

Shipwreck found near Kelleys Island - Discovery could be sailing vessel lost in 1829

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A 19th century schooner, which the National Museum of the Great Lakes is similar to the Lake Serpent.

Provided photo

KELLEYS ISLAND

What may be the oldest shipwreck ever found in Lake Erie has been found east of Kelleys Island, possibly off the Erie County coast.

The National Museum of the Great Lakes and Cleveland Underwater Explorers on Monday announced the possible discovery of the Lake Serpent, a sailing vessel built in Cleveland in 1821 and lost in 1829.

“It is very much a local story for Sandusky,” said Carrie Sowden, a marine archeologist and the director of the museum’s Peachman Great Lakes Shipwreck Research Center. To protect the shipwreck site, museum officials are not giving an exact location. But Sowden described the site as a few miles east of Kelleys Island, possibly off the Erie County coast.

A crowd funding effort has been launched at indiegogo.com/projects/lakeserpentproject to help raise the money needed for a planned excavation this summer. The excavation would seek to confirm if the Lake Serpent has indeed been found. About \$13,000 is needed, with \$6,000 raised so far. Excitement is building as museum officials and the Cleveland diving group point toward possible confirmation of the discovery.

“Based on initial preliminary research, the target in question has been found in an area where the Lake Serpent was lost in 1829 and is very similar in size and design to the long-lost shipwreck,” said Sowden, an underwater archeologist who has traveled to much of the East Coast of the U.S. and places such as Portugal, Turkey and the Azores to dive for wrecks.

“Based on the vessel’s enrollment papers, the Lake Serpent has a carved sea-serpent figurehead below the bowsprit of the vessel. We intend to excavate around that portion of the wreck to determine the identity of this important discovery and have filed for permits to do so,” she said. This is the first time online crowdsourcing has been used to explore a Lake Erie shipwreck site, and the effort may also be a first for the Great Lakes as a whole, said Christopher Gilchrist, executive director of the museum. “Our members and four other organizations have donated almost \$6,000 toward the project so far. We hope that the general public will see the value of supporting this investigation with contributions of \$10 and more to help us determine if we have found the oldest commercial shipwreck ever discovered on Lake Erie,” he said.

The Lake Serpent, a two mastered schooner, was lost in 1829 while carrying a load of stone from Cleveland to Put-in-Bay, according to an article published on Oct. 8, 1829, in the Cleveland Weekly Herald. The report stated a body was found floating between the islands and Sandusky Bay, and other bodies from the ship washed ashore in Lorain County.