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## Searching for signs of Ronksville

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State archeologists are looking for remnants of a pier that along with the immigrants who built it played a key role in settling the Lake Church area once named for them



A PHOTO FROM the Luxembourg 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.

**By BILL SCHANEN IV**

*Ozaukee Press staff*

What remains of it might not be that impressive, perhaps some 150-year-old pilings half buried in the sandy bottom of Lake Michigan, but state archeologists who were to begin their search this week are determined to find Ronk Pier because of the key role it and the immigrants who built it played in settling the Town of Belgium community of Lake Church and establishing a Luxembourg-American population in northern Ozaukee County.

Wisconsin Historical Society archeologists planned to begin their quest Wednesday using a boat equipped with side-scan sonar and searching on land for signs of what was a formidable structure — large enough to accommodate more-than-80-foot schooners — that extended from the rural Belgium shore somewhere south south of Jay Road.

If signs of the pier are found, Tamara Thomsen, a maritime archeologist with the Historical Society, said she would dive on them Thursday.

In addition to documenting the remains of the pier and its precise location, the hope is to pave the way for a historical marker that would memorialize the roles Nicholas and Paul Ronk played in settling the Lake Church area in the mid-1800s, Jonathan Ronk, the great-great-great-grandson of Paul Ronk, said this week.

“The only thing I really knew about my family came from some vague stories my dad told me,” Ronk, a Port Washington native who now lives in Dallas, said.

But Ronk was inspired by Kevin Wester, the former director of the Luxembourg-American Cultural Society in Belgium and a leading authority on Luxembourg-American history in Ozaukee County, and became an authority himself on the lives of his great-great-great-grandfather and uncle.

“It’s a pretty significant story,” Ronk said.

Builders by trade in Luxembourg, Wester said, the Ronks 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,” Wester 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, a fact recorded primarily in the oral history of the area but confirmed by a rare map.

Thomsen said that while researching the Northerner for its nomination to the National Register, she heard the term Ronksville.

“But I couldn’t find it on any maps,” she said. “I actually thought it might have been kind of a local joke.”

But then Thomsen came across an old government nautical chart that clearly labeled the Lake Church area Ronksville.

The men for whom a fledgling community was named and their families immigrated to America on a ship named Spartacus, which made landfall in New York on July 5, 1849, Jonathan Ronk said.

They found their way to Port Washington and, perhaps inspired by Barnum Blake, whose pier there was the largest in Ozaukee County, set off to start their own enterprises in the Town of Belgium, Ronk said.



**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.**

In 1856, Paul Ronk bought just more than 13 acres on the site of the Lake Church Inn for a general store and tavern that was known as the Lake House, Wester said.

At this time, 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 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 Ronks weren’t your typical Luxembourg farmers. They were better educated and more entrepreneurial than other Luxembourg immigrants.”

Paul Ronk was the first teacher at a public school that preceded the parish school in Lake Church, and Nicholas was the church organist, Wester said.

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.

Built in 1850 by the well-known shipwright John Oades of Clayton, N.Y., the Northerner was one of a number of relatively small, maneuverable schooners that carried goods to Great Lakes communities before road and rail networks were established.

The ship began its career on Lake Ontario as a 79-foot schooner but after being damaged in a storm was rebuilt as an 81-foot vessel with a distinctive scroll figurehead, an unusually decorative feature for a working ship.

The schooner apparently operated on Lake Michigan under Ronk’s ownership without major incident until Nov. 28, 1868, when it docked at an unprotected pier at Amsterdam near Cedar Grove. While being loaded with wood, the Northerner pounded on the bottom. Although the crew was able to sail her away from shore, they soon discovered the ship was taking on water.

After a brief stop in Port Washington to unload its deck cargo, the Northerner continued toward Milwaukee, getting a tow at one point from the steamer Cuyahoga. The schooner, however, filled with water, capsized and sank five miles southeast of Port Washington. All the crewmen aboard were rescued.

The wreck lay undisturbed for 107 years.

Then in April 1975, using a commercial fishing chart provided by Port Washington resident Allen “Butch” Klopp that showed “hitches,” or areas where nets were snagged, Rick Smith and Linda Nenn, also Port residents, and Roger Chapman of Milwaukee found what their sonar equipment suggested was a ship on the bottom of the lake.

“It was cold and getting dark so we decided to come back the next day to dive on it,” Smith said in 2011, when the Northerner was named to the National Register of Historic Places.

Klopp said he was the first person to dive in the area and saw a remarkably well-preserved schooner sitting upright on the bottom. But the diving conditions in April were brutal, so he and Smith got only brief glimpses of the wreck at first and, in fact, didn't know they had discovered the Northerner until about a week later when Klopp recovered the block marked with the schooner's name.

"It was definitely a virgin wreck," Smith said. "You could see she went down bow first and plowed into the bottom. There was still white paint on the figurehead when we found her."

Smith and Klopp dove on the wreck frequently, recovering hundreds of artifacts, including the rudder and tiller, main mast, crocks and running lights.

Sometime after the sinking of the Northerner, Nicholas and Paul Ronk dissolved the Luxemburger Pier Co., sold their store and tavern in Lake Church and pursued farming. Paul moved to South Creek, Neb., where he died in 1880. Nicholas died four years later and is buried in St. Mary's Cemetery in Lake Church.

Ronk Pier was eventually abandoned, although how long it stood is unclear. Perhaps the last photo of the structure — an image in the Luxembourg-American Cultural Center's archives — shows the structure, apparently no longer in use, in the 1870s.

That was about 150 years ago, and finding what's left of a pier that along with the entrepreneurial immigrants who played such a key role in the development of Lake Church won't be easy, Thomsen said.

"There's a little wiggle room on where exactly the pier may be, so we are going to have to search a pretty wide swath," she said. "I'd say our chances of finding it are about 50-50."

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