

The mysterious mythical **Marysburgh Vortex**

By Kenn M. Feigelman

VORTEX: An Area of concentrated energy rising from the earth. Some believe that Vortexes (Vortices) are a portal for celestial and terrestrial Spirits.

The site of scores of shipwrecks over many years, and many disappeared airplanes, the so-called BERMUDA TRIANGLE, stretches South from the islands of Bermuda to Puerto Rico, and West to the Florida mainland.

Since becoming known worldwide in the 1950s, the BERMUDA TRIANGLE has become something of a lightning rod, for those believing in 'other-worldly powers' at work - not unlike those (alien) mysteries believed to surround the infamous Area-51 in Nevada.

Closer to home, specifically, off Prince Edward County, we have the treacherous waters of the so-called MARYSBURGH VORTEX, to ponder. It may not have captured the global imagination to quite the same degree as its more famous southern counterpart, but for centuries, the 'Vortex' has become known and feared by local residents, while spelling doom for many an unsuspecting mariner and airplane pilot. All the same - to this day, most of the lost ships and aircraft, have yet to be discovered.

Defining the Marysburgh Vortex

Find a nautical chart of Eastern Lake Ontario and draw an imaginary line from the rocky shores off Point Petre, the southernmost tip of Prince Edward County, across the lake in a south-easterly direction to Mexico Bay, off Oswego, New York. Now, draw a line in a north-easterly heading, back across the lake to the far shores of Kingston; now, complete the 'Triangle' by extending your schematic back to your point-of-origin in the County. The resultant 'Triangle' delineates the so-called



An ROV – Remote Operated Vehicle – exploring and documenting the remains of a sunken wooden schooner. *Courtesy N.O.A.H.*



MARYSBURGH VORTEX, which includes many islands: Amherst, Wolfe, Simcoe, Main Duck, False Ducks, Timber ('Snake Island') and numerous smaller islets. Within this imaginary-triangle, in excess of 450-ships are believed to have met their demise over the past few centuries. As well, many aircraft, both civilian and military, have disappeared within the 'Vortex'.

There are, of course, shipwrecks throughout all of the Great Lakes. However, the eastern sector of Lake Ontario seems to have been exceptionally lethal to both sailing vessels and steam ships.

Of the many hundreds of shipwrecks slumbering on the cold, dark lake bed, within the MARYSBURGH VORTEX, about 80% have yet to be discovered.

While the BERMUDA TRIANGLE rose to fame in the mid-20th century, the reputation of the MARYSBURGH VORTEX dates back earlier, to what might be truly considered the Golden Age of Great Lakes travel. Well before the advent of the trans-continental railroads, and later on, Highway 401, wooden sailing schooners were the primary mode of the transportation of cargo & passengers on Lake Ontario.

The Vortex devours The Waffle

On Sept. 22, 1919, wreckage of an apparent wooden steamer washes ashore off Oswego, New York. Included in the flotsam are 9" life preservers, each stencilled with *T.J. Waffle*. Also discovered on the rocky promontory are the doomed vessel's deck house, with an attached fire axe – as well as mattresses, pillows, oars and shattered lifeboat davits, and even the lost ship's helm and attached steering chain are discovered ... all evidence of a catastrophic 'incident'.

Built in Westport, Ontario in 1914, on the Rideau Lakes system, by master shipwright Joseph Paradis, under contract by two local brothers, William and Walter Waffle, the wooden 112-ft.-long steam-powered barge was designed specifically for transporting cargo to shallow-water ports up and down the Rideau system, including to and from Ottawa.

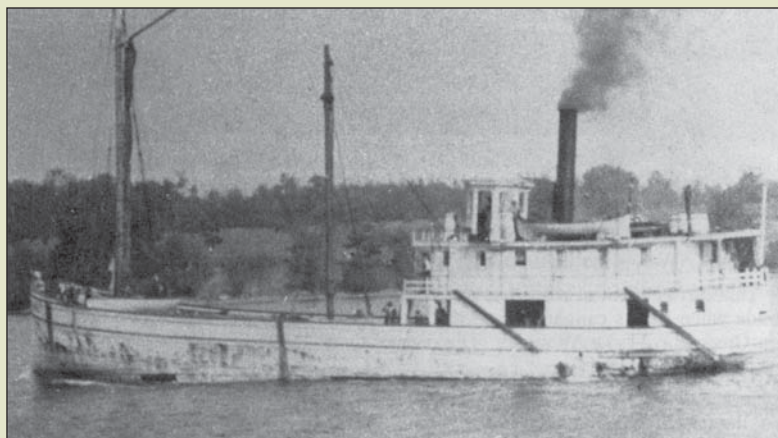
Thus Mr. Paradis specifically designed and constructed the wooden hull in the format of a 'scow-barge', including a flat, rectangular bottom, a square stern and a slightly-sloped bow.

With a top speed of only six miles per hour, with no cargo hatches and an open hold, a displacement of about 202 tons, a beam of 22 feet and just eight feet in depth, the *T.J. Waffle* was the perfectly-designed vessel for plying the relatively shallow, calm waters of the Rideau system, where wave height seldom exceeds two feet. The ungainly wooden steamer, when fully-laden, had a draught of less than three feet. Walter Waffle christened the vessel *T.J. Waffle*, after his 15-year-old son, Thomas John.

Walter Waffle received a dreaded telegram on March 16, 1916, announcing that his beloved son, Thomas John, aged only 17 years, had been tragically killed in action (WW1) on a battlefield in France. Shortly after the sudden loss of his son, Walter decided to sell his namesake *T.J. Waffle* to the Swift shipping family on Kingston for \$12,000. Being unreliable in stature and appearance, and definitely not designed for life on a 'freshwater sea' (Lake Ontario), it was odd that the Swifts engaged the *Waffle* to haul (relatively) small loads of coal from either Fairhaven or Oswego, New York, back to Kingston.

Her captain was Charles Beaupré, his first mate was Marshall Switzer of Kingston. There were at least four other 'itinerant' crewmembers on-board – paid in cash, their names were never officially registered in the ship's log. It is believed that a William Sweet was hired as a ship's mate for the journey, as was his wife, Elizabeth. The ship's engineer may have been Russell David of Picton. There also appears to have been at least one other un-named crewmember on-board, and possibly another two.

Sept. 23, 1919, James Swift, President of Swift & Sons, owners of the ill-fated steam-barge, sat nervously in his



Purportedly the only known photo of the *T.J. Waffle*.
Courtesy Willis Metcalfe Collection via the Naval Marine Archive.

Kingston office on a gloomy, overcast afternoon, anxiously awaiting word of the now 16-hours-overdue vessel. Telephone calls across the lake confirmed that the wooden steamer had taken on 249 tons of coal in Fairhaven, N.Y. and was last seen departing for her home port of Kingston at about 10 a.m. on Monday the 22nd.

The crew of the steam-tug *The Muscalonge* believed that they may have sighted the *Waffle* at around 5:30 p.m. plowing through dangerously-high whitecaps in a north-easterly heading, and (possibly) changing course to a southbound heading for an (unknown) safe haven.

Neither the *T.J. Waffle* nor her doomed crew of 6-8 souls was ever again to be seen.

Only those who perished aboard the 'un-seaworthy' little wooden steamer, knew what calamity 'truly' occurred, causing their imminent demise, as well as that of the *T.J. Waffle*. The answers may rest, ultimately, on the deep, dark bed of Eastern Lake Ontario. Due to the nature and 'significant' dimensions of the scattered flotsam which washed ashore on that bleak September day, some have speculated that there may have occurred a traumatic explosion of the vessel's coal-fired steam-boiler, possibly, as she foundered in 5- to 6-foot high seas.

As no explosion was reported by those on land or aboard other nearby vessels, there is also supposition that the unfortunate little steam-barge, designed not for the ravages of an angry Lake Ontario, and over-burdened with a heavy load of coal, riding dangerously low in savage seas, simply gave-up, capsized and was battered to bits, large and small. Her over-taxed boiler may even have catastrophically burst, as the unforgiving, frigid waters engulfed the sinking wooden ship.

Until someone can positively identify a long-drowned debris-field, including, possibly, a rusted, old steam-boiler (intact or not), will we truly learn of the fate of the *T.J. Waffle* and its crew of 6-8 unfortunate, doomed souls, devoured by THE MARYSBURGH VORTEX. □

Back then, the former South Marysburgh township (now a Ward of the County – the townships were amalgamated in 1998), was a renowned ship-building hub of wooden schooners, as well as a major shipping port for the maritime transportation of grain, apples, corn, dairy products and lumber into upper New York state (primarily, Oswego). These same sailing vessels, after unloading their varied cargoes in the U.S., would return to various ports along Lake Ontario hauling heavy loads of coal and minerals (including, phosphate).

As well as two- and three-masted sailing schooners ‘lost’ within this ‘mysterious’ region, now known as the MARYSBURGH VORTEX, there exist also, scores of other types of long-drowned vessels, slumbering on the lake-bed, including steam-driven side-wheelers & stern-wheelers; wooden and steel-hulled. Included also among the missing, are the gunboats of three different nations – Britain, France and the United States (another story, for another day), dating back almost three centuries.

More recently, in the age of flight, numerous aircraft, both civilian and military, have likewise disappeared in these dark, foreboding waters.

The Marysburgh Vortex was given its name by the late Canadian author, Hugh F. Cochrane, in his 1980 tome *Gateway to Oblivion: The Great Lakes’ Bermuda Triangle*. The ‘Marysburgh’ portion of his title is understandable – the ‘Vortex’ portion, not so much.

This is where the designation changes from a merely ‘geographic’ location to suggesting something more ominous indeed. The word, ‘vortex’, refers to a whirling mass of fluid or air, such as in a whirlpool or whirlwind. Due to their frightening nature, vortexes (or vortices) are believed by some, to be ‘portals for celestial and/or terrestrial spirits’. (The vortex) is a strange place, Cochrane writes in his book, “where globes of light and weird fogs abound, and where ominous waters shroud sinister happenings. It is an enigma, featuring a long-history of disasters, which have drained insurance companies of millions of dollars in claims.” □

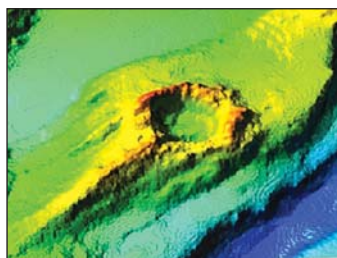
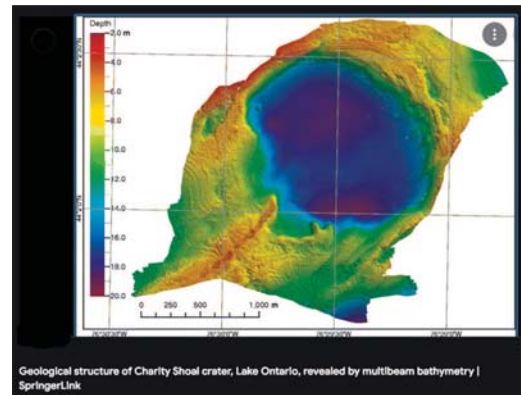
LOOKING FOR ANSWERS

While myths of a mysterious vortex are most enticing, the truth is far less mystical. Although various legends and theories hint at mysterious circumstances for the numerous tragedies/sinkings, marine historians today attribute the region’s record number of nautical disasters to more conventional sailing hazards: poor weather conditions [sudden squalls prevailing from the south-west], shifting cargoes, fires, unseen reefs [shoals] exposed during periods of low water levels and lastly [and most unusually] compass errors due to natural geomagnetic anomalies, especially in thick fogs.

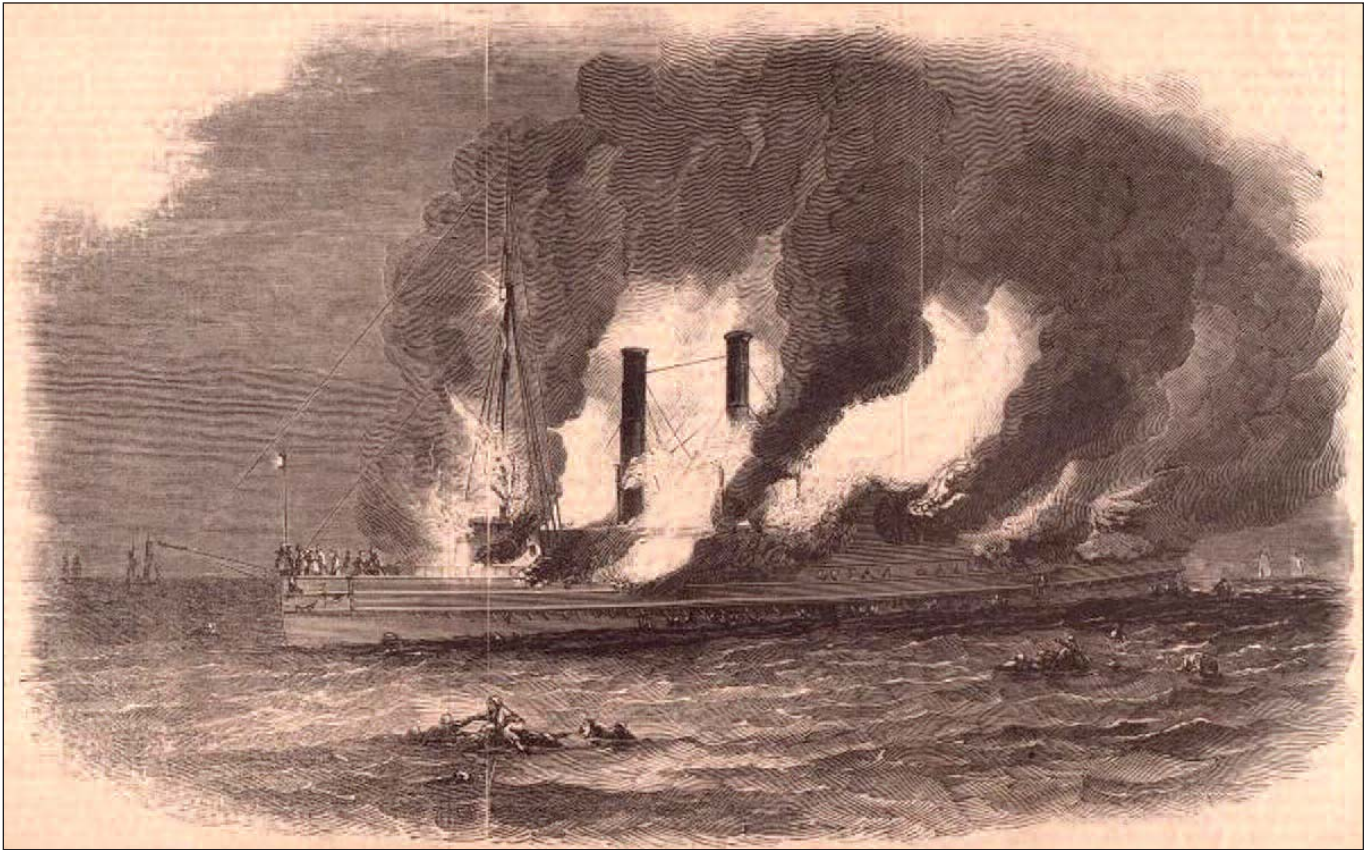
Compasses have been known to spin wildly and even totally malfunction within the parameters of the MARYSBURGH VORTEX. This magnetic anomaly is still mentioned on present-day navigational charts. However, there is a theory behind this oddity that is rooted in science rather than superstition – though it’s true that something ‘extraterrestrial’ is to blame.

In the north-east end of Lake Ontario, about 12-km. south-west of Wolfe Island, and 25km. south of Kingston, the lake bottom shows evidence of what experts describe as an impact crater, about 460-million years old. Based on the composition of the crater, it appears that a large meteorite crashed down to the Earth. The resulting CHARITY SHOAL CRATER – named for the CHARITY SHOAL in which it rests – is between 1.2-1.4 kilometres across, with a maximum depth of around 19 metres. Buried there to this day, are minerals associated with a meteorite strike/impact, [nickel-iron compounds] which affect the Earth’s natural magnetic fields, causing ships’ compasses to wildly deviate, sending the afflicted vessels off-course, into unknown shoals. While such compass confusion accounts for some of the area’s shipwrecks, it certainly doesn’t account for all. It seems that the MARYSBURGH VORTEX does not readily divulge its secrets. □

The bottom of Lake Ontario shows evidence of an impact crater, about 460-million years old. Based on the composition of the crater, it appears that a large meteorite crashed down to Earth. The resulting CHARITY SHOAL CRATER is between 1.2-1.4 km across, with a maximum depth of around 19 metres. This may have affected magnetic fields, causing compasses (binoculars) to malfunction. *Courtesy N.O.A.H.*



The Wreck Of the Side-wheeler *The Ocean Wave*



The *Ocean Wave* burning, April 29, 1853: The steam-driven side-wheeler catches alight & quickly sinks, around three miles off Point Traverse, taking 28-souls to a dark, cold, watery grave at around 2 a.m. *Courtesy Public Archives of Canada*
Left: Part of the burnt wooden hull of the long-slumbering vessel, uncrusted with zebra mussels (Depth of 50 Metres).
Courtesy Tom Rutledge.

Another tragic encounter happened on April 29, 1853, when the passenger/cargo steamer *Ocean Wave* burned and sank three miles off Point Traverse. Commanded by Captain Allison Wright, the *Ocean Wave* made a weekly round trip between Hamilton and Montreal.

On this trip, it had departed Kingston with a full complement of passengers and a large shipment of tallow on board. The *Ocean Wave* was a cord-wood burner. Captain Wright – who miraculously survived the eventual conflagration and sinking of his vessel – stated that he believed the

fire had started when sparks from the doomed ship's funnel ignited the highly volatile cargo of tallow.

However it started, by about 2 a.m. the *Ocean Wave* was a flaming inferno – and most of the crew and passengers were asleep still in their bunks below deck. The second mate, who survived the disaster, later recounted that the blaze was so intense that he was driven from the helm.



A highly-trained diver examines the remnants of one of the two steam-driven sidewheels used to propel the doomed, wood-fired steamer *The Ocean Wave*. Courtesy Tom Rutledge.

Toward the flames on the horizon and the screams of trapped victims, a farmer from Point Traverse, David Dulmage, rowed out over two miles from shore toward the sinking ship. He arrived to find Captain Wright clinging to flotsam in the cold, dark lake. The vessel had apparently been still running under full steam when it sank, all lifeboats onboard being also consumed by the inferno.

Two other nearby vessels also rendered assistance upon spotting the fire, rushing to the tragic scene to rescue the few remaining survivors from the frigid unforgiving waters. Sadly, not everyone could be saved: in all, 13 passengers and 15 crew members perished.

At the time of this disaster, the *Ocean Wave* was less than one year old, having been built in Montreal for the famous Molson family. It was said that all their company's earnings for that year – in cash, gold and silver – were stored in the purser's safe for eventual deposit to a bank in Montreal. It was also said that the body of the ship's purser was found weeks later, washed up on the shore of Lake Ontario near West Point. A large sum of money was supposedly found concealed in the purser's belt and was apparently in very good condition. To this day, rumours persist that the purser's yet-discovered safe, with contents worth tens of thousands of

dollars, is resting beneath the scorched bones of the long-drowned shipwreck.

Conclusion

With the advent of Radar, Sonar and GPS as aids to navigation, mariners no longer rely solely on a ship's compass (binnacle) and charts to plot a safe course. Of necessity, ship-building parameters have also changed dramatically, as have onboard safety devices, as well as Search & Rescue techniques. Of course, ships are no longer 'the only game in town' for transporting people and goods; accordingly, the frequency of shipwrecks beneath the MARYSBURGH VORTEX has vastly diminished.

Likewise, modern scientific advancements verify that there's no rationale to believe that any supernatural and/or paranormal activity exists within the so-called MARYSBURGH VORTEX – no alien beings or crystal pyramids. The area encompassed, is simply a very historic, well-travelled swath of Eastern Lake Ontario, prone to sudden voracious tempests, treacherous, blinding fog-banks, misleading compass-bearings (due to 'inexplicable' geo-magnetic anomalies) and innumerable hidden, dangerous shoals and rocky reefs.

Combined with deadly fires caused by an ill-placed oil lamp or

other deadly sources of ignition; add to the mix, instances of poor seamanship and/or, faulty decision-making, as well as instances of questionable ship construction, we have the recipe for potential maritime disaster(s), whereby, hundreds of unfortunate vessels have disappeared beneath these dark unforgiving waters.

Until, 'what lies beneath' is explored in greater 'depth', the MARYSBURGH VORTEX will continue to be an enigma, and the ultimate plight of the many vessels it has claimed over the centuries, as well as those poor souls lost, will still be a source of speculation and unresolved mystery. □

Herman Melville in *Moby Dick*, 1851:

"For in their interflowing aggregate, these grand Freshwater Seas of ours, Erie, Ontario, Huron Superior and Michigan, possess an ocean-like expansiveness; with many of the ocean's noblest traits, with many of its rimmed varieties of races and climes."

"They contain round archipelagos of romantic isles, even as the Polynesian waters do; in large part, are shored by two great contrasting nations, as the Atlantic is ... they have heard the thunderings of naval victories ... for leagues and leagues are flanked by ancient and unentered forests, where the giant pines stand. Like storied lines of Kings in Gothic genealogies, these same woods, hiding wild Afric (sic) beasts of prey and silken creatures whose exported furs give robes to Tartar Emperors; they mirror the paved capitals of Buffalo and Cleveland, as well as Winnebago villages; they float alike the full-rigged merchant ship, the armed cruiser of the State, the steamer and the beach canoe. They are swept by Borean and dismasting blasts as direful as any that lash the salted wave; they know where shipwrecks are, far out of sight of land, however, in-land, they have drowned many a midnight ship with all its shrieking crew."

Originally from Montreal, Kenn M. Feigelman co-founded Deep/Quest 2 Expeditions in 1973, searching for sunken history. Kenn evolved into a marine scientist, photographer and documentary film producer. He studied at McGill University & Concordia University in Montreal, and received his Doctorate in Marine History from the College of Marine Arts in South Carolina.