

CANADA AIDS ENEMY SHIPS — FROM 1813

SUBMARINE 'BURGLAR ALARM'

BY CHRIS WATTIE

Heritage officials are set to unveil an underwater "burglar alarm" to protect the almost perfectly preserved wrecks of two American warships sunk during the War of 1812.

The city of Hamilton, Ont., will announce the new system next month, which will watch over the final resting place of the Hamilton and the Scourge, two armed schooners that sank nearly 200 years ago during a sudden storm.

Ian Kerr-Wilson, the co-ordinator of the project, said the automated radar system is designed to keep souvenir hunters from looting the two wrecks, lying in the dark waters 90 metres below the surface of Lake Ontario.

"There aren't many 200-year-old wooden ships left in the world ... These are the only completely intact War of 1812 vessels in existence, that we know of," Mr. Kerr-Wilson said yesterday. "They really are little time machines that have been set out on the bottom of the lake. They're just awesome."

But the extraordinary preservation of the wrecks and their rarity also puts them at risk from souvenir hunters who, Mr. Kerr-Wilson is quick to add, are "a tiny minority" among sport divers.

So officials have decided to install a \$140,000 land-based radar programmed to watch for signs of divers over the wrecks.

"This isn't anything different than what we do at heritage sites on land," Mr. Kerr-Wilson said. "It's just like putting a burglar alarm on an historic house — only this site is at the bottom of the lake."

The two ships were part of the American naval squadron on Lake Ontario during the invasion of Canada, at the time a British colony. They are believed to have participated in several naval bat-

tles, including a raid on what is now Toronto in the spring of 1813 that resulted in much of the town being burned down.

The ships were anchored off the shore of the Niagara peninsula in August of 1813 when a violent storm struck and capsized both vessels. Only a handful of the crews escaped the disaster, and more than 50 sailors are thought to have died in the sinkings.

The ships were rediscovered in 1975, sitting upright and virtually intact on the lake bottom. They were still considered the property of the U.S. Navy, until title was transferred to the city of Hamilton in 1980 and they were declared a national historic site.

To protect the site, the exact location of which remains a closely guarded secret, the city's Hamilton-Scourge Project has designed a radar system linked directly to the marine unit of Niagara Region police.

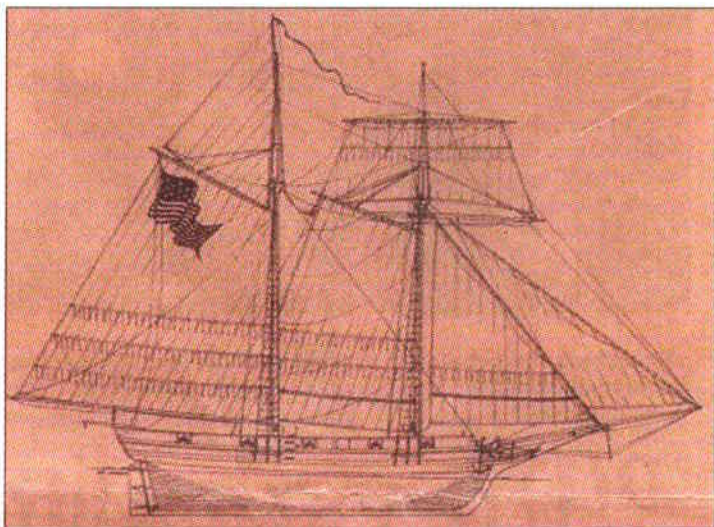
Mr. Kerr-Wilson said the radar, which can sweep almost the entire western half of Lake Ontario, is connected to an advanced computer that has been programmed to identify ships in the area of the wrecks that might be carrying divers. "It is a very, very good system — it can track hundreds of targets and very quickly distinguish between ordinary traffic on the lake and what might be ... a diver or a group of divers going down there."

The radar is sensitive enough to spot a rowboat on the lake and its sophisticated signal processing software, developed by Sicom Systems Inc. of Fonthill, Ont., can dispatch a police boat to investigate any suspicious craft within minutes. "This system will automatically sound the alarm and call a cell phone, which is with the police marine unit," Mr. Kerr-Wilson said.

Mr. Kerr-Wilson said the system will cost taxpayers \$90,000, with the remaining \$50,000 to be covered by private donations. It will cost about \$2,500 a year to



Armed schooners Scourge, below left, and Hamilton, below right, were sunk in 1813. Their ghostly but perfectly preserved remains, above, will be protected



operate. "And that's an amazing deal when you consider the value of this site to Canada, to all of North America," he added.

The city has been warned that the ships may be threatened by deep-water zebra or quagga mussels, or by the dragging anchors of large ships.

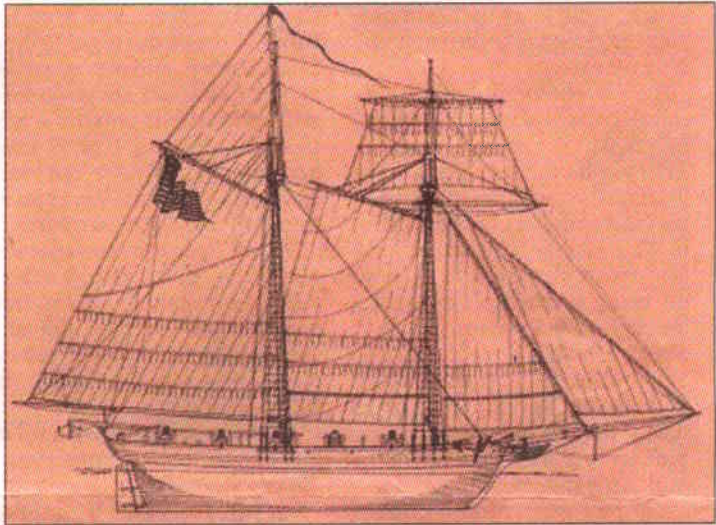
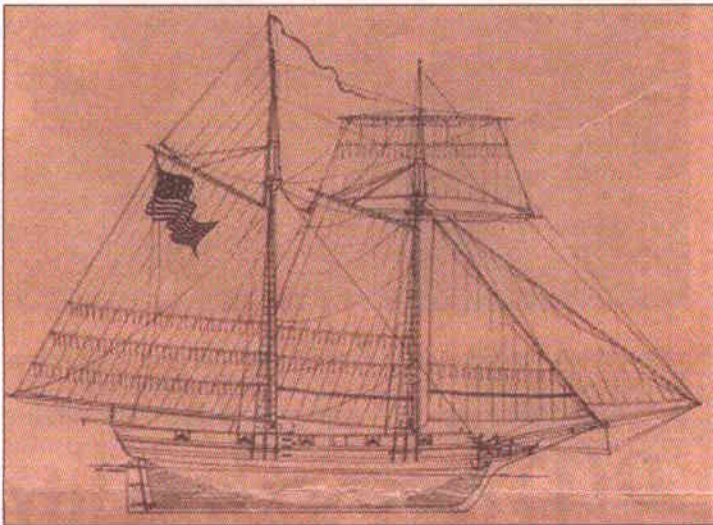
Canadian authorities have been urged for years to raise the ships and preserve them in museums, and the U.S. has offered to pay

the multi-million-dollar cost of bringing them back to the surface, with backing from *National Geographic*. Hamilton turned those offers down because one of the wrecks would have gone to a U.S. museum.

Mr. Kerr-Wilson's worry is that some private divers may have already surreptitiously visited the sunken warships, which were last surveyed by marine archeologists in 1991. "This is well beyond the



Armed schooners *Scourge*, below left, and *Hamilton*, below right, were sunk during a sudden storm on Lake Ontario nearly 200 years ago. Their ghostly but perfectly preserved remains, above, will be protected from divers seeking souvenirs from the wrecks.



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reach of normal sport divers ... although it's technically feasible, there aren't that many people who can do it," Mr. Kerr-Wilson said. "It's very speculative, but there are stories floating around about people diving to the wrecks ... That's why it's so important to get this system in place." The Ontario Heritage Act prohibits divers or submersibles from coming within 500 metres of the wreck; anyone caught div-

ing to them without permission could be subject to fines of up to \$50,000 and two years in prison, Mr. Kerr-Wilson said. "It's trespassing just to be diving on that site - we don't want anyone down there without notifying us and clearing it with us," he said. "There are 50-odd American sailors down there - it's a war grave. The Americans take that very seriously and so do we." *National Post*