

Discovery of the Bahama Channel

By ROBERT S. CHAMBERLAIN

Although Juan Ponce de León found the Bahama Channel during his voyage of exploration to Florida in 1513,¹ it was not until 1519 that this passage was revealed as the most advantageous route for the return to Castile from the Spanish Indies for all shipping, finally concentrated in the fabulous yearly treasure fleets with their heavy burden of silver and gold. The revelation of the Bahama Channel as such an important sea-lane was made by a pilot who had served under Ponce de León in his voyage to Florida, Antón de Alaminos, in company with Francisco de Montejo and Alonso Hernández de Puerto Carrero, the two first *alcaldes* of Hernán Cortés' new Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz, which that great conqueror founded on the coast of Mexico as he prepared for his momentous and almost incredible subjugation of the Aztec Empire.

Ponce de León had perhaps sailed into and across the Bahama Channel at or near its northern end on his voyage from the Island of San Juan, or Puerto Rico, to northeastern Florida or beyond, and then had passed it in sailing southward and exploring the coast of the peninsula. Nevertheless, it was not until Alaminos sailed through the Bahama Channel from south to north and on across the wide Ocean Sea, or Atlantic, to Castile that the passage was revealed as the most advantageous route back to Europe. Hitherto the route from the Indies to Castile lay directly east and northeast from the islands of Cuba, Santo Domingo and Puerto Rico, including the "Old Channel", between the north coast of Santo Domingo and the southern Bahamas.

The Bahama Channel became the official route for individual ships and yearly plate fleets which carried the wealth of the Indies to Castile. One squadron of the plate fleet sailed up from the Isthmus of Panama to Havana—la Habana—with the bullion from Peru, and the other sailed over from Vera Cruz with that of New Spain. At Havana the two squadrons united and sailed north through the Bahama Channel, past Bermuda to the Azores and then to San Lucar de Barrameda, at the mouth of the Guadalquivir, and up that river to Seville, which enjoyed the monopoly of the colonial trade.²

When Florida was finally occupied and held by the Spaniards, Saint Augustine, with its fortifications, had the mission of protecting this channel against foreign enemies and of affording refuge for fleets bound for Castile which encountered difficulties, storms and hurricanes in passing the channel.

Thus the Bahama Channel was a vital part of the life line of one of the greatest empires the world has seen, that of Spain during her period of supremacy.

The passage of the Bahama Channel by Alaminos, Montejo and Puerto Carrero on the return to Castile in 1519 was a direct result of the intrepid decision of Cortés to undertake the conquest of Mexico in his own right, casting off the authority of Diego Velázquez, Governor of Cuba, under whose aëgis his expedition had sailed out from Cuba. Velázquez, under whose auspices Yucatan had been discovered by Francisco Hernández de Córdoba in 1517, and by whose authority Mexico, which before long became known as New Spain, was discovered by Juan de Grijalva in 1518, had been granted the governorship of the new lands to the west of Cuba, with the title of *Adelantado*, by the King-Emperor Charles. Consequently, on moving to the conquest of Mexico, Cortés had to push Velázquez to one side and obtain royal recognition and favor for himself as governor if he was to reap the reward of his daring decision. With the great majority of his expedition supporting him, Cortés chose as the representatives who were to present his case before Charles, Francisco de Montejo and Alonso Hernández de Puerto Carrero, both noblemen and *alcaldes* of Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz. Alaminos was designated pilot to carry them to Castile, and Cortés' swift-sailing and sturdy *capitana*, or flagship, the best of his flotilla, with a crew of fifteen, was selected as the best ship for the mission.

Alaminos had served as chief pilot of the Hernández de Córdoba expedition to Yucatan in 1517, the Grijalva expedition to Mexico and first knowledge of the Aztec Empire in the next year, and the Cortés expedition. In fact, there is cogent reason to believe that it was Alaminos who, through his counsel and suggestions as the Hernández de Córdoba expedition was about to sail from Cuba, turned the enterprise into one which had discovery of lands to the west as one of its main purposes.

When it was originally organized the Hernández de Córdoba expedition seems to have been destined only for slaving and trade either northward to the Islands of the Lucayos, or Bahamas, or southward to the Guanajos, off the north coast of Honduras.³ Alaminos had received some 400 *pesos de oro* from Velázquez for his services.⁴

Cortés did not rely alone on the diplomatic skill of his envoys, on correspondence, or the importance of his objectives in the conquest of the new lands to the west which promised to be rich to sway the King-Emperor toward granting him authority over Mexico in place of Velázquez. He had received rich gifts of skillfully worked gold, silver and semi-precious stones, intri-

cately contrived feather work, articles of leather, and fine cotton textiles from emissaries of Montezuma and native caciques, and his men had obtained other riches by trade. Among these evidences of the wealth of the new lands which Cortés intended to bring under the rule of his sovereign and of the culture of their inhabitants were: "a large wheel of gold, with figures of strange animals on it and worked with tufts of leaves weighing three thousand eight hundred ounces; a large wheel of silver weighing forty marks . . . ; a hundred ounces of gold ore, that their Highnesses might see in what state the gold came from the mines; a fan of variegated featherwork, with thirty-seven rods plated with gold; two collars made of gold and precious stones; a bird of green feathers with feet, beak and eyes of gold; six shields, each covered with a plate of gold, with something resembling a golden mitre in the centre; two pieces of cotton very richly wrought with black and white embroidery. . . ."5

The delighted Spaniards called the "large gold wheel" the *sol*, or sun, and the "large silver wheel" the *luna*, or moon. Both were "large as cart-wheels."⁶ The learned and accomplished Peter Martyr says that the gold wheel had in "the center an image of a man a cubit high, resembling a king seated upon his throne, the figure draped to the knees; . . . it has the features we ascribe to nocturnal goblins. The bottom [is] decorated with branches [and] flowers. . . . Both are pure, without alloy."⁷ The Spaniards valued the treasure at over 25,000 ducats.⁸ Montejo, Puerto Carrero and Alaminos were to present these riches to Charles and also were to take to Spain four men and two women of Mexico, to show what manner of people inhabited the new lands.

A native of the port of Palos, from which Columbus had sailed to the discovery of the New World, and breeder of daring mariners like the Pinzóns, Alaminos had followed the sea from his youth. He was a cabin boy on one of Columbus' ships on his fourth and final voyage, on which the Admiral reached the north coast of Honduras, followed the coast to Panama, and then, after meeting failure in efforts to found a colony on the Isthmus, had sailed on to shipwreck off Jamaica. His service with Ponce de León had given Alaminos knowledge of the waters of Florida and the Bahamas, and of the powerful current—the Gulf Stream—which flowed northward between the Bahamas and Florida.⁹

There was no certainty in 1519 as to where this current led, nor any general certain knowledge as to what possible lands might lie to the north or northeast of the point reached by Ponce de León in 1513 to block a voyage to Castile,¹⁰ but with his experience and knowledge and the instincts of a

great mariner, Alaminos became sure that the current of which he knew and the passage between Florida and the "Islands of the Lucayos" had to lead to the Ocean Sea to the north and therefore to a feasible route back to Castile. In the same way, after his experiences as a youth, and having seen the north coasts of Honduras with the Admiral in 1502, he had in 1517 felt certain that there was a land mass not far west of Cuba. He was universally recognized as "a person of great experience and a great pilot, able in the art of navigation,"¹¹ undoubtedly the greatest in the Indies at the time, and well deserved to be the mariner to reveal the true importance of the Bahama Channel.

There had been slaving expeditions to the Lucayos, known from the time of Columbus' first voyage, and there had been voyages into the waters of the Bahama Channel, for they were known to many and were considered dangerous because of shoals, reefs, currents and tempests. It would be interesting to know how many unrecorded voyages were made into these waters from Cuba, Santo Domingo, and Puerto Rico, how far they reached, and who headed them and for what purposes, over and above the capture of Indian slaves.

With the treasure of Cortés aboard the *capitana* and everything prepared, Alaminos and the two representatives Montejo and Puerto Carrero sailed from the harbor of Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz on July 16, 1519.¹² It was not until August 23 that, with supplies exhausted after more than a month's voyage, they put in at the Bay of Marien on the northwest coast of Cuba, west of La Habana, where Montejo had *haciendas* from which supplies for the long voyage across the Ocean Sea could be obtained. Two hundred or two hundred fifty *cargas*, each the equivalent of four bushels, of bread, one hundred live hogs and a large supply of water were brought aboard the *capitana*. Obviously, before leaving Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz, it had been decided that supplies for the long voyage from Cuba to Castile would be placed aboard at Montejo's isolated *haciendas*.

The *capitana* remained at Marien two days and one night, and then sailed. In a moment of what may have been sheer bravado, Montejo took the majordomo of his *haciendas* aboard the *capitana* to see the treasure just before sailing, although he, Puerto Carrero, and Alaminos had been sworn to secrecy by Cortés. This majordomo disclosed the arrival of the ship, the mission of Cortés' representatives, and declared that the *capitana* was literally "ballasted" with gold. Rumors spread swiftly, and it was said that there was from 100,000 to 270,000 *pesos de oro* of treasure in the ship.¹³

Velázquez, already Cortés' bitter enemy, was infuriated and from distant

Santiago, seat of the government of Cuba, sent a fast-sailing, well-armed vessel to the north coast under the treasurer of the island, Gonzalo Guzmán, to intercept the *capitana*, her treasure, and Cortés' representatives. Velázquez and all others expected that Alaminos would sail eastward along the north coast of Cuba to follow the sealane east to Spain, the "Old Channel" used by all ships until that time.¹⁴

It was under these circumstances that Alaminos, partly to avoid possible interception by ships of Velázquez, or having to put into port where they and their treasure might be captured, decided to sail northeast, attempt a passage of the Bahama Channel and a return to Castile in a continuous voyage. His decision meant a search for a new, "unused and unknown" route for the voyage from the Indies to Spain through dangerous waters with their strong currents, shoals and reefs, including the keys off the southern tip of Florida—Los Mártires, so named by the devout Spaniards because their forms suggested Christian martyrs undergoing torture—and dangers from unfavorable winds, storms and hurricanes. The waters were feared then and for a long time afterward.

Montejo and Puerto Carrero were not entirely ignorant of the sea themselves. As a captain, Montejo had commanded a ship and the soldiers she carried with Juan de Grijalva in 1518 and again under Cortés in 1519. He had enough knowledge of the sea, as did Puerto Carrero, to be ready to accept Alaminos' more expert judgment.

Montejo and Puerto Carrero, jointly in charge of the mission, had the power to reject Alaminos' counsel and under such circumstances Alaminos would have had to obey them. They, however, accepted Alaminos' decision to sail by way of the Bahama Channel.

The decision taken:

"the ship laden with such a quantity of gold that [it was believed] . . . that it was ballasted with it, . . . [Alaminos, Montejo and Puerto Carrero] sailed away secretly and by a route very perilous for navigation, and many ships could be lost there, . . . It is not usual to sail by that route

[To sail] . . . by way of the . . . islands of the Lucayos is perilous, and voyages are not made by way of those islands, but by way of other ports on this island [of Cuba] . . . , [where] voyages can be made without danger. . . .

From the time these Indies have been discovered, never has a ship sailed for Spain [by that route] because it is so dangerous. . . .¹⁵ One Spaniard, Juan de Xerez, who had aided in the organization of the

Cortés expedition by order of Velázquez, added, upon giving testimony against Cortés, that he knew that the waters of Florida and the Bahamas were perilous because "he has gone on voyages toward those parts and has heard other pilots and mariners [speak of it] . . ."16

Alaminos, Montejo and Puerto Carrero safely passed the Bahama Channel and reached San Lucar de Barrameda in October. They apparently encountered good fortune both in the passage of the channel and on the long voyage across the Ocean Sea.

Montejo, who not only rose to be the *Adelantado* of Yucatan but also was to be the real conqueror of Honduras, later wrote of the passage of the Channel, ascribing the credit to himself:

. . . I went to give a report to Your Majesty of the land [of New Spain] and to discover the route of navigation [to Castile].17

After Montezuma, lord of Mexico, had given his obedience to the Marqués don Hernando Cortés and had sent many presents of gold and silver and jewels to him, and when all the land had come to peace along with everything in it, the *Adelantado* don Francisco de Montejo ventured himself in a very small ship, which carried no supplies, to discover a new route to Castile and to come there to give His Majesty news of what had happened in New Spain and also to bring to His Majesty the gold and jewels that had been received in that land of New Spain. Thus, having begun his voyage, the *Adelantado* don Francisco de Montejo went to an *hacienda* he had, called Marien. He went there since it is a very good port, and from his *hacienda* he supplied the ship with everything it needed for the voyage to Castile.18

Without the route having been known before, the *Adelantado* don Francisco de Montejo dared to enter the Bahama Channel and discover a new route to Castile, by which all the ships now sail from Tierra Firme and from Peru and New Spain to Castile. Ships now come from all those parts of the Indies much more quickly than before, and without danger. It was the contrary before the *Adelantado* Francisco de Montejo discovered the way.19

Although Montejo and Puerto Carrero as representatives of Cortés were in command of the mission to Castile and as a result share the honor for the revelation of the true importance of the Bahama Channel, it is of course to Alaminos as a great and daring pilot, relying on initiative and technical skill, and inspired by imagination, that the real credit is due. Charles V, who was told by Alaminos, Montejo and Puerto Carrero of the voyage in interviews

at Tordesillas in 1520,²⁰ later gave what amounted to recognition of the passage of the Bahama Channel by them as the official "discovery" of that route by declaring in a *cédula* granting a changed coat of arms to Montejo that "you discovered the route for the voyage from . . . New Spain to these our Kingdoms. . . ."²¹ In writing of this revelation of the Bahama Channel as a vastly important sea-lane for the Spanish Empire, the Royal Chronicler Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas declared that Alaminos was "the most experienced pilot of that sea [To escape Velázquez] . . . he set his course to the north because, on the basis of what he heard of the Lucayos and the coast of Florida, he judged that the currents had to lead somewhere. Touching at Marien, they passed to Havana and through the Bahama Channel. . . . Things went well, they reached the open sea. . . , and arrived in Spain with good weather. With good success they entered San Lucar by October . . . , being the first who made that voyage."²²

NOTES

- 1 See Woodbury Lowery, *The Spanish Settlements within the present limits of the United States, 1513-1561*, New York and London, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1911, pp. 123-45, for an account of Ponce de León's voyage of 1513 to Florida, and Diego Luis Molinari, *El Nacimiento del Nuevo Mundo, 1492-1534: historia y cartografía*, Buenos Aires, Editorial Kapelusz y Cía., 1941, *passim.*, for a recent careful discussion of voyages to the southern, southeastern and eastern coasts of the United States. Lowery briefly discusses the infinitely debated voyage of Sebastian Cabot and both Lowery and Molinari discuss the debated question of Vespucci. For a list of maps see Woodbury Lowery, *Descriptive list of maps of Spanish possessions in the United States 1502-1820*, Washington, Library of Congress, 1912. For geography see Juan López de Velasco, *Geografía y descripción universal de las Indias, 1571-1574*, Madrid, 1894, and Antonio Alcedo, *Diccionario geográfico-histórico de las Indias Occidentales o América . . .*, 5 vols., Madrid 1786-89. Cabo Cañaveral was the north end of the Bahama Channel.
- 2 Clarence H. Haring, *Trade and navigation between Spain and the Indies in the time of the Hapsburgs*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1918, provides an authoritative account of Spanish commercial policy, fleets, trade routes, and sea-lanes. On the voyage from Castile to the Indies the annual fleet, which came out with supplies and returned with the bullion and products of the Americas, sailed from San Lucar de Barrameda or Cádiz to the Canaries, then southwest to about 16 degrees, where, taking advantage of prevailing winds, it sailed west to Deseada, an island just east of Guadeloupe. At Deseada the ships for northern South America and the Isthmus of Panama (Porto Bello or Nombre de Dios) and those for the West Indies and New Spain (Vera Cruz) separated to sail to their destinations. As indicated in the text, the fleet concentrated at Havana for the return to Castile by way of the Bahama Channel and the Azores.
- 3 See Bartolomé de las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, 3 vols., Madrid, n.d., *Libro 3, Capítulo 96*.
- 4 Información recibida ante el gobernador y adelantado Diego Velázquez sobre una expedición sospechosa emprendida desde la Habana por Alonso Fernández Portocarrero y Francisco Montejo con pretexto de que iban a nuevos descubrimientos, [Santiago, Cuba,] October 7, 1519, in *Collección de documentos inéditos relativos al descubrimiento, conquista y organización de las antiguas posesiones españolas en América y Oceanía, sacados de los archivos del Reino, y muy especialmente del de Indias*, 42 vols., Madrid, 1864-84, vol. 12, pp. 151-204. Cited hereafter as *Información recibida ante . . . Diego Velázquez*, Santiago, Cuba, 1519, *D. I. I.*, vol. 12, pp. 151-204. A peso de oro was equivalent to a *castellano*, which valued 4.5534 grams of gold: a ducat had a gold

content of 3.485 grams: a gold mark valued 230.0675 grams: a silver mark valued five pesos de oro.

- ⁵ William H. Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico*, New York, the Modern Library, n. d., p. 196, note 7. For a published list of the treasure see Marshall H. Saville, Report of the jewels, shields and clothing sent to the Emperor Charles the Fifth by Don Fernando Cortés and the town council of Vera Cruz . . . , in *The goldsmith's art in ancient Mexico*, Museum of the American Indian, Indian Notes and Monographs, Misc. Series, No. 7, pp. 31ff. See also Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Verdadera y notable relación del descubrimiento y conquista y de la Nueva España y Guatemala*. 2 vols., Guatemala, Tipografía Nacional, 1933-34, Capítulo, 39. A complete inventory of the treasure as recorded by the officials of the *Casa de la Contratación*, Sevilla, is found in *Legajo Número 4675, Sección de Contaduría, Archivo General de Indias de Sevilla*.
 - ⁶ Bernal Díaz, *loc. cit.*
 - ⁷ Peter Martyr D'Anghera, *De Orbe Novo*, Edited by Francis Augustus MacNutt, 2 vols., New York and London, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1912, Decade 4, Book 9.
 - ⁸ See Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of Mexico*, 6 vols., San Francisco, 1883-1888, vol. 1, p. 167, note 20.
 - ⁹ For salient points of Alaminos' career see Lowery, *Spanish Settlements*, pp. 137, 143, 149, 150, 151, 443, 444, and Bancroft, vol. 1, pp. 1-173 *passim*.
 - ¹⁰ See *Información recibida ante . . . Diego Velázquez*, Santiago, Cuba, 1519, *D. I. I.*, vol. 12, pp. 151-204.
 - ¹¹ *Ibid.*
 - ¹² Second Cortés *Carta de Relación, Cartas de Relación de la Conquista de Méjico*, 2 vols., Madrid, Calpe, 1922, p. 36.
 - ¹³ *Información recibida ante . . . Diego Velázquez*, Santiago, Cuba, 1519, *D. I. I.*, vol. 12, pp. 12, pp. 151-204.
 - ¹⁴ *Ibid.*; *Letter of Diego Velázquez*, Santiago, Cuba, October 12, 1519, *D. I. I.*, vol. 12, pp. 246-251.
 - ¹⁵ From *Información recibida ante . . . Diego Velázquez*, Santiago, Cuba, 1519, *D. I. I.*, pp. 151-204.
 - ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
 - ¹⁷ *Adelantado Francisco de Montejo to the Crown, Gracias a Dios, Province of Honduras*, December 26, 1545, *Archivo General de Indias de Sevilla, Sección de Guatemala, Legajo Número 9*.
 - ¹⁸ *Probanza of Merits and Services in Suit of the Adelantado Francisco de Montejo with the Fiscal de la Consejo de Indias, 1552, Archivo General de Indias de Sevilla, Sección de Escribanía de Cámara, Legajo Número 1006A*.
 - ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
 - ²⁰ Las Casas, *Libro 3, Capítulo 121*; Herrera, *Decada 2, Libro 5, Capítulo 14*; *Decada 2, Libro 4, Capítulo 7*; Prudencio de Sandoval: *Historia de la vida y hechos del Emperador Carlos V. . .*, Amberes, 1681, *Libro 4, Número 10*.
 - ²¹ Grant of a new coat of arms to Francisco de Montejo, Granada, December 8, 1526, *Archivo General de Indias de Sevilla, Sección de Indiferente General, Legajo 421*.
 - ²² Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas, *Historia general de los hechos de los Castellanos en las Islas i Tierra Firme del Mar Océano*, Madrid, 1601-15, *Decada 2, Libro 5, Capítulo 14*. In his *Historia de México, con el descubrimiento de la Nueva, Espana conquistada por el muy ilustre y valeroso príncipe don Fernando Cortés, Marqués del Valle Anvers, 1554*, Francisco López de Gómara writes that Alaminos, Montejo and Puerto Carrero sailed from Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz in an "insignificant ship" and that on sailing from Marien "saying that they were going to La Habana, they passed through the Bahama Channel without halting and sailed with very favorable weather until they arrived in Spain." Bernal Díaz, *op. cit.*, Chapter 56, says that after leaving Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz "they reached la Habana with good sailing, and then passed through the channel, and it is said that it was the first time that such a voyage had been made by that way; in a short time [they] reached the isles of Tercera and from there Seville. . . ."
- For an account of the voyage of a treasure fleet and the perils from wind and sea which shipping from the Indies to Castile faced see Robert S. Chamberlain, *The Spanish Treasure Fleet of 1551*, in *The American Neptune*, vol. 6, no. 4.