



[HOME](#)

[NEWS](#)

[SPORTS](#)

[OP-ED](#)

[GOOD LIVING](#)

[OBITUARIES](#)

[CLASSIFIEDS](#)

[Home](#) » [Searchers waste no time in finding historic Lake Church pier](#)

Searchers waste no time in finding historic Lake Church pier

July 31, 2019

Discovery last week of last vestiges of Ronksville paves way for rural Belgium area to be named an archaeological site



Sitting on what is believed to be a piece of Ronk Pier found last week on the beach just north of Jay Road in the Town of Belgium were David Hirn (left) and Jonathan Ronk, descendants of Luxembourg immigrants Nicholas and Paul Ronk. The brothers immigrated to America in 1849 and 10 years later founded the Luxembourg Pier Co. in Lake Church, which at the time was known as Ronksville. Photo courtesy of Jonathan Ronk

By BILL SCHANEN IV

Ozaukee Press staff

The mission sounded a little like trying to find a needle in a haystack, but in fewer than two days last week state archaeologists discovered the remnants of a 150-year-old Lake Michigan pier that played a key role in settling the Town of Belgium community of Lake Church and establishing a Luxembourg-American population in northern Ozaukee County.

Searching from a boat equipped with side-scan sonar, then diving in the area, Wisconsin Historical Society marine archaeologist Tamara Thomsen found a path of submerged stones that she said is undoubtedly the remains of cribs that once supported the formidable structure and today is the last vestige of Ronk Pier and the community once known as Ronksville, named for brothers Nicholas and Paul Ronk, Luxembourg immigrants who were instrumental in settling the Lake Church area in the mid-1800s.



A PHOTO FROM the Luxembourger American Cultural Center archives shows Luxemburger Pier Co. founders Nicholas and Paul Ronk (wearing white shirts, from left) on what is believed to be Ronk Pier in the Town of Belgium’s Lake Church area in the mid-1800s. The pier played a key role in the delivery of goods to the area and later became home to the 81-foot schooner Northerner, which Nicholas purchased in 1863.

“It looks like a linear rock pile on an otherwise sandy bottom,” Thomsen said, noting the stones were quarried rather than glacial, meaning they were put on the lake bottom by humans.

On shore near the submerged stones, searchers found a large timber with spikes in it that is believed to be a piece of Ronk Pier.

“It was just where I thought it would be,” Jonathan Ronk, the great-great-great-grandson of Paul Ronk and family historian, said of the pier’s location about 300 feet south of Jay Road. “It’s right between the properties owned by Nicholas and Paul Ronk.”

With its discovery, the remains of Ronk Pier have now officially been designated a Wisconsin archaeological site. Its number — 47-OZ-361 — indicates it’s the 361st such site in Ozaukee County.

While the discovery of the pier and its designation are historically important, this was a personal mission for Jonathan Ronk, who traveled with his family from Dallas to witness the search, and David Hirn, the great-great-grandson of Nicholas Ronk, who lives in Sturgeon Bay and has also done significant research on his family's role in settling the area.

They celebrated the discovery with others who participated in the mission at the Lake Church Inn Tavern and Grill, a fitting venue since it's the site of the general store and bar built by the Ronk brothers in the late 1850s.

Now Ronk and Hirn are asking the Town of Belgium to improve the overgrown beach access from Jay Road and allow a historical marker memorializing the roles Nicholas and Paul Ronk played in settling the area to be placed there.

"It's a pretty significant story," Jonathan Ronk said.

Builders by trade in Luxembourg, the Ronks, who immigrated to America in 1849, were entrepreneurs driven not to just survive but to prosper in the Belgium area. At a time when there was little else there besides a Catholic church, the brothers built the general store and tavern that later became known as the Lake Church Inn, founded the Luxemburger Pier Co., built what was known as Ronk Pier and bought the 81-foot schooner *Northerner*, which sank in 1868 off Port Washington and is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

"The Ronk brothers were really the movers and shakers in the Town of Belgium," Kevin Wester, the former director of the Luxembourg-American Cultural Center and a leading authority on Luxembourg-American history in Ozaukee County, said. "They were the driving force behind the development of Lake Church."

So influential were the brothers that for a period of time the Lake Church area was known as Ronksville

In 1856, when Paul Ronk bought 13 acres on the site of the Lake Church Inn, the Town of Belgium's Lake Michigan shore was remote. American Indian trails marked by charred trees served as roads for horse-drawn buggies, and the nearest supplies were in Holy Cross, which was settled



Ronk Pier was home to the 81-foot schooner *Northerner*, which Nicholas Ronk purchased in 1863. The ship sank five years later off Port Washington and the wreck (below) is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

by Luxembourg immigrants earlier, or Port Washington, Wester said.

“That was a really long haul back in the day,” he said.

The Ronks found the perfect site for their store across from the only draw in town.

“The Ronks were really smart to open a store and tavern across from the church,” Wester said. “After Mass, the women shopped for supplies while the men went to the bar.”

The Ronks were also smart to realize the asset they had at their doorstep in Lake Michigan, which gave them easy access to the goods they sold in their store. In February 1859, they formed the Luxemburger Pier Co., and likely constructed Ronk Pier later that year, Jonathan Ronk said.

“There were no highways or even trains in the area at the time,” Wester said. “It was either horse and buggy or ships. Really, Lake Michigan was the first highway.”

The brothers were also savvy businessmen, and in an effort to further control the supply of goods for their store, Nicholas purchased the schooner Northerner in 1863.

The Northerner sank off Port Washington in 1868 after sustaining damage while being loaded with wood at the unprotected Amsterdam pier near Cedar Grove.

The wreck was listed on the National Register of Historic Places after being discovered in 1975 by Rick Smith and Linda Nenn of Port Washington and Roger Chapman of Milwaukee. Allen “Butch” Klopp, also of Port Washington, was the first person to dive on the Northerner.

The discovery of Ronk Pier last week helps complete an important chapter in the history of Ozaukee County, Jonathan Ronk said.

“Finding the pier was, of course, really important for our families, but Ronk Pier is now an archaeological site for the state,” he said. “That’s huge.”

Category:

[Top Stories](#) [Belgium](#)

Feedback:

[Click Here to Send a Letter to the Editor](#)

37
Shares

Share

Tweet

Email

Share

OZAUKEE PRESS

Wisconsin's largest paid circulation community weekly newspaper. Serving Port Washington, Saukville, Grafton, Fredonia, Belgium, as well as Ozaukee County government. Locally owned and printed in Port Washington, Wisconsin.

125 E. Main St.
Port Washington, WI 53074
(262) 284-3494

[About](#)
[Advertise](#)
[Newsstands](#)
[Subscribe](#)
[Buy Photos](#)
[Copyright Policy](#)
[Terms of Use](#)
[Privacy Policy](#)

Ozaukee Press

125 E. Main St | Port Washington, WI 53074

© 2023 Ozaukee Press. All rights reserved.

