

On Sunday afternoon, June 17, 2007, Cindy LaRosa and Kevin Magee went to Barcelona, NY, to go diving in eastern Lake Erie off Osprey Charter's boat "Southwind." The day had a strong wind out of the west, and whitecaps were prevalent on the lake with 3' seas. However, there was a full boat with 12 divers, including Jack Papes, Jimmy Herbert (Jr.), Scott and Diann Shields, Dave Stoebe, Jeff Thompson, Tim Laurito, Joe Olszewski, Mike Blunt, and John Gavroy. The original destination was the elusive "Swallow," a wreck Kevin has tried to dive many times but has never succeeded. Once again, it was deemed too rough to attempt to grapple the unmoored and distant "Swallow," so a nearby moored wreck was chosen instead. It was the "Oxford," a brigantine that was built in 1842 and sank on a calm, clear spring night in 1856 after being struck by the steamer "Cataract." The "Oxford" was carrying a heavy load of iron ore at the time, and the captain, his wife, their child, and two other crewmen perished as the vessel quickly sank at 2:00 am, leaving only three survivors. The wreck today lies in about 155' of water, but the crushed bow has created a crater where 165' can be reached at the bottom.

Despite the expected rough seas, the waves actually subsided during the trip to the site, and the sea state was a pleasant 2' during the dive. Upon descending, great bottom conditions were discovered with 50'-80' of visibility and bright ambient lighting that did not require a light. This wreck usually has good underwater conditions regardless of other wrecks' conditions. The mooring was tied to an anchor visible at the bow, which sits at the bottom of the large crater excavated by the ship when it hit the bottom. The anchor stands with the cathead attached to it, but no other pieces of the bow are readily visible next to it. The bow, which points west, has been completely obliterated and/or buried, leaving only certain fragments visible. One of the most unique items is the old-fashioned cutwater and attached scrollhead, which lie flat on the bottom near the far wall of the crater. The bowsprit and jib boom also appear to lie together on the bottom, and the pawl bitt and parts of the windlass are visible sticking out of the mud. Mostly visible, however, is unidentifiable wooden debris scattered about the area.

The entire wreck lies with a moderate port list. The base of the foremast sticks out of the mud at the bow, and it can be seen to have a U-shaped fife rail around it with some belaying pins still in it. Curiously, stones lie stacked around the base of the mast, but these may have been part of the ore cargo it was carrying. The fallen foremast lies intact off to the port side climbing out of the crater, and the port side of the ship is missing where the mast lies. The starboard side is much more intact, and there are seven deadeyes mounted on the starboard railing opposite the foremast. Sources indicate the collision took place on the starboard side near the foremast. The large number of deadeyes indicates the foremast was square-rigged, and, in fact, the entire rig of the foremast is observable. The mast lies pointing upwards diagonally as it climbs out of the crater with the full crosstree platform visible 10' above the bottom. The whole thing is improbably supported in this raised position by the square-rigged spar attached to the mast

just below the crosstrees. The spar is quite large, and one end sticks into the bottom while the other end points up high off the bottom. It is attached to the mast with a metal collar and various chains. The entire crosstree platform, mistakenly called a crow's nest, has various extra reinforcements and chain braces not seen on ordinary schooners. The overall structure appears very beefy, and the platform itself is D-shaped. This unique feature of the wreck has given the wreck one of its many nicknames, "Crow's Nest." The topmast is also attached above the platform, and it points upwards diagonally with its steps to the mast visible. Underneath the foremast lying on the bottom can be seen the fallen mainmast. Lying on the bottom nearby is a boom or gaff from the mainmast and another spar or two.

Moving aft along the centerline of the ship, the deck rises up diagonally out of the crater. The starboard decking is mostly intact, but the port decking is missing until amidships where there is a cargo hatch and a partially exposed centerboard box. Looking closely at the centerboard box, it appears to be offset to the starboard side slightly, an early ship construction technique that was later abandoned. There is a centerboard winch visible on the deck followed by the broken stub of the mainmast. This mast stub is ringed with vertically mounted cleats, and it appears to be octagonal in shape at the base. Opposite of the mainmast on the starboard side are four deadeyes mounted to the railing. This is indicative of a gaff-rigged mast, so this vessel was indeed a brigantine. There are three deadeyes mounted on the port railing with one obviously missing. Aft of the mast is another cargo opening, and a hatch cover lies next to it on the deck on the port side. Behind the cargo opening is an old-fashioned double-barreled hand pump with a standing center support for the handle's pivot. The links and handle are missing, but the pump cylinders can be seen extending far below the deck into the cargo hold. The barrels are unusually large in diameter compared to later pumps designs.

At the very stern is the large opening for the missing cabin. The floor joists are visible inside the cabin hole, and the stove can be seen sticking out of the mud on the port side forward. Aft of the cabin hole is the steering deck with a large tiller. This distinctive feature has caused this wreck to also be nicknamed the "Tiller Wreck." There is a small square opening centered in the deck near where the helmsman would have stood. The tiller itself attaches directly to the rudderpost and has two small sway braces. The stern is high off the bottom and can be reached at 135'-140' depth. The port yawl davit sticks out straight off the corner of the transom, but the starboard davit is missing. Swimming off the backside of the ship reveals the entire exposed transom, rudder, and underside curves of the ship - a beautiful sight! The rudder can be seen turned slightly to port to match the tiller's slight turn.

There are always burbot (also called lawyer fish or ling cod) on this wreck, and four were seen. One is almost always seen hiding inside the 'crow's nest,' and the other three were seen hiding at the bow, in the cabin, or under the stern. The

one under the stern also appeared to be eating a dead fish, possibly one of its brethren. Overall, this wreck is an excellent example of an early-build sailing vessel. Cindy and Kevin's bottom time was 20 minutes, and 20/35 trimix was used with 100% oxygen for decompression. Total run time was 50 minutes, maximum depth was 165', bottom temperature was 39-40 deg F, and the surface water was about 60 deg F with a noticeable thermocline at 30'-40' and slightly warmer water above 100'. Surface visibility was good at about 10', and there was a slight but manageable current at the 20' stop.