

Shipwreck hunter says famous 1812 war vessel found

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ARTIFACTS: Kenn Feigelman, who operates an Ontario-based underwater documentary filmmaking company, shows a few of the artifacts his divers have discovered.

A Lake Ontario shipwreck hunter claims to have discovered a legendary vessel from the War of 1812 -- the 32-metre sloop HMS Wolfe, star of one of the most dramatic naval battles on the Great Lakes at the height of the U.S. invasion of Canada.

The ship, renamed HMS Montreal later in the war, was the Canadian-made flagship of commodore James Yeo, commander of the inland British fleet during the crucial struggle against the Americans for control of the lakes.

In a famous 1813 engagement known as the Burlington Races, a damaged Wolfe was under intense fire in Toronto but just managed to escape the enemy assault by retreating rapidly westward to a gun-ports Burlington Bay.

A defeat in that battle -- which came just days after a major U.S. victory on Lake Erie -- could have had free rein in the lower lakes and, according to a leading War of 1812 naval historian, made certain the American union."

The ship, which was involved in numerous battles throughout the 1812-14 war, was scuttled years after the war in waters off Kingston, Ont., along with several other vessels that had outlived their usefulness in peacetime Upper Canada.

But Kingston-based diver Kenn Feigelman says he's found, on the murky lake bottom at an undisclosed location near the city, a ships' graveyard with four War of 1812-era wrecks -- including, he believes, the Wolfe. And he told Canwest News Service on Friday that he expects the discovery to generate international interest ahead of the bicentennial of the war in 2012.

"Although these were derelict vessels," he said, "they are a very, very important part of not only Canadian but North American history."

Depending on the outcome of the battles fought by the Wolfe -- which carried 20 cannon and 200 crew -- and the other ships in Britain's Lake Ontario squadron, the "political geography of North America could have been completely different," said Feigelman, a Montreal native who now runs Kingston-based DeepQuest2 Expeditions.

He and his dive team have captured sonar images and photographs of the sunken hulks and adjacent debris fields, but Feigelman insists the wreck sites will not be disturbed and that all information gathered is being shared with Parks Canada archeologists.

The find follows the discovery earlier this year of the Revolutionary War-era HMS Ontario and a major Parks Canada-led probe of the Hamilton and Scourge, two American ships from the War of 1812 that went down in a storm near Hamilton.

Marc-Andre Bernier, Ottawa-based manager of operations for Parks Canada's underwater archeology unit, said government scientists have conducted surveys off the Kingston shore in the past and identified some potentially significant wreck sites.