

# Ontario Marine Heritage Committee

## Organization Profile History

In the spring of 1975, a group of avocational and professional marine heritage enthusiasts was brought together to conduct an underwater archaeological investigation of the naval slip structure at the Historic Naval and Military Establishments (now “Discovery Harbour”) in Penetanguishene, Ontario. At a subsequent meeting in November of that year, the project participants gathered in Tobermory to prepare a report on the work and hold discussions concerning the protection of Ontario’s marine heritage resources. As a result of that meeting, a submission to the Heritage Division of the Ontario Ministry of Culture and Recreation was crafted, which included identification of issues and problems, a number of proposed solutions, and a list of recommendations.

Another event had taken place in the fall of 1975 which also was to have implications for the future association of the meeting participants: the discovery of a shipwreck near Hope Island, in Georgian Bay. It was decided that in keeping with recommendations made to the Ontario government in the submission, application would be made for an archaeological licence (**the first application for underwater archaeology to be made under the province’s Heritage Act**) to do a survey of the wreck in the spring of 1976. Most of the participants in the naval slip investigation were also involved with the Hope Island wreck project.

With these two projects behind them, members of the group met again in Tobermory in November, 1976 to initiate the formation of an organization dedicated to Ontario’s marine heritage. The following spring a meeting took place to formalize the organization. On March 12, 1977 the informal alliance of like-minded individuals officially became the Ontario Marine Heritage Committee (OMHC), “supporting the research, interpretation and preservation of Ontario’s marine heritage.” There were 11 charter members. As a first priority, members of the group undertook licenced surveys of the Hope Island wreck (1977 through 1980), providing the first documentary evidence of how unprotected Ontario shipwrecks quickly could be stripped by sport divers. In addition to project work, members met at meetings held in the fall and spring of each year. In October, 1979 a constitution and by-laws for the OMHC were adopted. The OMHC logo was adopted in 1987, based on the capstan cover – a compass rose – from the Port Stanley wreck, an OMHC project.

Since its formation, the OMHC has supported and been actively involved in over 30 research projects (some of these long term) around the province. Topics have been as varied as submerged prehistoric shorelines, caves and portage sites, shipwrecks, comparative surveys, resource monitoring and early port documentation. Members have presented over 30 training workshops and seminars, and have been actively involved in government-sponsored reviews of heritage legislation and regulations. Communication and outreach has been enhanced by the OMHC website and Facebook page. Membership numbers have varied over the years between 15 and 30, and a number of the original participants are still active. Current membership (45) includes professional archaeologists, marine historians, and people with extensive experience in underwater technology/equipment, photography and mapping. The membership includes divers with experience on sites all over Ontario, other parts of Canada and internationally.

The OMHC was founded to promote research, interpretation and preservation of Ontario’s marine heritage. After more than 40 years, that commitment is as strong as ever!