

# METRO/POLITICS

## Law to protect state's underwater history

→ Governor signs legislation making it a crime to take artifacts from Alabama's navigable waterways without permission from the state

By PHILLIP RAWLS  
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MONTGOMERY — State Sen. George Callahan has seen Civil War cannon balls turned into a pedestal for a coffee table. He'd rather see them displayed in a museum where all Alabamians could enjoy them.

"We've got to protect our history so we don't lose it," Callahan, R-Theodore, said.

That's why he helped push through the Underwater Cultural Resources Act in the closing hours of the 1999 legislative session. Gov. Don Siegelman signed it into law Saturday.

The new law makes it a crime — punishable by up to 10 years in prison — to take artifacts from the state's navigable waterways without permission from the state.

The law is designed to protect historical artifacts covered by the state's navigable waterways, but the primary target is shipwrecks and any sunken treasure that might have been aboard.

"If you find a figurehead, you can't rip it off and take it home with you, just like you can't take something from a cabin at a state park," said Greg Rinehart, cultural resources

administrator for the Alabama Historical Commission.

If someone wants to explore or salvage a shipwreck, the Alabama Historical Commission and the state conservation commissioner both have to approve a permit or contract.

They are both involved because the Historical Commission protects the state's past and the Conservation Department controls the land under Alabama's rivers and bays.

Elizabeth Brown, acting director of the Historical Commission, said the new law is not aimed at people who explore riverbanks for arrowheads.

"We don't have any interest in pursuing children digging for arrowheads when the water is down," she said.

Sen. Jack Biddle, R-Gardendale, opposed the legislation, calling it another example of over-regulation by the state.

"Now you can't pick up something on the bottom of the river. We are losing all our rights in this state," he said.

But Callahan said the need for the law was demonstrated in September when Hurricane Georges uncovered the wreck of a 19th-century ship at Dauphin Island.

The Historical Commission mapped its location and covered it with sand to keep people from stealing its skeletal frame, he said.

Likewise, Ms. Brown said the law was needed because history sells.

"Civil War relics are in high demand and will bring thousands of dollars," she said.



"We've got to protect our history so we don't lose it."

— George Callahan, state senator, R-Theodore

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By SHELLIA HARDWELL  
Associated Press Writer

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