

# INLAND SEAS<sup>®</sup>



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Carol Johnson photo

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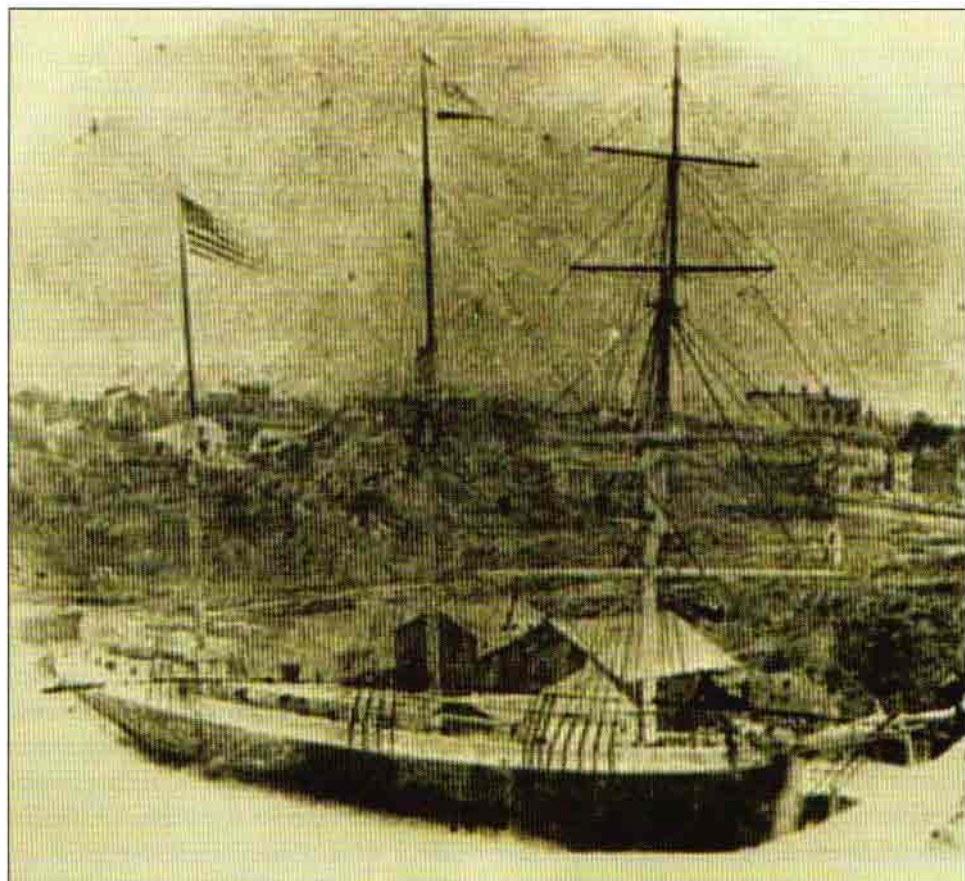
## THE LOST WRECK OF THE *CORTLAND* FOUND

by KEVIN MAGEE AND DAVID VANZANDT  
CLEVELAND UNDERWATER EXPLORERS (CLUE)

On Saturday night, June 20, 1868, a three-masted barkentine that had plied the Lakes for less than a year sailed downbound on western Lake Erie through the Pelee Passage. Its journey began several days earlier in Escanaba, Michigan, where it had taken on a full load of iron ore that was destined for the steel mills of Cleveland, Ohio. At 173 feet in length and 34 feet in beam, the vessel was the largest of its brethren only three years after the end of the Civil War. The ship was a herald of the boom in post-war commerce and trade on the Great Lakes that was to follow during the next two decades using large sailing vessels to carry goods and bulk cargo both east and west. Vessels like it would support the nation's expansion westward, and Lake Erie itself would serve as the primary highway for passengers and cargo moving along its length.

The ship was built and launched by Albert G. Huntley, Master Builder, in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, the previous year and received its official enrollment on August 21, 1867. Its owner, Asahel P. Lyman, Esquire, spared no expense at the time of its construction. He spent about \$55,000 to have the ship built, an enormous sum of money for the time. It had unusually large frames, doubly secured planking, a well appointed cabin, an on-deck forecastle (located abaft of the foremast), prominent gallant forecastle with a bell, two centerboards, two capstans, and three pumps — an amount of equipment far beyond what would normally be expected on most sailing vessels in the Great Lakes. Extra appointments such as a scrollhead, personalized name pennant, and rare photograph also hint at the attention lavished on it. The ship was built “clipper style” in a manner similar to the large oceangoing vessels of the time. Although a princely sum was spent on its construction, it was only insured at \$36,000.

The ship in question was the *Cortland*, and it became infamous on the night of June 20, 1868. The night was described as dark and drizzly with a fresh breeze blowing from the north and rain squalls crossing the lake. In a prelude of things to come, while passing through Lake Erie's western basin at about 8 or 9 o'clock in the evening, the *Cortland* came close to another vessel while on a starboard tack and then nearly collided with it while on a port tack. However, the *Cortland* successfully navigated through the Pelee Passage and continued its journey towards Cleveland. Meanwhile, the *Morning Star*, a side paddlewheel steamer engaged in the profitable Cleveland-Detroit route, was



The only known photo of the *Cortland*, 1867 or 1868.

Center for Archival Collections, Bowling Green State University

preparing to leave its dock in Cleveland. It was behind schedule due to problems with loading its cargo, which included pig iron, barrels of nails and flour, mowing machines, and a long list of other sundry materials. Also aboard were a variety of passengers, including some socialites returning from a wedding in Cleveland and some poor German immigrants carrying only their meager possessions. At around 10:30 p.m. the problems were resolved, and the steamer slipped out into Lake Erie to begin its overnight run upbound to Detroit. Although the night was described as rough, the steamer was reported to be making good time at the start of its journey.

At approximately midnight, Andrew Brown, the forward watch on the forecabin deck of the *Cortland*, reported lights in the distance to the first mate, William Mullan, who was the officer of the deck, since the captain was asleep in the cabin. The mate retrieved his glasses from the cabin and determined the lights in the distance to be a large



The *Morning Star*

*Early American Steamers*, Vol. 6, 1969, by Erik Heyl

steamboat. Some time later, Brown noticed the green navigation lantern on the *Cortland's* starboard mizzenmast rigging, which was the side presented to the oncoming steamer, was burning dimly and duly reported this to the mate. The mate then proceeded to remove the green lantern and take it into the cabin to trim and clean the wick, leaving the deck crew with no guidance or instructions for further action. From the forecastle deck Brown continued to watch as the steamer drew closer. The *Cortland* was on a port tack, leaving the now-unlit starboard side exposed to the approaching steamer. No other lights were visible on the *Cortland*, and no one on the steamer took notice as it continued to steam ahead towards the Pelee Passage.

As a collision neared, the mate appeared from the cabin and began to hang the green lantern back on the mizzen rigging, just as Brown stepped back and began to ring the ship's bell. Witnesses aboard the *Morning Star* later reported hearing a bell ringing and then saw canvas materialize out of the darkness in front of them. Moments later there was a violent collision as the bow of the *Morning Star* bore into the *Cortland* on its starboard side near the mizzenmast, ironically killing the mate instantly as he was hanging the lantern. The collision also killed the *Cortland's* helmsman, Linnott Chandler. The shock of the collision was so violent that the anchors of the *Morning Star* were launched forward, one into the lake and the other completely over the *Cortland*. This anchor pinned the *Cortland* to the *Morning Star* and caused the barkentine to swing into the rotating starboard paddlewheel, sustaining even more damage to the *Cortland's* starboard side.

The *Morning Star* sank very quickly — within 15 minutes — due to the complete destruction of its bow. Unlike the two lives lost on the *Cortland*, this ship took many more lives with it. At least 30 people perished, but exact numbers are difficult to determine since some were immigrants who were nameless on the manifest and had no friends or

relatives to report them missing. As a testament to the *Cortland's* great strength and stout construction, the ship remained afloat and drifted for over an hour with its very heavy load of iron ore before finally sinking about three-quarters of a mile southwest of the collision site. After several uncomfortable hours floating in the cold Lake Erie waters, many survivors were mercifully picked up by the passing brigantine *L. H. Colton* and — ironically — the *Morning Star's* sister ship, the *R. N. Rice*, which was returning from Detroit to Cleveland on the opposite run. Upon the *Rice's* arrival in Cleveland, the news rapidly spread of the disaster, and over the next few months the accident garnered unprecedented press coverage as many of the victims were from the area. There was great public interest in the stories about the cause of the accident, the watch for bodies and debris washing ashore, and accounts of the rescue.

Salvage began almost immediately after the accident using hardhat divers. Within a week, bodies and cargo were being recovered from the sunken hulk of the *Morning Star*, and the rigging, sails, masts, and deck equipment were salvaged from the *Cortland*. Newspaper reports chronicled the salvage operations from the decks of the salvage vessels or spectator-filled vessels chartered specifically to visit the wreck site. The *Cortland* was described by the salvage divers as lying nearly on its starboard side in 12 fathoms (72 feet) of water with its spars plainly visible above the water. They also reported both ships lay on a very soft mud bottom into which the divers sank “as into newly fallen snow,” making work difficult. With much trouble, the *Morning Star* was eventually raised after several attempts, only to sink again some distance away while being towed to shoal waters for repairs. Several subsequent attempts to raise the *Morning Star* were unsuccessful, and the ship was abandoned. Despite early optimism, the *Cortland* was never raised and no further salvage attempts were made.

The locations of these historic wrecks were well known at the time, but as time passed, they were forgotten. A hundred years after the tragic accident, the advent of scuba diving renewed interest in these ships. Soon modern divers were searching for them, and in late April 1980, the *Morning Star's* final resting place was located by Jim Kennard, Craig Hampton, and Don Muhleman approximately 8 miles north of the mouth of the Black River off Lorain, Ohio. However, the location of the *Cortland* remained elusive. Despite two decades of extensive searching by different people, no sign of the wreck was found. Because of its elusiveness and the historic significance of the wreck, the *Cortland* soon became the most sought wreck in Lake Erie's west-central basin. Many unsubstantiated claims and boasts were made over the years, but no proof was ever presented to verify that the *Cortland* had been found.

In June 2002, the Cleveland Underwater Explorers (CLUE) joined the search for the *Cortland*. The initial search was conducted by David VanZandt and Kevin Magee using Dave's sidescan sonar and 30-foot boat *Sea Dragon*, but several years of searching produced no results. In May 2004, researcher Jim Paskert joined the group as CLUE's Chief Researcher, bringing to the organization his considerable years of expertise in researching and finding Lake Erie shipwrecks. Using information provided by Jim and based on detailed historical research, Dave and Kevin set out into Lake Erie on Saturday, July 30, 2005. The seas were initially tolerable at 2 feet, but during the long transit from Cleveland to the search area, they began to build to rough 3-to-5-foot seas with numerous whitecaps. Since it had been such a long trip, it was decided to try and do some minimal searching while in the area. As luck would have it, within the first 15 minutes, a wreck was located almost directly under the boat's path. It was too rough to attempt a dive that day, so it was postponed until conditions were more favorable. The first dive occurred the following day on Sunday, July 31, minus Kevin, who had other commitments. Instead, Carrie Sowden, a nautical archaeologist at the Great Lakes Historical Society, performed the dive with Dave.



Sidescan sonar image of the *Cortland* on the bottom.

Sidescan Image by David VanZandt

The wreck lies in 60 feet of water and actually consists of two disarticulated sections, the bow and stern. They are separated by about 100 feet in a north to south direction with the bow pointing towards the south. There is almost no wreckage lying in between, and the dive boat is usually relocated to dive both sections. What happened to the amidships section is uncertain at this time. It could possibly indicate unrecorded heavy salvage of the cargo of iron ore. This is somewhat supported by the fact the bow and stern centerlines do not line up, suggesting a rather violent removal of the center section. Unfortunately, there is no mention in the archives of its cargo being salvaged — just

the rigging, masts, and equipment. The other distinct possibility is the heavy load of iron ore would have put undo stress on the amidships. The iron ore would not have shifted due to the shifting boards constructed inside the cargo holds, and this would have caused that portion of the hull to collapse. This is a normal occurrence in the wrecking process, and over time the collapsed hull would have been buried in silt.

The bow rests in a scoured hole at about a 45-degree angle on its starboard side with its starboard gunwale buried and the port side about 6 feet off the bottom. There is a large and distinctive waist-high forecastle deck on the front of the bow, and aft of the forecastle deck the wreck ends immediately with a few hanging boards and one spar lying perpendicular across the width of the ship at the break. There is no additional wreckage visible on the bottom after the break. A windlass is mounted under the forecastle deck with anchor chain still wrapped around it and running into the silt. On the edge of the forecastle deck at the centerline is the windlass' pawl bitt, a large square post that is covered with metal and several fore-and-aft rows of metal studs. Two curved metal arms come out of the post on each side and hang aft over the windlass. At first these were undetermined until the object they supported was discovered on a clear-visibility day lying near the bottom, wedged between the windlass and forecastle deck. This item was a large flared bell, probably the very bell rung by the *Cortland's* forward watch, Andrew Brown, in the fateful moments before the collision. It was heavily corroded due to its cast iron construction. The bell was raised on August 22, 2006, under an archaeological permit issued by the State of Ohio and was conserved for public display by the Great Lakes Historical Society. On the forward side of the pawl bitt is attached a horizontal pivoting bar with mechanical stops. Below each end of the pivoting bar is a small hole in the deck large enough for a rod to pass through; it is probably the actuating mechanism for an early style hand pump. Immediately forward of the pawl bitt, along the centerline, is a capstan mounted in the middle of the forecastle deck. This is another unusual feature, since most Great Lakes sailing vessels had only one capstan mounted on the main deck amidships.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the forecastle deck is that it is not solid but grated with lengthwise slats with drainage spaces in between. Five small cross pieces give this grated floor lateral strength. The centerline of the forecastle deck is not grated but a solid wood piece. This design is reminiscent of oceangoing sailing vessels but was not a common feature on Great Lakes vessels. Looking under the forecastle deck reveals mostly debris, but anchor chain can be seen running from the windlass to the port hawsepipe, and under the pawl bitt is a fallen piston barrel from the hand pump. Running diagonally across





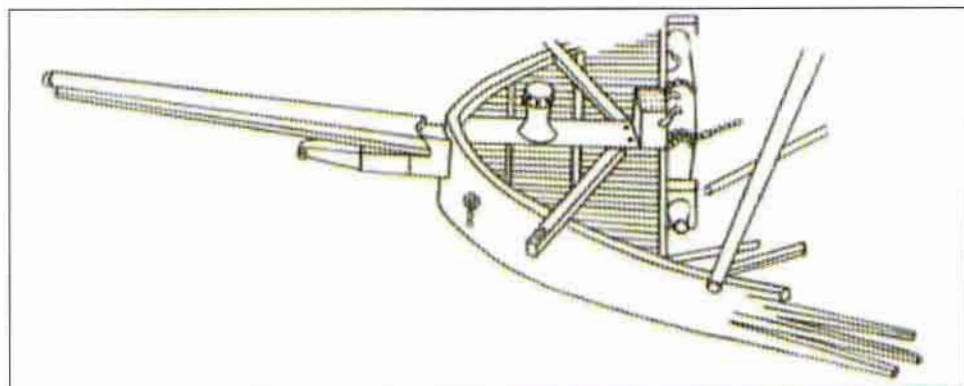
*Cortland bell undergoing conservation.*

Photo by David VanZandt

the forecastle deck to each side are the anchor catheads. The port cathead hangs high off the bottom, and the starboard cathead's tip is buried in the mud with some chain wrapped around it. Lying loose on the deck next to this cathead is a two-sheave block with a large hook. Nearby on the gunwale is a hearteye. Two pieces of modern debris — a small cut log and white plastic bucket — can be seen stuck underneath the wreck's hull on this side. The bow's gunwale has several line chocks towards the stem. Examining the port side, the anchor chain can be seen to hang down from the hawsepipe a foot or so and then abruptly ends without an anchor.

At the very tip of the bow is a large bowsprit. It has pulled out from the bow by several feet and fallen towards the starboard side, but it is still attached and held partially in place at an angle between the knightheads. The bowsprit extends about 10 feet forward where it is broken at a metal collar as it dives into the mud bottom. Looking under the bowsprit, a scrollhead can be seen. It is broken in three places but is still attached. This was another exciting find!

The stern is not as exciting as the bow, especially after the bell and scrollhead were located. It is almost completely buried with only a



Conceptual sketch of the *Cortland's* bow.


Sketch by Kevin Magee

small portion of the transom and port side exposed. Only about 6 feet of the transom's length is exposed before it plunges at about a 45-degree angle into the silt. A wooden cleat and line chock are mounted at the transom's corner, and an attractive carved lip is visible along the top of the transom. The transom is squared and blends into the port side with a knee. The port side is collapsed into exposed frames (commonly, but incorrectly, called ribs) with some decking folded down against the frames on the interior. No railing is present, but the cabin hole and its coaming are visible along the edge of the decking. As soon as the cabin coaming ends, so does the wreck. A belaying pin board lies on the bottom in this area. About 20 feet away from the end of the cabin, a roughly 8-by-8-foot piece of decking and beams can be found sticking out of the bottom. It is unremarkable in appearance, and there are no other pieces of debris to be found.

There are many diagnostic features that suggest this is indeed the wreck of the *Cortland*. The first is its condition on the bottom. The ship lies on its starboard side in soft mud as described by early divers. Second, it has "clipper style" construction which is unusual on the Great Lakes and reflects more of an oceangoing style of construction. Third, there is specific deck hardware that matches the known equipment on the *Cortland*. This includes the forward capstan and forward pump. Fourth, there are specific construction features that match known construction features used in the *Cortland*. These include the scroll head and the use of square fastened planking with double bolting and double spiking in each frame. This construction feature was found on the planking at the stern. The wreck also has a squared stern, which is documented in the enrollment. Fifth is its location, which is consistent with the location described in the historical record. These diagnostic features, along with the location of the bell where Andrew Brown

sounded the alarm, provide strong evidence that this is indeed the bark *Cortland*.

It should also be noted that the presence of the scrollhead, bell, blocks, hearteye, and other items strongly suggests this wreck is an undisturbed shipwreck and was not previously found.

Much credit for finding this wreck goes to Jim Paskert's research, without which finding this small and difficult target would not have been possible. Also, some diligence, determination, and a little luck helped. CLUE is proud to have found this missing piece of Lake Erie history, and its discovery helps to finally complete the tragic but intriguing story of the *Cortland* and *Morning Star*. 

### **About CLUE**

David VanZandt, Kevin Magee, Tom Kowalczyk, and Jim Paskert, are the principal members of the Cleveland Underwater Explorers (CLUE). CLUE is a non-profit corporation, founded by David VanZandt and co-founded by Kevin Magee in 2002, whose purpose is to research, locate, explore, and document the shipwrecks of the Great Lakes with an emphasis on Lake Erie. The team consists of individuals experienced in maritime archaeology, archival research, maritime history, ship construction, underwater remote sensing techniques, mechanical and electrical engineering, and recreational, technical, and scientific scuba diving.

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