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Rutgers Expedition Locates Wellman Polar Airship Wrecks on Danskøya, Svalbard

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An expedition from Rutgers University has located the remains of two airship wrecks on Danskøya, Svalbard. The airship wrecks, believed to be the two oldest aeronautical artifacts ever found in the arctic, are from the 1906, and the 1907 and 1909 polar expeditions of the American journalist Walter Wellman. Between 1894 and 1909, Wellman, a correspondent for the now-defunct Chicago Record-Herald, led five unsuccessful expeditions in search of the North Pole. The 1906, '07, and '09 expeditions were by airship.

For three weeks in July and August, 1993, P.J. Capelotti, a doctoral student in historical archaeology under Dr. Carmel Schrire of the Rutgers University Department of Anthropology in New Brunswick, New Jersey, surveyed all the archaeological remains at Virgohamn on Danskøya, including the site of Wellman's base camp, with a Topcon GTS-303 Total Station. The car of the airship used in the '07 and '09 flights was confirmed on the second day on Danskøya and, on the expedition's second to last day on the island, the wreck of the car from 1906 was discovered.

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The artifacts are the oldest American airship cars in existence, and rest within 200 yards of each other on the rocky island, which lies 700 miles from the North Pole. Capelotti is now working with the Norwegian Government on a management plan for the fragile artifacts and for Wellman's base camp, which is located near a shoreline visited by over a thousand arctic tourists on small cruising yachts each year.

The Rutgers expedition also located what appear to be parts from the motor sledges Wellman brought to Danskøya for the aborted 1906 expedition. Artifacts brought to the United States for further analysis include parts from the 1907-09 airship car; a can of unidentified material with a label from "Chicago, U.S.A.;" a bottle with raised lettering from the "Lambert Pharmacal Company;" and a sample bottle that may have originated with the 1896-97 polar balloon expeditions of Salomon A. Andree, who flew from Danskøya with two companions on a flight to the pole in 1897, vanished, and whose remains were discovered on Kvitøya in August of 1930.

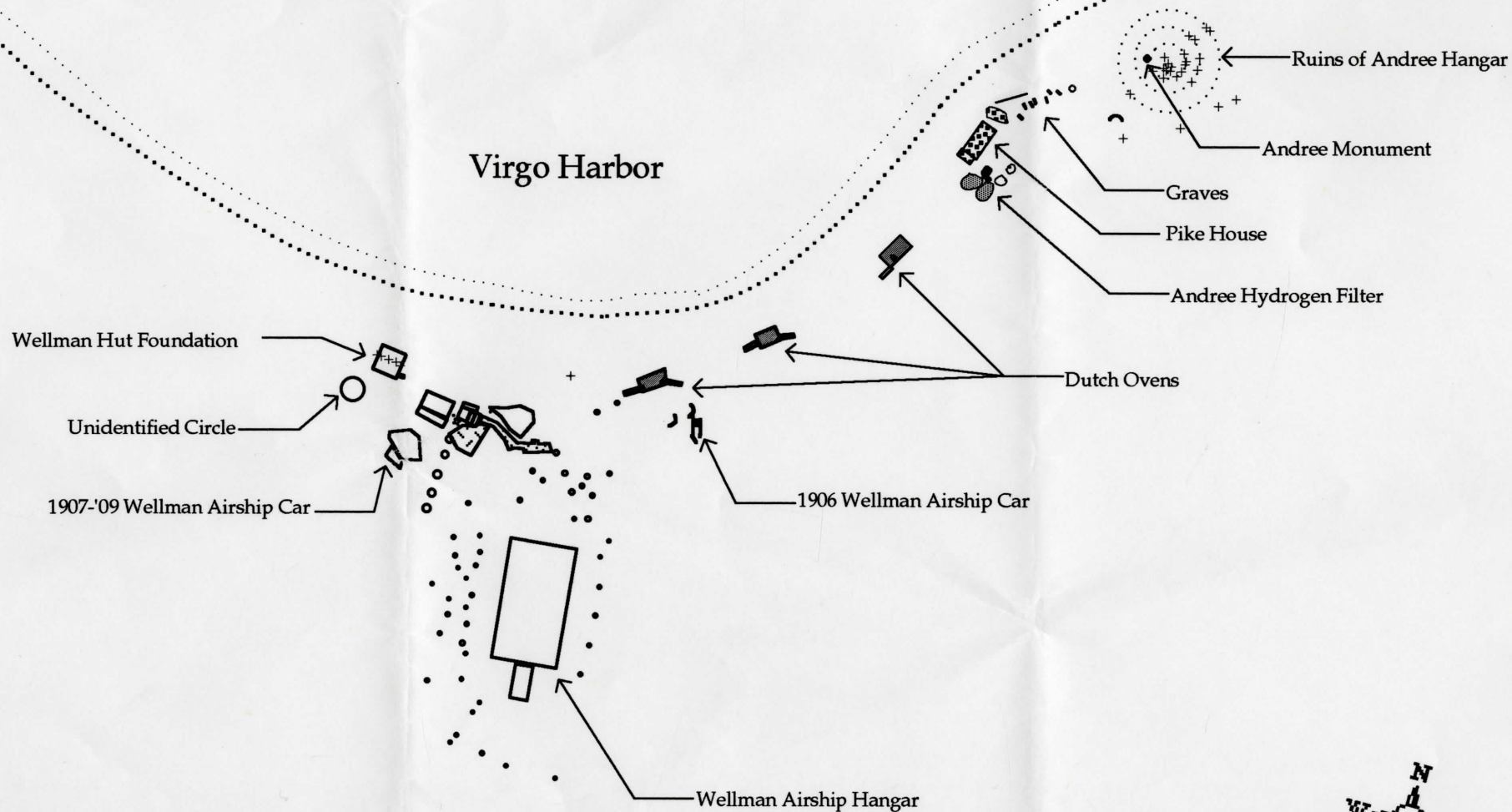
Other notable finds included original ballast bags from the 1907-09 airship, still underneath the wreckage of Wellman's hangar, which collapsed in 1912, and a large iron pot used to boil blubber, which appears to date from the late 18th Century and possibly earlier. A sample of the "boil-off" found at the bottom of this pot was taken for mass spectrometer and radiocarbon dating analysis.

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Several soil and chemical reaction samples were taken from within the surviving machinery areas on both the Wellman and Andree sites where hydrogen gas was produced for their respective airships.

Airship Archaeology Survey: 79°40' North
Virgohamn, Danskøya, Svalbard, Norway
P.J. Capelotti, Rutgers University
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Virgo Harbor



Scale: 1"=200' / 1cm = 24m