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The Susquehanna submariner and the secret silver stash

By Matt Connor

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A multimillion dollar lawsuit, a mysterious fortune, a sunken Civil War-era submarine and possibly a link to a legendary treasure in Native American silver. All that plays into the mysterious life of Brutus DeVilleroi, inventor, debt-dodger and one time owner of a huge piece of property in Clinton County.

Today DeVilleroi's greatest claim to fame is that he invented the U.S. Navy's first submarine, the Alligator, a version of which was tested and approved for use in rural New Jersey's Rancocas Creek between 1859 and 1861.

Today 150-year-old Navy documents verify the training of the Alligator's crew and the building of this unique vessel, which was ultimately lost off Cape Hatteras during a storm in 1862, before it ever saw any action against the Rebels.

But what of its prototype Alligator the smaller version tested in that creek in the Phillie suburbs of New Jersey, and ultimately believed to have been abandoned there once the Navy approved the construction of the larger sub two years later?

That's a mystery that has plagued researcher Alice Smith for four years now. A New Jersey resident who has lived all of her life in the region surrounding the Alligator prototype test sites of 1859-1861, Smith became intrigued with DeVilleroi after reading about him in emails from friends. She soon began trying to piece together the complete story of his life and the development of his premier submarine.

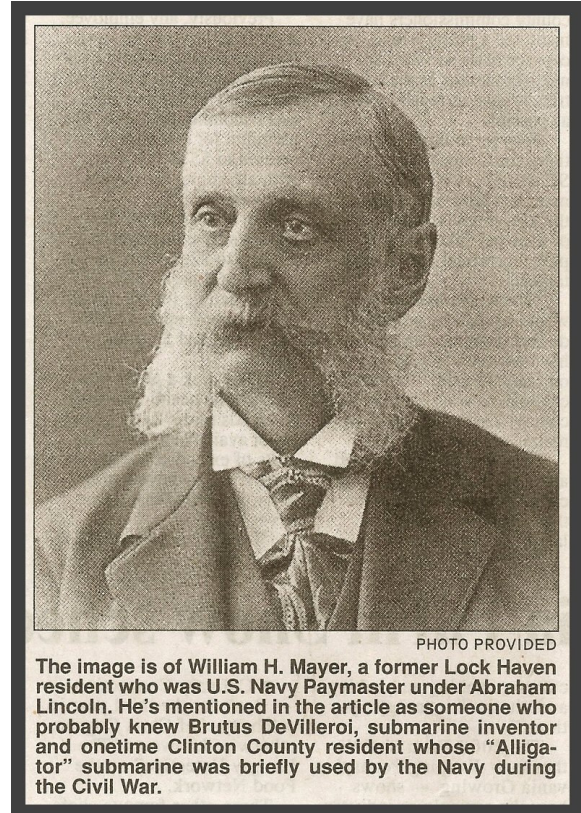
"Most of the story of the Alligator has been documented and written down in books, and the Navy documents verify everything," Smith said, adding that she's interested like any great researcher in tracking down the historic nuggets nobody else has dug up yet.

About a year ago, she found out DeVilleroi had once owned land in Clinton County, and called Heisey Museum Curator Lou Bernard requesting some information on the now-forgotten but historically important inventor.

"When I contacted Lou, I wondered what kind of local history is up there in Clinton County on Brutus DeVilleroi," Smith said, "and he was the one who tracked the initial deed."

Anyone who knows Lou will not be surprised that he tackled this new assignment with his customary zeal: "The property he owned is south of the Susquehanna, up around the Westport area," he said. "There's a little tip of land between Keating and Renovo. He owned a lot of land. He owned it for about 18 months and then it was given back to a previous owner, Elliot Cressen."

DeVilleroi, it seemed, had overextended himself, and was unable to pay his debts to Cressen and another individual who sued him for a combined \$120,000 in 1849-50. And if you think \$120,000 is an exorbitant amount today, bear



in mind that, according to the Consumer Price Index, \$120,000 in 1850 is the equivalent to about \$3.3 million today.

Even more intriguingly, DeVilleroi was apparently able to quickly come up with the cash to pay off what would have been a multi-million dollar settlement in 2008.

He got his creditors off his back, but how? Where did that pile of moolah come from?

And, equally mysterious, where did he come up with all of the research and development money and construction costs to make the various versions of the Alligator a reality?

"The whole thing is a mystery as far as where he gets his money from to even build the prototype," Smith says. "I'm not a lawyer, but when I look at the lawsuits, they seem to be about the fact that he borrowed money and then he wasn't able to meet that."

Both Smith and Bernard are intrigued by the mystery of the potential DeVilleroi fortune, and both have their theories as to how he was able to make the money materialize for his various projects. Smith's involves DeVilleroi's possible connection with a wealthy benefactor. Bernard's involves the legend of lost Indian silver.

"It's nothing but a theory at this point," Lou said. "To be honest, even calling it a "theory" drastically glorifies it. It's basically a couple of stray thoughts tied together."

Here are the stray thoughts, which woven together make a compelling if tangled braid: DeVilleroi's Clinton County property is located about where, in the late 1700s, several early Keating settlers were said to have witnessed a group of Iroquois Indians carrying large bags of silver ore from one of the mountains to their canoes on the Sinnemahoning River. Were there silver mines in the vicinity? And were there sacks of Indian-mined silver stowed away in hiding? To this day, locals wonder if a fortune may indeed lay hidden in their midst.

"I started thinking, 'Hey, isn't DeVilleroi's property up around where I heard all those rumors about the lost silver caves?'" said Lou. "I can't prove anything, but Alice and other researchers are wondering how he was able to build the sub how he got enough money together to build a sub. This after several lawsuits totaling \$120,000 were successful against him. After the lawsuits, he still had enough money to design and build a submarine. So either this guy was either really independently wealthy, by an obscene amount, or something else was going on there."

It may ultimately add up to a great big zero, but until they're disproven, the DeVilleroi-Indian silver stories are an awful lot of fun to speculate about.

"I'll admit the silver mine theory doesn't answer everything," Lou said. "He apparently had a lot of money and he owned land where I've heard stories of lost treasure. So maybe he found the lost silver cave, decided he didn't really need to own the land, snuck out a lot of it the year he owned the property, knew where it was and figured he could go back anytime. Or I could just be writing fiction here."

Meanwhile Smith continues to linger along the banks of the Rancocas, interviewing old timers who seem to have foggy memories of a long metal submarine-like structure that lay rotting on the creek's shoreline for years, back in the early 1930s. She hopes to locate the remains of the lost Alligator prototype and perhaps have it put on public display after a restoration.

"I'm running around the marshland in Riverside and Delanco, N.J., in a creek, looking for the prototype to a Civil War submarine," Smith said. "And people think I'm crazy?"

Crazy? Maybe. But if she is, she's got company here in Clinton County. While Smith is wading around in Jersey marshes, Bernard is trekking up to the Keating area to photograph DeVilleroi's property and search for legendary Native American silver.

They're like a couple of Indiana Joneses, without the whip, fedora, Nazi pursuers, exotic period settings or wisecracking sidekicks.

Neither of these budding adventurers were aware, however, of another intriguing element to the story, involving another local figure who clearly had a connection to DeVilleroi.

At the same time DeVilleroi was testing his Alligator submarine prototype in New Jersey, local furniture mogul William H. Mayer was building a fine house at 245 West Main Street in Lock Haven.

Mayer's boss at the time was then-President Abraham Lincoln. As Lincoln's paymaster of the U.S. Navy, Mayer would likely have been writing the checks for the training of the Alligator's crew, and possibly for the submarine's development and procurement. It seems extraordinarily likely that Mayer and DeVilleroi knew each other, especially since they shared Clinton County addresses at one time or another.

And during DeVilleroi's legal run-ins, Mayer's brother Charles would likely have been spending a great deal of time at the courthouse as an attorney. He later became a county judge and remained on the bench for 36 years.

Did future Judge Charles Mayer ever encounter DeVilleroi in the courthouse hallways and stop to chat? Not likely. DeVilleroi was born in France and spoke very little English. Surviving records indicate he had an interpreter working for him during the court proceedings.

And while Charles Mayer's house was torn down over a century ago, former Lincoln paymaster William Mayer's once-grand home still stands today. It's the former TKE fraternity house opposite the Ross Library parking lot.

From her home in New Jersey, Alice says she's increasingly interested in DeVilleroi's Clinton County period, and may be coming by for a visit sometime soon.

"This has piqued my interest," she said. "I really feel that there's more out there that he was there (in Clinton County), that he had a representative there, and that things were going on."

Yes, but does she think DeVilleroi might have been slaving over submarine blueprints while living in his old farmhouse (now gone) near Westport? Did he fashion a miniature version of the Alligator, perhaps, and test it out in the waters of the Susquehanna?

Probably not, but Alice is too polite to say so.

"You never know!" she says with a hearty laugh.

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