

New state law makes underwater plunder a crime

By PHILIP BOWLS
Associated Press writer

MONTGOMERY — State Sen. George Callahan has seen Civil War cannon balls turned into a pedestal for a coffee table. He would 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 artifacts covered by the state's navigable waterways, but the primary target is shipwrecks and any treasure that might have been aboard.

"If you find a figurine, you can't rip it off and take it home with you, 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 His-

torical Commission and the state conservation commissioner 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 arrow-

heads. "We don't have any interest in pursuing children digging for arrowheads when the water is down," she said. Sen. Jack Riddle, R-Gardendale, opposed the legislation, calling it another example of over-regulation by the state.

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

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