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**Archaeological Remains
of Admiral Walker's
Shipwreck from 1711
in the Montreal Military
and Maritime Museum**
by ANDRÉ LÉPINE

FIELD WORK AND STUDIES

ARCHAEOLOGICAL REMAINS OF ADMIRAL WALKER'S SHIPWRECK FROM 1711 IN THE MONTREAL MILITARY AND MARITIME MUSEUM

by André Lépine

I. Walker Expedition

André Lépine, born in Montreal, 1949. Consultant on underwater archaeology and naval history for the Montreal Military and Maritime Museum in Quebec. Research student in Archaeology at the University of Montreal Department of Ancient and Modern Studies. Until 1968, served as Underwater Technical Advisor for the Water World Diving School in Montreal; his duties included investigation of several mid-19th century merchant steam vessels sunk in Lake Champlain and a survey of the remains from the Naval Actions of the War of 1812 in Plattsburgh Bay, State of New York. In 1972, surveyed and studied a mid-18th century Spanish galleon sunk in the Florida Keys in 1733. Technical Director of the Walker Underwater Research Expedition and Richelieu River Archaeological Exploration, 1970–1975. Founder-President of the nautical archaeology organization "Les Archeonautes Associes", since 1972. Advisor for numerous private organizations concerned with underwater archaeology, and member of historical and archaeological societies in Canada and the United States.

Early on the morning of July 30, 1711, the expedition, consisting of nine ships-of-war, two bomb vessels, and some sixty transports and tenders, British and colonial, with close to 7,500 troops and marines aboard, set sail from Boston. Although a fairly strict embargo had been laid on colonial ports to secure secrecy, there is every reason to believe that information about the project had reached Canada before Walker left England, and that this knowledge had been abundantly confirmed since Walker's arrival in Boston. Certainly, any last doubts on the part of Governor Vaudreuil at Quebec must have been dissipated with the public proclamation by the General Court of a "general fast" to promote the success of the expedition.

By August 3, the fleet was probably abreast Cape Sable, and the weather being moderate, Walker summoned Colonel Vetch to the flagship, and entrusted him with the task of leading the fleet in the 300-ton frigate *Dispatch*, accompanied by three small scouts, to "poynt out the fleet their way, prevent their running into any dangers", and to mark anchorages in advance. Working on an agreed code of signals, Vetch brought the fleet safely around the tip of Cape Breton and past St. Paul Island — a performance which suggests a good knowledge of the coast. Although a landsman and soldier, Vetch was probably correct in the estimate of himself as the best pilot on the expedition. He had always regarded the St. Lawrence as the chief obstacle to the success of the expedition; he had little faith in either the loyalty or competence of Paradis, and he had become increasingly worried about Walker's seamanship. His subsequent conduct, therefore, in the light of this deep anxiety, is the more mysterious and baffling.

Shortly after leaving Cape Breton, Vetch was once more summoned to the flagship and requested to transfer to the *Sapphire* (Captain Rouse), the smallest frigate in the squadron. Vetch refused, on the grounds that it would be troublesome to move his stores and baggage in such "stormy blowing weather". The Admiral accepted this explanation, but on the following day sent him a written order that he was to await the signal to take up once more his position in the van. According to Vetch's own evidence, no such signal was ever made, and when the puzzled captain of the *Sapphire* inquired the whereabouts of his expected guest: "I told him I had excused my self of that to the admirall: so I never after had any more instructions or directions from the

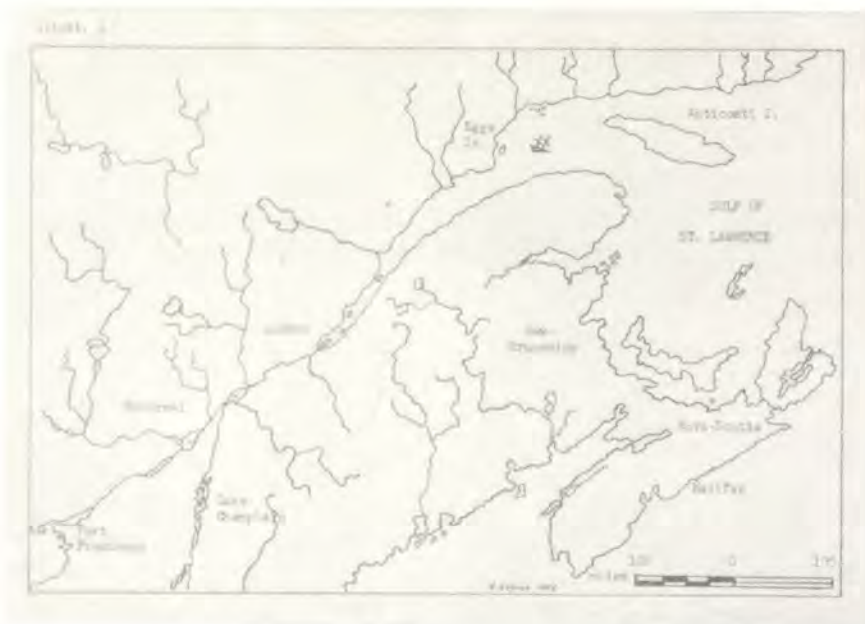


Fig. 50. Map showing the eastern part of Canada, the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the shipwreck of Walker at Eggs Island in 1711.

Flagg". Apparently Vetch did not receive further orders, for he followed cautiously astern ("by which wee escaped the missfortune that happened to severall"), watching the course of the fleet, as he confesses in his journal, with growing uneasiness and foreboding.

Vetch later contended that had he been permitted to continue ahead of the fleet, "as I did for some time with the small vessels one head of us", the disaster could have been avoided. In the light of events, this bold statement was probably justified. On the other hand, his refusal to change ship unless accompanied by all his baggage remains as curious an anomaly as Admiral Walker's acquiescence in this refusal. The minutes of evidence taken at a "council of war" following the disaster (August 25) throw little light on the enigma. "...Colonel Vetch being asked why he had told the Admiral that he was the best Pilot for the River, and whether he thought now that he could carry up the Men of War and Transports; he said, he could undertake nothing that related to Sea Affairs, and he could take no Charge; but he was willing to go up the River in a small Vessel to discover Difficulties".

The fleet was well within the Gulf of St. Lawrence by August 13, "to the Northward of the Bird Islands" (sixteen miles north-east of the main group of Magdalene Islands), and standing by ten o'clock at night west-north-west, with the wind from the south-west. According to Walker, the pilot (Paradis) thought it unsafe to steer any longer in this direction for fear of running into the Island of Anticosti; hence about midnight he made the signal for the fleet to tack, and stand to the south-ward; and at five o'clock they tacked again. In Vetch's opinion this reversal was the accidental cause of all their misfortunes, for rather than take advantage of a wind which would have carried them into

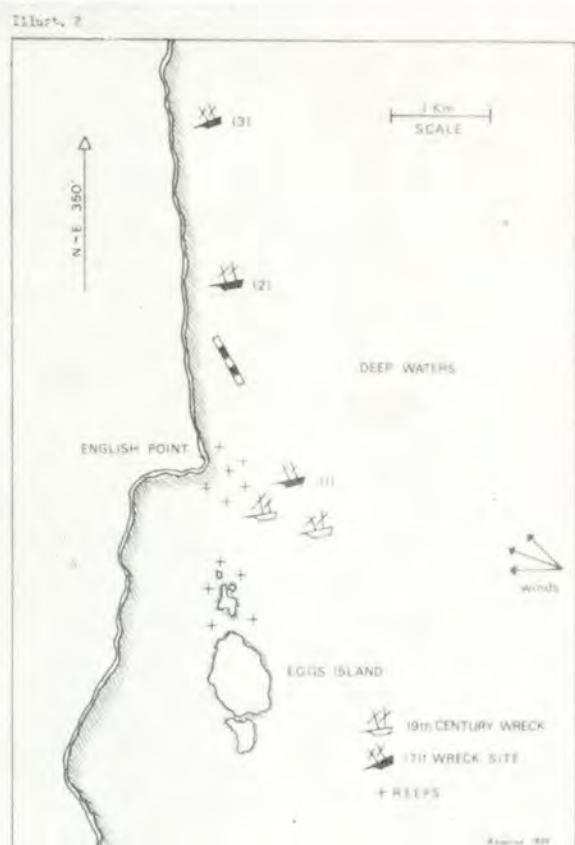


Fig. 51. The wreck sites discovered during survey by the Author in 1972–1975, on the North Coast of the St. Lawrence Gulf.

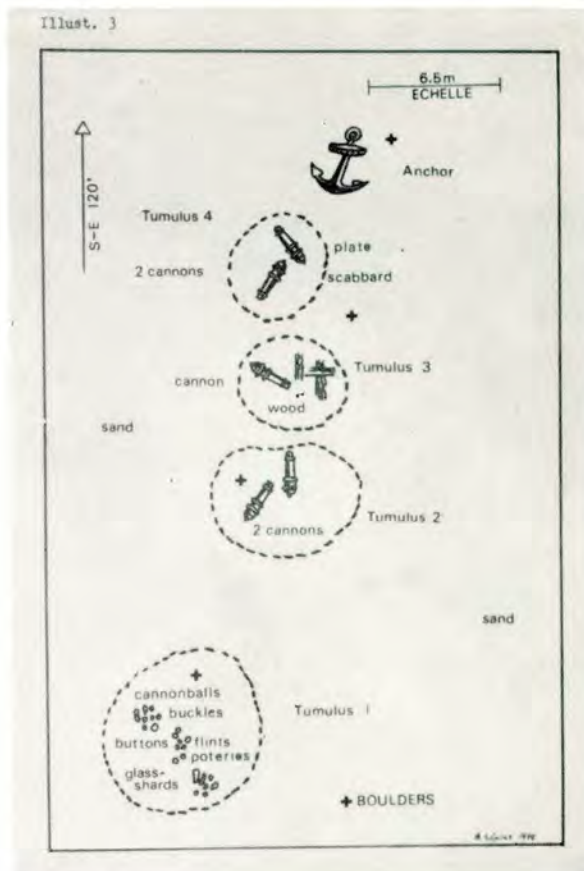


Fig. 52. Excavation site No. 3 with the cannons, anchor and artifacts.

the river, they had turned in their tracks, “and for about six hours wee runn back directly to the great surprizall of all the fleet”. Then followed three days of comparatively calm weather and light winds until on the morning of the 18th, just as the fleet was about to enter the river, it began to blow hard from north-north-west, north-west, and north-west by west. Unable to weather Cape Gaspé, the fleet was forced to shelter in Gaspé Bay from a wind “which had wee gott into the River, would have been verry fair for us”.

On the morning of August 20 the wind veered to the south-eastward, and Walker was able to leave the Bay, and move into the river. The wind continued between south by west and south-east until noon of the 21st, and they had just passed the North-West Point on the westward extremity of Anticosti, when the wind died, and fog came down blanketing both shore and fleet. On the 23rd the wind freshened from east-south-east, and there were intermittent breaks in the fog, but not sufficient to give sight of land, and soundings were impossible because of the depth of water. In the evening, by his own account, Walker consulted his pilots, both French and English, who advised him because of the thick fog to bring to until morning, with heads to the southward.

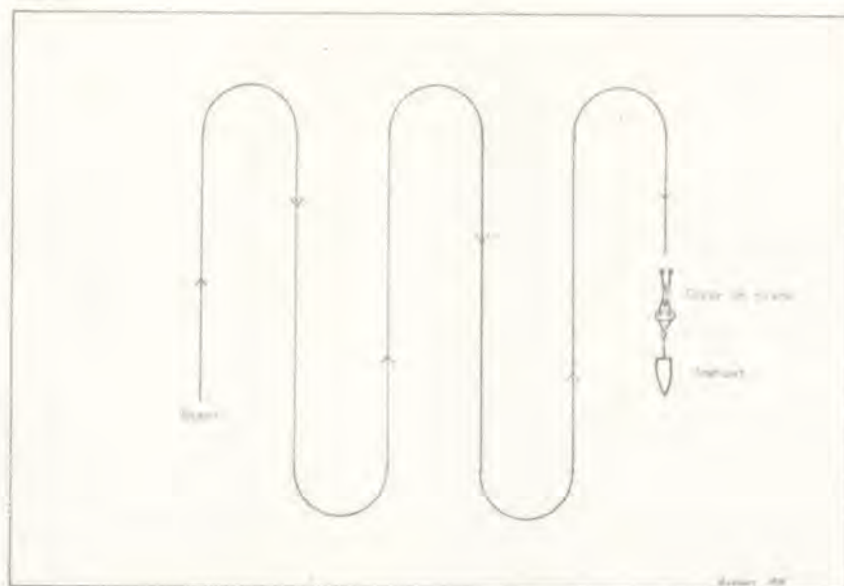


Fig. 53. Search pattern used during survey. Parallel paths $\frac{1}{4}$ mile to over a mile long.

The fleet was now well to the westward of Anticosti (where the river is about seventy miles wide) and probably fifty miles from the south shore. At this time the wind varied between east-south-east and east by north, "which by the Advantage of Two Points, West Variation in all likelihood would make our Drift at least (if not better than) S. W....". Accordingly, at eight o'clock Walker gave a signal to bring to on the larboard tack, thus heading the fleet to the southward under mizzen and main topsail.

Unfortunately, Walker was mistaken in counting on a south-west drift. The most notable characteristics of currents near the entrance to the St. Lawrence are their incredible vagaries — changes in strength and direction which vary unevenly with the season of the year, the time of day or night, and the effects of wind and barometric pressure. There is, of course, a constant out-going current as the river moves towards the sea; but the evidence of repeated surveys indicates not only the presence of such irregular on- and off-shore eddies as sweep from Sept Iles to Pointe des Monts, but a powerful flow inward in a north-westerly direction from the south coast of Anticosti Island. Walker was not in mid-stream when he issued the order to bring to. In the grasp of strong currents which had borne him relentlessly towards the north-west, he was at least seven leagues north of his proper course, and, according to his own account, about fifteen leagues farther to the westward than he believed himself to be. Aided by an easterly wind, the fleet had been brought to close to the "North Shore", which in the vicinity of Ile aux Oeufs runs almost north and south, and might not inaccurately be described as a west shore.

Had this position been maintained until morning, disaster might still have

Fig. 54. Author working on an excavation
carefully removing pottery shards.
Photo.: André Lépine.

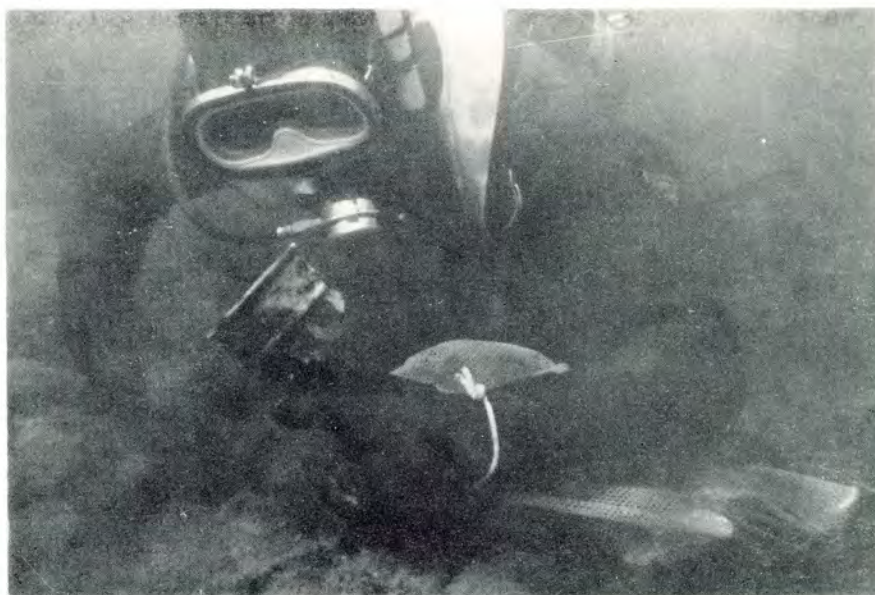


Fig. 55. Ship's fittings and iron objects
recovered from excavation site No. 1.
Photo.: Roch Lépine.



been avoided. Unhappily, when, at about half past ten, the *Edgar's* captain, Paddon, brought the disturbing news that land had been sighted, presumably ahead, Walker who was then preparing for bed took it to be the south shore. It seems likely that one of the small off-shore islets had been sighted, or more probably the flash of white spray on an outlying shoal or reef. In consequence, assuming he was approaching the south shore, and, therefore, that all was clear to leeward — i.e., to the westward — Walker ordered the fleet to wear,

and bring to on the other tack. The signal being given, the Admiral once more prepared to take his slumbers when he was again interrupted by an excited young army officer named Goddard, who reported seeing breakers to leeward as the ship bore away. Walker rejected this importunate advice from a "Land Captain" as fantastic, and was about to close his eyes for the second time when the young man precipitated himself into the cabin "desiring me for the Lord's sake to come upon deck myself, or we should certainly be lost, for he saw Breakers all round us. Upon this his repeated Importunity, and hearing a more than ordinary Noise and Hurry upon Deck, put on my Gown and Slippers, and coming upon Deck, found what he told me to be true, and all the People under a mighty Consternation, and in great Confusion". By that time, the whole fleet was closing on the "North Shore", or, more accurately, the coast to the westward — a dead lee shore in an easterly wind — and ships in the van were already on the edge of the breakers. One may wonder what the officers of the watch were doing during the interval between Walker's signal to wear and Goddard's excited summons.

Once recovered from the shock, Walker immediately made all available sail, and stood off from the shore towards mid-channel. But some ships, including the *Windsor* and the *Mountague*, failed to get clear and were compelled to anchor for the night in positions of extreme peril, with shoals of rocks on either quarter. Within a cable's length on either quarter the surf dashed high over the reefs; and from far away in the night came the faint



Fig. 56. Showcase of artifacts from English Point.
Military and Maritime Museum, Montreal.

cries of despairing men whose distress lights broke the darkness for a moment to reveal broken ships grinding on the rocks.

Up to this time a gale had been blowing almost directly on shore; had it continued it is doubtful if many of the fleet could have been saved. Mercifully, by two o'clock in the morning there came a providential lull, followed by a shift of wind to the north-north-west, until shortly after four o'clock it began to blow hard at south-west by west, by which time most of the ships were able to weigh or slip their anchors and by morning were standing-in to the south shore. It speaks well for the seamanship of the crews that only seven transports and one storeship were lost.

Walker cruised in the neighbourhood of Ile aux Oeufs for two days in an effort to save what men and stores he could. On August 25, after consulting with General Hill, he called his captains to a council of war, which was also attended by the regimental colonels. Only six of the pilots were asked to give testimony, in addition to Colonel Vetch whose rather ambiguous evidence has already been noticed. It is quite clear that both Hill and Walker had no desire to persevere in the attempt on Quebec, and that this feeling was shared by the captains, whose unanimous opposition to further adventure afforded strong pretext for retreat. "Tis our unanimous Opinion", read the resolution, "that by reason of the Ignorance of the Pilots aboard the Men of War, it is wholly impracticable to go up the River of St. Lawrence so far as Quebec."¹

II. Underwater Archaeological Research

I became fascinated with the story of Walker's shipwreck in 1970 while doing original research in the Public Archives in Ottawa. After locating many documents dealing with this shipwreck, including admiral Walker's own journal, which listed and described every ship lost the night of August 22, 1711, I came across a report dated October 12, 1711 from the Admiralty of Quebec, that of a certain François Margane de Lavaltrie who was the first Frenchman to see the site of the shipwreck after the disaster. This gentleman wrote an exciting and vivid account of everything he observed from the time he set foot on the island until he returned to Quebec. I also found documents stating the precise locations of the ships sunk, and knew that they could be located with proper underwater equipment and research.

Early in 1972, aided by Donald Théberge and Roch Lépine, two experienced divers, we raised a substantial amount of money and formed an association Les Archeonautes Associes to search and salvage historical remains of man's past maritime activities.

After several months of preparation and, carefully putting together the best in underwater equipment and personnel, we initiated a systematic search along the coast of English Point using the underwater diving-plane which covers a great distance in a short time.

Like most wrecks in shallow water, they have been badly battered by nature and man, and are scattered over wide areas of the sea floor. Also in shallow water, the diver battles rough seas and is hampered by poor visibility which

¹ Gerald S. Graham, *The Walker Expedition to Quebec, 1711*. The Champlain Society, Toronto.

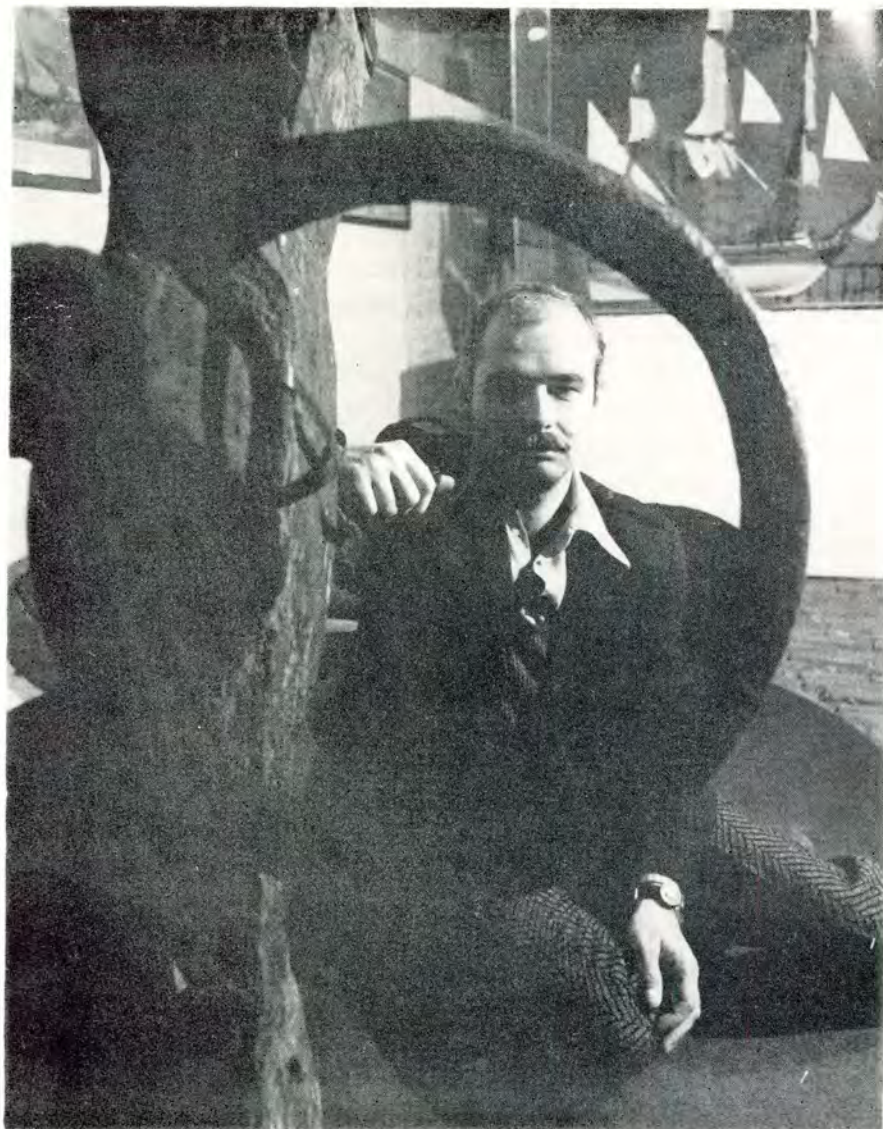


Fig. 57. André Lépine showing an early 18th century stock-anchor in the Montreal Military and Maritime Museum. Photo.: Gilles Rivet.

makes it almost impossible to utilize the surveying, photographic and excavation methods used in deeper waters.

Let us consider briefly what happened to most ships wrecked in shallow water. Either immediately upon running aground or soon after, the vessel began breaking up, even if wrecked in good condition. The superstructure of the old ships was the first to go. Being buoyant, it was often washed up on the beach or carried some distance from the main hull, spilling cannons and other objects along the way. Waves or currents eventually dispersed the ship's timbers and marine borers devoured them. In some cases, ships cargoes have been strewn over areas of several square miles and are intermingled with the cargoes and vestiges of other wrecks, sometimes of another period, making it very difficult to determine what belongs where.

An important fact in our research, was the local information we could get from the fishermen of English Point. By chance, Jean Baptiste Langlois one of the first settlers in this coastal village, offered to collaborate in our search.

From the start, I was convinced that we would eventually find traces and remains of these wrecks.

After several days of searching, we finally found sites of five wrecks three believed to be of Walker's shipwreck and two of the 19th century. Buoys were thrown overboard the searching vessel to mark the spots.

Days later, we were investigating these sites where we had dropped marking buoys. Diving down, I found a small limestone concretion which was surrounded by boulders and sand. I was positive the remains were buried in that limestone, so we positioned the searching vessel and began excavating on site No. 1 with chisels to remove the artifacts encased in a hard conglomerate.

In the meanwhile, recording by measurement, drawings and photographs were made of the excavation site and artifacts uncovered, so that major finds would help show how the vessel broke apart and where the several components ended up. In the case of these wrecks, we can only determine what cargo, anchors and armament the ship carried. As the destruction of the ship is virtually complete no clues to its construction remain, nor how, nor where she carried her cargo, stores and armaments.

Donald and I were on the bottom in approximately 25 feet of water, removing artifacts from the hard bottom which was covered with ceramic shards and limestone-encrusted iron objects.

Donald found four-pounder cannon balls and soon, I found a brass buckle-belt of the late 17th century period. I was happy for we had indeed found the remains of Walker's shipwreck.

The following days at site No. 3, we located five of the ship's iron cannons and a broken anchor, originally perhaps measuring 12 feet in length.

Nearby, we discovered two dozen cannon balls and about two hundred musket balls. Under one of the iron cannon, which was resting on the limestone bottom, Donald spotted a pewter plate intact, caught almost completely in the concretion. Through the period of navigation between Britain and her New World colonies, pewter table-ware and utensils were in daily use during those long and painful voyages.

Working as cautiously as possible, Donald managed to extract the pewter plate. When he reached the surface with it, I discovered that it still bore the marks and engraving of its owner "John Habien att y Royal Oak upon y common Portsmouth 1710". This was, in fact, our first and real proof of Walker's ship. It is hoped that current documentary research will provide sufficient information to identify the wreck.

In the small area of bottom where we found the anchor and the iron cannons we also discovered two brass butt-plates of a 17th century musket, a plug bayonet scabbard used as early as 1680 from which the leather was almost in perfect condition, and a copper powder measure "ladle" part of a cannon's equipment.

We continued to work on the wreck site and recovered barshots, explosive shells, several gunflints, silver and brass buttons, and a remarkable decorated brass shoe buckle.

During these same fruitful days, we also recovered from site No. 1 more than eight hundred pounds of calcareous concretion-encrusted iron objects, the majority of which were ship's fittings and spikes that were used to fasten ships. We were also happy to find among the many iron objects a late seventeenth-century shipwright's hammer, chest lock and hinge, cannon balls, gun parts, chain links, nails and rings. These objects attested to the routine of life aboard these ships.

Although diving conditions in the Gulf of St. Lawrence are difficult, we were all diving from 3 to 5 hours a day in spite of the freezing water which ranged from 4 to 12°C in summer.

Those diving problems were followed by six days of hard labour during which we salvaged a 600 hundred-pound anchor and five iron cannons weighing 1500 hundred pounds each. To refloat them we had to build a lifting-raft with six 45 gallon barrels tied together by chains and wood planks, with a hand-winch in the centre of the raft. On several occasions we also had problems with fog and rough seas which gave us poor visibility.

Our finds during these excavations included a variety of artifacts such as glass shards, fragments of canvas, pieces of rope, a three-pound brass scale weight, a wooden dead-eye from the ship's rigging, small animal bones, a Queen Anne coat-of-arms brass plate, and a brass musical organ-stop with the marks "H. W." Is it a coincidence that "H. W." are the initials of Hovenden-Walker?

The 1974 and 1975 expeditions were concentrated on a complete excavation of sites 1, 2 and 3. From information gained during the 1973 examination and excavation of the remains of Walker's ships, an effort was made to determine the configuration of a buried hull structure at site No. 2.

During the same years, land exploration was done along the sandy coast with electronic detectors for the purpose of locating iron remains of the shipwreck. A ship's timber of about 12 feet long, 13 inches thick and weighing probably 600 hundred pounds or more was located on the beach. Closer examination of the ship's timber revealed that it was of early 18th century wooden construction.

Since 1973, countless artifacts have been salvaged from this underwater cemetery and are currently undergoing preservation treatment.

Preliminary examination of the iron objects was made to determine the condition of the specimens before a course of action could be decided upon.

Since most of the iron objects were heavily corroded, chemical methods were adopted with fairly good results, and a protective finish, such as an organic lacquer, was applied against exposure to air.

Some of the wooden artifacts were treated by the polyethylene-glycol-wax method. The waterlogged objects were placed in a container filled with 12 per cent solution of wax at room temperature. The container was placed in a ventilated oven and the temperature was gradually increased until after a period of weeks it reached 60°C. During this time the wax slowly diffused into the wood, displacing the water in the wood, so that the super-natant solution slowly evaporated, and by the end of the operation, the wooden objects were just covered with molten wax.

Removal of calcareous deposits on copper and copper alloy objects was effected with calgon (sodium hexametaphosphate) treatment which in time

released deposits of calcium and magnesium salts by complexing them to form soluble salts. Good results were obtained.

Thus, all historical artifacts recovered during the Walker Underwater Archaeological Expedition, the result of many months of patience and labour, were collected to be restored, studied and identified by scientific methods.

From those discoveries, we have made many observations. They have provided us with clues and concrete facts concerning the methods of arming the ships, the type of artillery, and the details of everyday life and trade during the period.

In the spring of 1974, the first exhibition of these historical artifacts was presented, in the Arms Pavilion at *Man and His World* (Expo 67 site) in Montreal.

Since November of the same year, a permanent exhibition has been placed in the Maritime Section of the Montreal Military and Maritime Museum established in the grounds of the Old Fort on St. Helen's Island (1829), where the public has shown a great interest in underwater archaeology and the naval history of our country.

At the Annual Conference of the Organization of Military Museums of Canada in Montreal in the fall of 1974, I was invited to lecture on the Richelieu River Underwater Archaeological Exploration and to exhibit artifacts recovered during these excavations.

In 1975, my assistant (D. Théberge) and I produced, in collaboration with the Society of Radio-Canada, a film dealing with underwater archaeology in the waters of Quebec for the television series "Science et Réalité".

Since the winter of 1976, we have been studying new projects, and we hope to realise them.

In August 1976, an underwater survey was directed in the vicinity of Cap des Rosiers on the coast of Gaspesia in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The purpose of this investigation was to locate and determine the condition of the wreck *Garrick*, which had been on its way to Quebec with 187 Irish immigrants on board when it went aground in a storm in 1847. The survey was conducted with the collaboration and financial support of the Montreal Military and Maritime Museum.

A co-operative effort of the University of Montreal's Geophysics Department and the Montreal Military and Maritime Museum will be made this fall (1976) to conduct a remote sensing survey in the Richelieu River, Quebec Province. This survey, to locate the wreck of the first steamship *Vermont* which travelled the waters of Lake Champlain (U.S.A.) and the Richelieu River, and the second ship in the world engaged in commercial service, sunk in 1815, will concentrate on targets generally identified in historical accounts, using magnetometer surveying equipment.

In August 1976, I had the honour to be invited to lecture on Underwater Archaeological Research in Quebec waters, at the Annual Conference of The International Association of Transport Museums, where I became aware of the Association's active contribution to the conservation of man's past history.

