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# The Urban Deep

# A Bored Scuba Diver Discovers New Thrills in the City's Sunken Past

**G**ENE RITTER took up scuba diving in 1973 as a 14-year-old in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn. Soon he was discovering the underwater ecosystem of what divers call the Manhattan Beach Reef, a stretch of submerged, offshore rocks. Then came years of exploring the wrecks off Long Island. But eventually he grew restless.

"It was hard to find a thrill," said Mr. Ritter, 40, a commercial diver who replaces propellers on ferries. "I have seen all the fish. I have dived all the local wrecks. The feeling of weightlessness, that does not thrill me as much anymore."

What's a bored scuba diver to do? In Mr. Ritter's case, he combined diving with his other passion, local history. Unearthing the city's sunken past became his mission.

Using old maps, Mr. Ritter in 1995 located the site of Fort Lafayette some 25 feet under one of the two 693-foot towers supporting the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. The small island fortress was built in 1812 to guard the entrance to New York Harbor and had 96 mounted guns and three-foot-thick walls. Used as a military prison during the Civil War and a Navy munitions bunker in World War I, the battery was razed in 1960 and the island it stood on dredged for construction of the bridge. Mr. Ritter found a wooden floorboard there, a World War II shell and a blue bottle from 1861 with the name of a local distiller on it.

The dives can be dangerous, Mr. Ritter, said, noting



Linda Rosier for The New York Times

Gene Ritter in Coney Island Creek at the wreck of a submarine built to explore the *Andrea Doria*, a luxury cruise liner that sank in the Atlantic Ocean in 1956.

that the current in the channel was "rip roaring." There are barges and freighters, and "visibility can be zero," he said. And while the water is a lot cleaner these days, Mr. Ritter still packs a bottle of Listerine to kill off any bacteria in his mouth after a dive.

He is now trying to find Fort Defiance, which was built in the late 1700's in Buttermilk Channel, near Red Hook, Brooklyn. Mr. Ritter said he had found some old, hand-forged metal spikes but no definitive traces of the fort.

He is also searching for the fabled Dreamland Pier at Coney Island. The amusement park was built on a 1,000-foot-long pier extending off Surf Avenue and had a central plaza, a ballroom, restaurants, rides, a lagoon and a 375-foot tower. A showcase for the marvels of electricity, it went up in flames in 1911.

Mr. Ritter has located the structure of another of Coney's Island lost wharves, the original Iron Pier, a ferry port with bathhouses and restaurants built in late 1880's. During dives in the area, he has uncovered turn-of-the-century Coke and beer bottles, cutlery and Victorian light fixtures.

Conscious of the disdain many archeologists have for divers, whom they see as scavengers, Mr. Ritter has founded the Educational Diving Archeological Society. He does not sell any of the hundreds of objects he has recovered but uses them in lectures at local schools and historical societies.

"Each of the artifacts he has brought up has its own story to tell," said Brenda Parnes, who works with the New York State Archives and Records Administration and volunteers with Mr. Ritter's group. "He has found milk bottles with the names of Brooklyn dairies on them. Who would have thought Brooklyn had a dairy industry?"

RICHARD WEIR