

Civil War-era ships that collided, sank in 1878 found in Lake Michigan

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Photo by John Janzen and John Scoles, via Shipwreck World

A view of the final resting of the schooners Peshtigo and St. Andrews, lost in 1878 in northern Lake Michigan. They were discovered in an “amazing state of preservation” about 200 feet below the surface between Beaver Island and North Fox Island off the shore of Charlevoix.

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CHARLEVOIX, MI – Two massive Civil War-era ships were discovered in Lake Michigan this month about 50 miles from where they were thought to have collided and sank.

The schooners Peshtigo and St. Andrews, lost in 1878 in northern Lake Michigan, were discovered in an “amazing state of preservation” about 200 feet below the surface between Beaver Island and North Fox Island off the shore of Charlevoix, according to a [news release from Shipwreck World](#).

The discovery was first viewed by underwater camera during June 2019, the release states. Long-time diver and explorer Bernie Hellstrom, of Boyne City, located an obstruction at the site in 2010 while using a bottom sounder.

When he lowered his custom camera system in June, Hellstrom found a ship graveyard, according to the release. The remains of the two tall ships lay only 10 feet apart at the bottom. Their masts were laid over each other and coal was strewn across the sand. A huge hole in one of the hulls indicates that the vessels crashed and sank quickly.

The find was a “real mystery,” because there was no record schooner collision within 50 miles, according to the release. The Peshtigo and St. Andrews were thought to have gone down in Lake Huron in the eastern Straits of Mackinac.

The location was presumed after an 1857 flying eagle penny was found in the mast step of a wreck that was thought to be the St. Andrews. But the Peshtigo was never found in that area despite searches.

Marine historian Brendon Baillod went on a fact-finding mission and discovered that many news accounts of the St. Andrews-Peshtigo disaster placed the collision in Lake Michigan between Charlevoix and Beaver Island – the approximate location of Hellstrom’s ship graveyard, according to the release.

Technical divers John Janzen and John Scoles were recruited to descend to the eerie site, which lies beyond normal sport diving depths. Paul Ehorn was brought in to handle surface support with his specialized dive boat.

Janzen and Scoles’ dive resulted in a high-definition video that reveals evidence of a dramatic and violent disaster.

Dives and investigation confirm that the ships at the bottom of Lake Michigan between Beaver Island and North Fox Island are the St. Andrews and Peshtigo - “two iconic Great Lakes sailing ships from the Civil War era,” the release states.

Conditions were dark and hazy when the vessels collided around 1 a.m. on June 25, 1878.

The Peshtigo was on her way to Chicago from Erie, Pennsylvania, with a cargo of coal. The St. Andrews was headed to Buffalo, New York, from Chicago, with a corn cargo.

Torch signals were confused as the ships came upon each other in the night. The Peshtigo turned hard to port and struck the St. Andrews on her port side. Both ships were at the bottom of Lake Michigan within 10 minutes.

When it was hit, the St. Andrews fell over onto the Peshtigo, taking out two of her masts. The Peshtigo's stern reportedly rose 40 feet in the air before the ship dove for the bottom.

The Peshtigo lost two men – second mate John Aldrich and wheelsman John Boyle – in the confusion after the collision. The surviving crew members of both ships were picked up by the passing schooner SVR Watson.

Built in 1863 at 161 feet long with three masts and weighing 384 tons, the Peshtigo was a giant schooner for her time. She was the largest vessel built in Peshtigo, Wisconsin by shipwright Thomas Spears.

Almost as large, the St. Andrews was built in 1857. It had two masts and was 143 feet long, weighing 426 tons. She was built at the Merry and Gay shipyard in Milan, Ohio.

Continue scrolling to view more photos of the shipwreck.



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Photo by Bernie Hellstrom, via Shipwreck World

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ARRIVAL OF SHIPWRECKED CREWS AT CHICAGO.

The Inter-Ocean of Monday has the following:

Among the notable arrivals here on Saturday was the propeller Garden City, Capt. Shaver, with a full load of freight, and forty passengers from Ogdensburg. The captain reports having met the captain and crew of the ill-fated schooner Atlanta, at Glen Haven, and brought them here. The vessel is a total loss. They had to cut her deck away in order to get the lumber out of her hold. The Garden City brought up all of her gear, running and standing, her anchors, chains, and everything of any value. Capt. Lynch, of the schooner Peshtigo, says the disaster occurred about 1 o'clock a. m. on Tuesday. The Peshtigo was headed at the time southwest by south. She was on the port tack. Wind was southeast by south. It was hazy. It was not necessary to sound the fog horn. Saw Skillagalee light four miles off. Should see it eighteen miles in clear weather. The captain was below at the time of the collision, and the first intimation he had of anything wrong was when the crash came. The mate being lost, there is only the man who was on the lookout to look to for information, and he says that the fault rests with the crew of the St. Andrew. This, of course, will be very unsatisfactory sort of evidence.

The mate lost was John Aldrich, who has a family, and belonged to Peoria, Ill. The captain does not know whether the sailor, Boyle, had a family or not, but he belonged to Buffalo.

In regard to the report that Capt. Lynch, on coming on deck, said to the mate, "John, you have done a bad job," the captain utterly denies it. The crew of the Peshtigo saved most of their effects.

The tug Clematis, Capt. Nicholson, took Capt. Lynch and the crew of the Peshtigo off the S. V. R. Watson, when ten miles off Milwaukee, at 10 o'clock Saturday morning. The provisions on the Watson had about given out, owing to the prevailing head wind, and Capt. Nicholson, when taking the shipwrecked men, furnished the schooner with what was necessary in the way of provisions. The Clematis landed the crew here at 3 o'clock yesterday (Sunday) morning.

Up to a late hour last night the Watson had not yet arrived.

Courtesy of Shipwreck World

A news report of the crash of the schooners Peshtigo and St. Andrews, lost in 1878 in northern Lake Michigan. They were discovered in an "amazing state of preservation" about 200 feet below the surface between Beaver Island and North Fox Island off the shore of Charlevoix.

The crew of the St. Andrew arrived this afternoon on the prop Ocean. Following is the statement made by James Hackett, Second-Mate of the St. Andrews: He says that she was heading northeast, weather cloudy, wind southeast, making about five knots per hour; could see the Peshtigo about one mile off; had showed a torch three minutes before the vessels came together. Both vessels sunk in about nine minutes. When they struck, the St. Andrew fell over on the Peshtigo, taking out her fore and mainmast. Two of her men jumped on the Peshtigo forward. Heard Capt. Lynch say to his Second Mate, "John, you done a bad job. Why didn't you call me?" The Peshtigo's crew were ordered to lower the boat. The Second Mate, name unknown, and John Boyle, who was at the wheel when the accident happened, went after their clothes. Boyle was not seen again. The Second Mate lowered himself to the water on the davit falls. The Peshtigo's stern was forty feet in the air, sinking rapidly. When her crew got into the boat none of them had a knife except the Captain, who cut the painter when the boat was standing on her ends, luckily saving all from drowning, as a large wairpool followed the sinking vessels, causing both small boats to come together, in which way they remained until picked up by the schr S. V. K. Watson, two hours later in the morning.

The St. Andrew's crew were transferred to the prop Ocean, bound down. The Peshtigo's crew remained on the Watson, and will be taken to Chicago. Both crews lost all their clothes. Both vessels sunk in 120 feet of water off Beaver Island.

Courtesy of Shipwreck World

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