

Tequesta

Pirates and Treasure Trove of South Florida

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The history of piracy in America had its roots in Hakluyt's compilation of the "Principall Navigations, Voiages and Discoveries of the English Nation" in 1589. Almost one hundred years later, in 1678, Esquemeling's classic "Bucaniers of America" was printed in Dutch. It was received with a flood of enthusiasm, being translated into Spanish, French and English. In England it was the best seller of its times, and it was issued in tides of editions and additions. Not since then has there been a better account written of the doughty Henry Morgan, his butchering contemporaries or their bloody cohorts, than was so indelibly inscribed by this erudite Dutchman who 'went a piriting' with them. In 1724 Capt. Chas. Johnson issued his "History of the Pyrates," another monumental work on the latter day champions of individualism, and by many it is regarded as the greatest of all pirate books.

In the early years of piracy, the Spanish treasure fleets sailed by way of the Windward Passage east of Cuba or the Old Bahama Channel along its north coast. But the English occupancy of Jamaica and the French pirates at Tortuga made these routes too dangerous. The golden argosies, making up at Havana, coasted along with the Gulf Stream in the New Bahama Channel, flanking the east coast of Florida. Thus these ships became doubly vulnerable to depredations from bases on this peninsula. First when sailing in "the great arc" along the north coast of the Gulf of Mexico the "Flota" made its way from Vera Cruz to Havana, when the west coast pirates took toll. Again, when the almost unmanageable, but gorgeous galleons wallowed, drifted and sailed toward the north tip of the Bahamas, the east coast pirates had opportunity to assault them once more. The Spanish held St. Augustine, Pensacola, St. Marks, and some other small centers, but the few sorties

that they made toward the suppression of piracy were totally ineffective. Florida became a great golden horseshoe, from which pirates operated almost at will, cutting out rich galleons and snuggling down in the recesses of her coves, bays and rivers. Nature, too, took sides in the unequal struggle; many great fleets of Spain were caught in hurricanes and tossed to their doom on our reefs and shores. There was no Esquemeling or Dampier to record the exploits of these early years. We find an account here and there in Spanish records, and piece the picture from other information that we glean much as an archaeologist unfolds the forgotten past. The towns of Florida were more apt to be sites of poverty, and too often of starvation, not of riches, and there was no glamour where there was no loot. In respect to the period beginning a century and a half ago, history has been treated more generously and we know, sometimes in detail, what the pirates of those days were like.

Under the waters of Choctawhatchee Bay are the wrecks of a dozen pirate ships, some dating after the American occupation, and culminating with the glamorous story of Billy "Bowlegs" Rogers and his millions. Farther down the coast, near Apalachicola, is a place on the Costal Highway where the sign reads "Money Bayou." Here it is recorded, the pirate Copeland in late years buried money in three kegs, which were duly discovered according to directions on the chart, but disappeared into the quick sands when disturbed. Up the river from Apalachicola is another kind of treasure, the sunken steamer "Alice," which went down with 300 barrels of whiskey on board, worth somewhere between \$300,000 and \$600,000. She lies under twenty-eight feet of accumulated clay and sand, and a well known diver has twice made his way down to the hull, and vows that he will get the cargo next time.

Near St. Marks, I am told, the pirate Lewis Leland made his headquarters. Along the northwest coast are five different headstones, bearing his name and date of birth and death, and each was a marker for a treasure that he had buried. He had the happy habit of "marooning" large numbers of his crew, so it is not too surprising that he passed in his chips with a knife in his back.

Farther south along the shore are the Anclote Keys, one of the few names according to Mr. Marchman that have come down to us unchanged. These keys were the home of a nest of pirates sufficiently strong to capture Ft. St. Marks, as detailed by Dr. Boyd of Tallahassee.*

Charlotte Harbor was the home of numerous pirates, the best known of whom was Gasparilla, to whom Tampa owes so much of her fame and

* "The Fortifications of San Marcos de Apalache," a pamphlet reprinted from the *Florida Historical Society Quarterly*, Vol. XV, No. 1, 1936.

glory. According to charts, the treasures that he and his men buried are to be found on various islands in the bay and at some places on the adjoining mainland.

On Sanibel Island, Black Caesar spent a last couple of years, after leaving Biscayne Bay and before having his career ended for him at Key West.

Just north of Miami, near the little town of Ojus, a couple of pirates, famous two centuries ago, careened their ships and made their headquarters on Snake Creek, then known as Rattlesnake Creek.

Farther north along the coast, numerous inlets provided shelter to various purveyors of misery and misfortune, all the way to Amelia Island and one time sleepy Fernandina, whose history alone would fill a modest volume.

All the books that contain any worth while data on piracy in Florida would constitute a very scant private library. Those that tell us about our own small corner of the state are very few.

There are the Spanish and the English "Cotejas," pertaining to the wrecks, and containing acrimonious accusations in both languages. "Flight into Oblivion" by Prof. J. A. Hanna of Rollins College, details an engagement between the fleeing General Breckinridge and pirates occupying Ft. Dallas, in what is now the downtown area of Miami. Dau's "Florida, Old and New" and two of Verrill's books, "They Found Gold" and "Romantic & Historic Florida" contain some accounts of interest. Both authors mention the plate fleet that went down near Carysfort, and from the lucidity of one relation, the author must have been on at least one of the wrecked ships as she was battered to pieces on the reefs amid spume and spray. Residents of Miami will be delighted to read the story of the colored man who dug up a treasure chest and purchased a large interest in one of our principal department stores with the proceeds. Those of us who heed current gossip will recognize both the individual and the estate on which the iron bound chest was located.

Both authors, too, relate the loss of the *Santa Margarita*, the site of which they place near Palm Beach. This was one of the world's fabulously rich ships, and there is hardly a book regarding treasure that does not mention her. Various writers and salvage experts have placed the wreck all the way from Palm Beach to the Mona Passage. A deep sea diver, repairing a cable to Cuba during the Spanish American War, announced that he had found this wreck, and a ship was especially fitted

out to salvage its millions. Only some souvenirs were found, the salvage ship was wrecked and a book was written about the venture. If a writer can place a deep sea cable at Palm Beach or near there, I see no reason why he cannot place the galleon there too! One of the earliest works that I have is a copy of a small pamphlet of a dozen pages, printed in Havana in 1622. It tells of the wrecking of the *Santa Margarita*, together with the flagship of the plate fleet, off Matacumbe. Miraculously, many of the passengers and crew escaped.

Another book that is admittedly fiction is "Coral Ship" by Kirk Munroe. Any boy of sixty or so can light his pipe and get one more thrill by reading this fascinating yarn spun around a treasure ship of Black Caesar's era, located on one of the keys of Biscayne Bay.

One more book, the "Commodore's Story," by Munroe and Gilpin, should be read by every resident of South Florida. It contains an inimitable history of early beginnings of Coconut Grove and Miami. Mention is made of Black Caesar and Parson Jones. There is one short chapter devoted to local treasures, including the find of Ned Pent, also the "Silver Ship" at New River.

On page 301, we read as follows: "Wide interest was excited in the early days of the Bay by a report that 'old man Brown', beachcomber, had found a fortune. He was an early settler who had a small and solitary house on New River Sound, not far from the south end. Walking the beach after a severe hurricane he found two bars of metal exposed by the cutting away of the sand, which he took to be lead. Shortly after, in Key West, he sold them as lead, and very soon after heard that they were really silver! Hastening back to New River, he found that the surf had already covered the spot with sand so deeply that he could find nothing more.

For many years there were frequent attempts to find the timbers of this wreck again, without success. Every spring the boys—Dick Carney, Harry Peacock and others—would go to New River turtling, making a grand lark of the affair, and staying a month or more. There was a small canal, cut during the Seminole War, between New River and Hillsboro, by which they could go quite near to Hillsboro Rocks, where Brown was said to have picked up his bars, and of course a considerable amount of the turtlers' time was spent in that neighborhood! At last Jennings—a Carolinian, who had started an extensive planting of tomatoes, with contract labor, south of Coconut Grove—became so much interested in this quest that he offered to finance a more carefully planned effort.

A company was formed and incorporated in order to insure exclusive right to what might be found, and for a few shares of stock the Commodore designed a caisson whereby the wreck might be uncovered when found. The whole affair got into the papers, with a solid page in the New York Sunday 'Herald', which rather annoyed Jennings. The Commodore told him, jokingly, that this was a 'wonderful opportunity. Nothing attracts the public as much as a treasure, and if you were mean enough you could make a fortune by selling this stock.' He took it half seriously, and answered with great indignation, 'Well, I might be a gambler and a blackleg—but I wouldn't do that', and the Commodore could only answer heartily, 'Bully for you'.

They went at the search with determination, eventually got on the timbers of the wreck, and actually found some curiosities and a few coins, but never recovered anything of substantial value. In the course of the search they discovered the remains of an old privateer, surrounded by cast-iron guns. Several of these were recovered, and mounted as decorations in the lakefront sea-wall of the Clarke property at Palm Beach, which now occupies the site of "Cap" Dimmick's old hotel, the Coconut Grove House."

I have talked with some of the men who camped on the sand ridge about nine miles north of Ft. Lauderdale, where this treasure ship had been driven ashore in a hurricane. Some of the group who worked on the wreck, said that a stranger with a chart had stopped with a local judge. He told that thirteen sailors had survived the storm, had packed gold about their persons and started trudging north along the beach. Their burdens became too heavy, so they buried this money about four miles north of the wreck, and almost every year someone does a lot of heavy digging around Boca Raton. All but one of these men were killed by Indians, and the one who escaped gave the chart to the man who brought it to Miami. A local group put up enough money to purchase a diving outfit, in which one of the men explored the ship, finding that the silver bars had corroded into a solid mass that they were unable to break up. They placed a half stick of dynamite on it, and it all sank out of sight; so they gave up. All but the persistent man who had done the diving. He sold off his real estate, hired salvaging equipment at Jacksonville, and without anyone knowing about it except the hired crew, he took up all the silver. Then he went to New York City, where he joined an exclusive club and bought a membership on the New York Stock Exchange; a man of means, even in that part of the world. Finally, a local resident firmly anchored his ship with the stern against the old hulk, and let the

propeller wash her out. Some dozens of wine jars were broken to bits, and the captain told me that he had been advised later that these had contained gold ore, and that he had washed a fortune into the sands along side.

Since the earliest dates of Florida history there have been recorded the wrecking of ships along our south coast. During the first century after its discovery, Indians salvaged valuables from the wrecks, and murdered various of the survivors. Private wreckers came from Cuba and found their salvaging adventures so profitable that the Governor of Cuba wrote to His Majesty suggesting that the government take a hand in the recoveries. It was not until 1714 that one of the events of greatest importance in our region took place; the wrecking of a whole plate fleet, except one vessel, on Carysfort Reef. This one ship brought back the sad tidings that thirteen others had been lost, some of them great galleons, loaded with silver from Peru, gold from South America and the Philippines, silks from China, and spices and dyes from the Indies. Also, nearly all the passengers and crews had been lost. Almost no time was lost in bringing divers and diving bells from Spain to begin "fishing" on the wrecks. The pirates of Florida, from Providence across the channel, and even from Jamaica, swarmed like vultures on the reef. Within two years the thrifty Governor Spotswood of Virginia had dispatched a ship, the "Virgin" of Virginia, to hunt up the wrecks and take a hand. Incidentally, and unfortunately for the "Virgin," she met up with a Spanish Man of War within a couple of days out, and was promptly escorted to Puerto Rico. Just ten years later Capt. Chas. Johnson, already mentioned in the Introduction to this book, tells of these wrecks in this fashion.:

"It was about two years before, that the Spanish Galleons, or Plate Fleet, had been cast away in the Gulf of Florida; and several Vessels from Havana, were at work, with diving Engines, to fish up the Silver that was on board the Galleons.

The Spaniards had recovered some Millions of Pieces of Eight, and had carried it all to Havana; but they had present about 350,000 Pieces of Eight in Silver, then upon the Spot, and were daily taking up more. In the meantime, two ships, and three Sloops, fitted out from Jamaica, Barbadoes, etc., under Captain Henry Jennings, sail'd to the Gulf, and found the Spaniards there upon the Wreck; the Money before spoken of, was left on Shore, deposited in a Storehouse, under the government of two Commissaries, and a Guard of about 60 Soldiers.

The Rovers came directly upon the place, bringing their little Fleet to an Anchor, and in a Word, landing 300 Men, they attack'd the Guard, who immediately ran away; and thus they seized the Treasure, which they carried off, making the best of their way to Jamaica."

Thus was the art of highjacking introduced to Florida not far from Miami's own door steps. And not so far either from Key West, which spawned those hardy acquisitive wreckers of a century later. Off Key Largo the pirates assembled a whole fleet to do their own salvaging on these wrecks; all were under the direction of this same Henry Jennings.

It was just a little north of this that Black Caesar had his base of operations until he was driven out by fear, leaving so suddenly that part of his men were still at sea when a pilot guided him to the West coast. Since he is sort of "home folks," we regard him with more than ordinary interest. Many years ago, a colored preacher reached Miami, coming from the Carolinas, according to Munroe and Gilpin. He confided to Dr. Gifford that he had brought with him a chart to some treasure locations, probably Caesar's, and had made recovery of three out of four locations. At the meeting of the State Society at the Biltmore Hotel, there was displayed a chart of Black Caesar's treasure location. It was loaned by Miss Marie Cappick of Key West, who has a wealth of treasure lore. From another source, I quote as follows: "Caesar was an escaped negro slave, half Scotch from his father and a negro mother. Escaped and joined the pirates, and worked himself up. He moved to San Carlos Bay on the west coast when settlers began to settle along the east coast. Was finally whipped and captured and taken to Key West by U. S. Sailors where he was burned to death tied to a tree, fire lit by widow of the preacher from Baltimore whose eyes he had burned out and who engineered his capture on Sanibel Island. When he moved he took his treasures except the 26 tons of silver which he did not care much about—Caesar got the silver bars on a ship 800 miles east of Cuba and sailed the ship to Caesar's Creek, took off the silver and let the old merchant ship pile up on the reef or rocks north of the creek where it was destroyed by a storm."

I have further data, but it involves treasure on Sanibel Island, and with gas rationing, it might not be wholly fair to tell of the fabulous treasure which is at present so far away.**

**Note: This article was written and read at a meeting of the Association during the era of restrictions.

But there have been times when residents of Miami took an interest in ventures beyond walking distance. One of the first radio detectors was brought into this country by a local syndicate. The instrument was brought in by plane from Panama. When I was in Pensacola I heard of the locations around that section, known to the son of a man to whom the charts had been given. This man had left Pensacola and lived in Dania, and he had a number of locations. Near Camp Walton there is a huge oak which directs one to a chest at Spanish Cove. In a near bayou is a ship, directions to which are markings on trees along the shore. And in another bayou, according to charts, were seven great concrete boxes, in which were the millions captured from seven plate fleets of Spain. There were some fifty "expeditions" all told, that at one time or another took a hand in investigating the locations on Choctawhatchee Bay, and a list of the men who went there from Miami would constitute a blue book of the business and professional men of the city.

One may add, in a whisper, that the land on which the famous Suwanee River treasure is supposed to be located, is owned by Miamians, and for twenty-five years or so, other Miamians have been some of the "also present" who have donated money, hope and exertion on this story-book treasure. Others have sought in vain along the St. Johns River near Green Cove Springs; have uncovered an old English ship off Soldier's Key, and a fellow member of our society has told of uncovering another old ship, as detailed in the National Geographic Magazine.

Before the lighthouse at Carysfort had been constructed, a light ship had been anchored there. The Captain of the lightship had a small garden on shore and had built a wharf. He is also said to have had buried in his garden some 1600 or 16,000 gold doubloons. One day he was ashore with two or three other white men, when they were attacked by Indians, and the Captain was killed. Since then there have been many searching for his hidden horde, but it has never been found.

Many years ago a Spanish ship was driven on shore at Duck Key, and all but one of the crew were lost in the storm. The son of this survivor told my friend of the approximate location, but he had not been able to locate the money, which his father had salvaged from the wrecked ship.

On Oct. 20, 1940, an announcement was made in a local paper that a group of leading attorneys, with Mr. Harry Gwinn, were on a trip to Key West to hunt for treasure. A party, of which I was a member, had been to this location a short time previously. Our guide had lived in Key West, and when about ten years old, at play, found a round piece of

leather, sewn like a ball, and within it was a written description. It was dated 1876, and stated that on a certain "hill" on Boca Chica "the treasure of Pirate Demons was buried." It gave explicit enough directions from a certain marked tree. Our train from Miami obligingly stopped at a trestle about four miles north of Key West, right on Boca Chica itself. All day long mosquitos attacked us by the billions, for it was summer time, and the sun bore down in its most scorching mood. Head nets and rain coats gave us little enough protection. Near the supposed location we found some broken pottery and a few old bricks, and these were our only rewards for a day of hard work. When we got onto the train for home, the porter sprayed us with a flit gun, to keep the "varmints" as he called them, from coming on board.

A resident of bygone years, living on Elliott's Key, had a negro helper whom he put to work one day, digging a well in one of the old pot-holes. A little digging, and he had uncovered a skeleton! Nothing would induce the colored brother to dig there any longer. So the white man continued the work, and just beneath the skeleton, he came upon a treasure. He at once retired to a life of ease in Key West, on the gold coins and bars that the "bogie" had failed any longer to protect.

I first heard of treasure on Upper Matacumbe, when told that children of a local resident had been found playing with some gold coins that the narrator had purchased. They were part of a small lot found in a pot hole near the railroad track. Some time later I was told that a man by the name of Curry lived on the island, and while digging a well in 1832, he had come upon a large concrete box. Within it were wine jars containing a huge treasure. He finally moved to Key West when some friends of his were killed by Indians on a neighboring key. He is said to have returned in a ship by night, and that he then removed the treasure, which he had left in his hurry to escape the Indians.

Don Dickerman, who operated the "Pirates Den" here, introduced me to a man who was born in Spain, and whose father brought him to this country when he was but eight years old. Some of his ancestors had been pirates. One was "Bartalomeo el Tigre Negro," who operated from 1578 to 1600 and was hanged by his own crew. Another was "Ricardo al Rojo," who lasted as a pirate from 1786 until 1793, when he met a violent death, trying to highjack a load of slaves off Cuba.

According to this man's story, he visited Spain in 1910, being assigned to a sub chaser that made a call there. He managed to visit the old castle that had been his ancestral home. His family had been very rich, for one of the ancestors had recovered nine million dollars buried

near Havana. Politically, they were on the wrong side, and his father had been fortunate to escape with his life, only to be pursued by his enemies and killed by them in this country. In the castle was one old fireplace, from which our narrator, following directions, lifted some loose tiles. This disclosed a passageway thru a hollow column that extended below the wine cellar. There he found charts to seven different treasures, all in the region of North Miami. These he kept in an aluminum fishing rod case on board his house boat on the Miami River. When the 1926 hurricane struck, other boats and debris that washed down in the high and rapid waters pounded his own boat to pieces, and his charts were washed out to sea.

He remembers but one location near Arch Creek. One of his ancestors owned the pirate ship "Carazon" and while it was careened and most of the crew away, other pirates highjacked his treasure, and a deserter from this other ship told of where the money had been buried. A chest with fifteen bars of gold was buried on the east side of Arch Creek, and another chest with forty-five bars was buried on the farther side. A very old gumbo limbo tree stood near the road, not far from the rock arch, a few years ago. It was marked when I saw it, with a curved arrow, and certain directions and measurements took one to the site of the fifteen bars of gold. Doubtless, one band of pirates, or the other, took it up, for it was not there when we tested the location some years ago.

When I was visiting Key West, on one of my trips, a resident said that some time before he had found a small brass cannon in shallow water, and that its muzzle was plugged up. It was too heavy for him to salvage in his skiff, and was not then worth a special trip to go back after it. Later he heard that it contained a deposit of coins and jewels. I did not have time then to make a trip for it, and later on the papers carried the story that the treasure had been recovered.

In a Miami paper, under the date of August 3, 1940, was a headline to the effect that a six year old negro girl was to inherit a fortune of \$150,000. Mr. Merrick told me how this fortune had been acquired, and it is information pretty generally known by Miamians. Years ago some men arrived from the north, with a treasure chart and hired the negro to sail them about the keys to the south of us. They spent long and disappointing days in a vain effort to find the right key, and at last were on the point of giving up. Finally they told their pilot that they were looking for a key with two big palm trees. This was sufficient identification; their guide took them directly to the right key, and they recovered the treasure, which they took back north with them. From the

proceeds they sent him what is said to have been 15% of what they had found. His honesty and trustworthiness were thus adequately rewarded.

One treasure that has not been recovered to my knowledge, is one to which a chart has been in circulation for long years. The original is on an old piece of sacking, which was sent by a man, dying in a Baltimore hospital, more than one hundred years ago, to a friend in Key West. The chart reads "For guide, Captain Key 20 miles South by West there lies seventy thousand dollars in pieces of eight in a barrell. Turtle Island, Florida. Capt. Sanford." Now, eighty thousand dollars is pretty small potatoes compared with all the ten million dollar locations that lie beneath the sea, or hidden back behind the bushes. I have been on Captains Key often enough to know that this is not the location. One can go there from Miami by boat, as we once did. It rained, and we found that the cabin leaked in every part of the roof and on all sides. We got plenty wet, but no pieces of eight. At another time we went to Tavernier and hired a skiff to which we attached an outboard motor. Just as we left the key to return, the motor ran dry. In filling it, by some chance the motor and boat got on fire. We managed to beat the fire out with an old cap, and then had to row all seven miles back in.

If you want to find this barrel for yourself, take a chart of the keys, put it on the dining room table as I did, calibrate a string twenty miles, pivoting on Captains Key, and see if you can cross anything that looks to you like Turtle Key.

The last pirates that I heard of in this region, were two who were pursued in 1888, only a few miles north of Miami. One was killed, and the other lived until a few years ago, so old that he could not recover three caches that they had hidden. But he confided in a friend, and this man not long ago found one of them. It was an iron wash pot, encrusted with coral, located almost under a side walk near 79th street. It contained a hundred pounds in gold coins and bars, and a friend of mine saw the imprint of the coins on the sides of the old iron pot.

If one goes hunting for treasure for fun, he will at least have fun. It is one of the few domains of adventure left open to civilized men. Enough people have found treasure to make the risk somewhat better than a slot machine, at least. Governments and government officials have taken such ventures seriously, and have been successful many times. The stories of people who buried treasures, or lost them in wrecks; those who robbed and murdered, and those who have made recovery, all together fill no small niche in history, particularly in Florida. And the stories, both of fact and fiction, have contributed largely to our literature.