakes’ most famous shipwreck – the wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald, which lies at the bottom of the southeastern portion of Lake Superior (just over the border in Canadian waters) – is protected from diving as a gravesite. Visitors can see some of the ship’s artifacts on display, and learn more about this and other wrecks, at the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum at Whitefish Point in Paradise.

**A view from above**

For those who prefer to stay dry, there are glass-bottom boat tours, museums and interpretive trails that tell the dramatic and sometimes tragic stories of sailors and their ships.

The Underwater Salvage and Preserve Committee also is working with DNR to create an online map for armchair shipwreck explorers and to build a strategy to connect more people, including kayakers, snorkelers, glass-bottom boat tourists, divers and people exploring museums and heritage trails on land, to Michigan shipwrecks and underwater preserves.

“We believe that people value what they know about and preserve what they value,” Clark said of this planned outreach effort.

The culture preserved through the remains of these vessels – ship construction, shipboard life, cargo – provides a tangible link to the past for the diver to experience firsthand and the nondiver to experience through imagery and video.

“You do not have to be a diver to truly appreciate the history and significance of a shipwreck in the Great Lakes,” Bloomfield said. “There are many terrestrial archaeological sites in the state of Michigan; however, there are no places on land that I know of where you can see a brig that was built in 1848 still relatively intact and upright. In Michigan, you can see one preserved in 70 feet of Lake Michigan water to the west of the Mackinac Bridge.”

Many of the thousands of Great Lakes shipwrecks have been found, but it’s likely that many more will be discovered with the availability of modern technology that makes it easier to scan the bottomlands and to remotely dive to greater depths.

Find more information about Michigan shipwrecks and underwater preserves at [Michigan.gov/Shipwrecks](https://www.michigan.gov/egle/0%2C9429%2C7-135-3313_3677_3701---%2C00.html).

Anyone with information about the illegal removal, alteration or destruction of shipwrecks and associated artifacts can call or text the DNR Report All Poaching hotline at 800-292-7800.

Check out previous Showcasing the DNR stories in our archive at [Michigan.gov/DNRStories](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0%2C4570%2C7-350-79137_79770_79873_80003---%2C00.html). To subscribe to upcoming Showcasing articles, sign up for free email delivery at [Michigan.gov/DNR](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr).