

Keeping souvenir hunters at bay

By **BILL CURRIE**
Standard Staff

Souvenir hunters won't get anywhere near two remarkably well-preserved armed schooners which went to the bottom of Lake Ontario in a storm nearly 200 years ago.

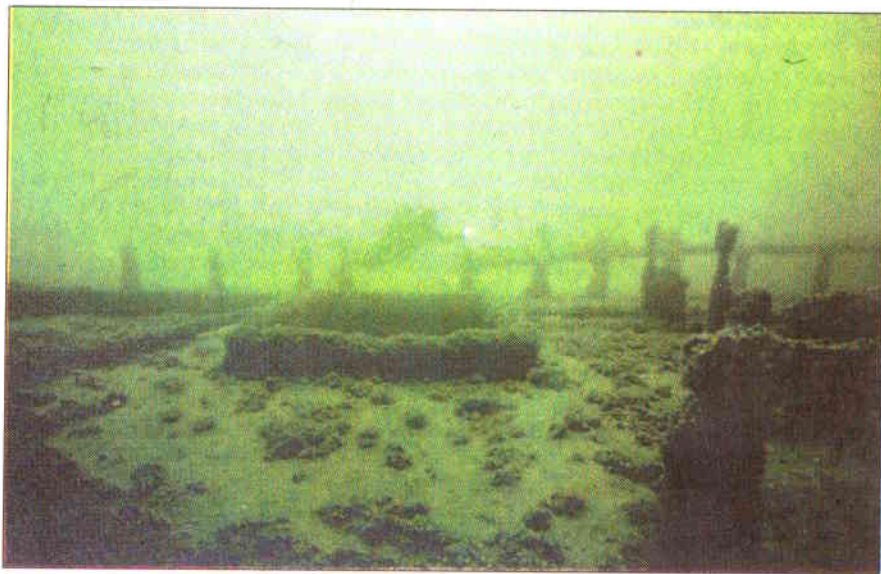
After about six months of testing, heritage officials with the City of Hamilton are set to unveil a surface radar system purchased from a Fonthill company that will keep safe the irreplaceable War of 1812 assets.

The former American vessels Hamilton and Scourge have been equipped with alarm systems and an automated radar is being monitored by Niagara Regional Police. The NRP's marine unit is responsible for enforcement if a vessel should approach to conduct an unauthorized dive on the ships.

The City of Hamilton owns the virtually intact wooden ships, which are sitting upright in about 90 metres of water. They were moored off the shore of the Niagara Peninsula in August 1813 when a violent storm struck and capsized them.

They were discovered in 1973. The U.S. Navy transferred the title to the City of Hamilton seven years later.

Several dives have taken place over the years, including those led by



The Hamilton and Scourge lie in about 90 metres of water off Port Dalhousie.

PHOTO SPECIAL TO OSPREY NEWS NETWORK BY DAVE GILCHRIST

Jacques Cousteau in 1980, the National Geographic Society in 1982 and the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute's Jason Project by Titanic discoverer Robert Ballard in 1990.

The exact location of the wrecks in Lake Ontario off Port Dalhousie remains a closely guarded secret.

NRP Sergeant Bill Wiley, a member of the department's marine unit, said alarm systems are in place and there is

a protocol for responding to alarms by using police boats.

"It's similar to the same sort of call from a business alarm," Wiley said. "The only difference is the response vehicle."

He declined to provide other details and said he couldn't confirm whether other agencies are assisting with enforcement.

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The Hamilton and Scourge lie off Port Dalhousie.

STANDARD FILE PHOTO

Shipwreck alarm

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The Hamilton-Scourge Project is hoping to protect the site from technical and sport divers who might disturb it and destroy its archaeological and historic potential. It is also treating the site as a war grave.

The project is developing a plan which will guide research, archeology, conservation and education efforts.

Tim Nohara, founder and Sicom Systems Ltd., the company that sold the radar technology to the project, said he's gratified to be able to offer it to help preserve a historic site.

"As a company we're a defence contractor," Nohara said Tuesday. "(But) we've always been interested in civilian applications."

This is the first operational use of Sicom's computer-based radar surveillance system, which is designed to monitor inland waterways and for homeland security applications, but rivals much more expensive military radar equipment.

The system cost Hamilton about \$140,000, of which \$50,000 will come from private donations.

Nohara said a test of the radar when the Second World War destroyer HMCS Haida was towed to Hamilton from Port Weller last summer provided much of the data used to optimize the system.

Nohara said a quick response by enforcement teams is augmented by the fact that surface threats to the ships would have no way of knowing they have been detected. Also, he said a dive on the historic vessels would take time and suspect vessels could be tracked accurately either approaching or departing.

The Ontario Heritage Act says divers or submersibles are prohibited from approaching within 500 metres of the wreck.

In 1976, the National Historic Sites and Monuments board noted that the shipwrecks are "considered to be of national historic significance." In 1980, the two vessels were declared a national historic site.