

The Spanish Camp Site and the 1715 Plate Fleet Wreck

By MARION CLAYTON LINK

A 300-foot strip of sandy beach and dunes between Vero Beach and Sebastian Inlet will immortalize forever the story of the Plate Fleet wreck of 1715, thanks to the generosity of Robert McLarty of Vero Beach and Atlanta, Georgia, who has recently deeded a portion of the former campsite of the Spanish survivors and salvors of the Fleet to the State of Florida for a park and museum.

Where 250 years ago nearly 1,500 terror-stricken survivors gathered following the destruction of their fleet in a violent hurricane and sought to establish themselves on this deserted, sandy shore, today nothing remains but a 15-foot height of sand dune quickly covered with vegetation.

For more than two centuries this now deserted strip of beach kept its secret. When scattered settlements began to dot the shores of the Indian River late in the last century, the last vestiges of its previous occupancy by the Spanish refugees had disappeared beneath the scrub oak, cabbage palm and cactus which still cover its steep crest.

Charles D. Higgs,¹ local historian, came close to discovering its presence some 25 years ago, but although he found quantities of both European and Indian artifacts buried in the site, he failed to associate it with the wreck of the Plate Fleet. His examination revealed for 500 feet along the beach in the wind and tide-eroded bluff a concentration of bones, both animal and human, iron spikes, clay pipes and a peculiar assortment of pottery sherds. On the higher land he discovered evidences of building materials — bricks of red clay, shell mortar and plaster, decorative and roofing tile and wooden stakes.

¹ See "Spanish Contacts with the Ais (Indian River) Country," by Charles D. Higgs. Florida Historical Quarterly 1942, Vol. 21, pp. 25-39.

He concluded erroneously that it might have been an early Spanish settlement of Menéndez' garrison out of St. Augustine, or possibly evidences of Ponce de Leon's second landing on the Florida coast.

Several years later the same site was investigated once more by Hale G. Smith² while acting as assistant archeologist for the Florida Park Service. His deductions came somewhat closer to the truth. He wrote:² "Considering all of the data it seems very likely that the Higgs site represents materials from the Plate Fleet Wreck of 1715 and/or the pirate's hangout of the following year.

"It must also be borne in mind that Indians, possibly Ais, were associated with the site, probably drawn there by the wrecks."

He was led to this conclusion because this position agreed generally with a map of east Florida made in 1774 by Bernard Romans,³ an English historian and mapmaker, which bears an interesting note at the San Sebastian River indicating that the Plate Fleet of 1715 was wrecked, in part, at that point. This is in the immediate area of the Higgs site.

Smith says, "In the year following the Plate Fleet wreck, 1716, Spanish sources mention a pirate's hangout at Palmar of Ays,⁴ which is probably to equated with "el Palmar" shown on the Romans map and which is also in the immediate vicinity of the Higgs site."

The publication of these two papers, one in 1942 and the other in 1949, attracted little attention except among those scholars interested in the anthropological and archeological history of Florida. Any would-be treasure seekers failed to associate the significance of these surveys with the fabulous riches which must still exist in the sunken hulls offshore.

It was only after a hurricane in 1955 which carried away about 15 feet of the sand bank facing the shore and uncovered coins and other evidences of the ancient shipwrecks, that Kip Wagner, a housebuilder who lived in the

² See "Two Archeological Sites in Brevard County, Florida" — The Higgs Site (Br 1) —by Hale G. Smith, Florida Anthropological Society Publications, U. of Fla., Gainesville 1949.

³ Concise Natural History of East and West Florida and accompanying charts—Bernard Romans 1774.

⁴ From an unpublished bibliography on the area by Charles D. Higgs.

vicinity a good share of his life, became curious as to their origin and learned the story of the lost Plate Fleet. He obtained a metal detector and started a search which led him to a re-discovery of the site. Within a half acre he turned up clusters of cannon balls, ships spikes, quantities of broken earthenware, bits of melted gold, and even a pair of cutlasses buried in the sand. A gold ring set with a large, crudely cut diamond and smaller stones was one of the most exciting finds.

His curiosity aroused as to what might lie in the offshore waters, he set out to organize a search first by plane and then by boat. Since then Kip Wagner and his associates who later joined him in forming the Real "8" Company, Inc. and obtaining leases from the state of Florida to work these areas, have located several and salvaged two of the lost Plate ships retrieving an unbelievable treasure in gold and silver coins and bullion, rare Chinese porcelains still intact, jewelry, religious medals, and a wide variety of ships' parts and equipments.

The fleet which yielded these treasures was known as the "Combined Armada of 1715." It was organized by the Spanish government at the port of Cadiz in 1713 just following the end of the War of the Spanish Succession which had caused the postponement of the regular yearly sailing of the Plate Fleet for several years. Because there were not enough Naval vessels available for the undertaking, the King had given orders to make up the balance by letting contracts to private owners. These *registros*, as they were known, were in charge of Don Antonio de Echebera y Zubiza, while Don Juan Esteban de Ubilla was designated leader of the *flota*.

During the more than two hundred years that the Spanish had been carrying the wealth of the New World to Spain, it had become the custom for the fleets to split upon reaching the western side of the Atlantic, the Galeones de Tierra Firme, or Mainland Fleet, going to Cartagena and Portobello in New Granada and Panama, and the *Flota* heading for Vera Cruz in New Spain. From the South American ports the *Galeones* would pick up shipments of gold, silver and jewels, while the *Flota* at Vera Cruz collected the gold and silver of Mexico as well as the treasures from the Orient which arrived there by muleback after a long voyage across the Pacific from Manila in the Philippines to Acapulco.

Finally rendezvousing at Havana, the combined fleets would prepare for the final voyage back to Spain, generally north through the Bahama channel

and then northeast past Bermuda to the home port. It was this final leg of the voyage which so often spelled disaster, for even though they were able to navigate the dangerous Gulf Stream, passage between the Bahamas and the reefs which bordered the Florida coast in good sailing weather, it was quite another story when the clumsy ships were caught in the violent winds and seas of a hurricane. And strangely, most sailings from Havana seemed to take place during the hurricane season from July to October.

True to form, the 1715 Combined Armada of eleven ships finally completed its preparations and set sail from Havana on July 24th. On July 30th the fleet passed the mouth of the Bahama Channel where it was overtaken by "one of those frightening air flurries that are common to the circular course of an irresistible hurricane," according to Spanish historian Fernandez Duro.⁵

The peak of the hurricane struck about 2 A. M. on July 31st with a violent wind from the east north east while the fleet was offshore between the St. Lucie river and Cape Canaveral. Of the eleven ships in the fleet only one survived, the French *Grifon* which had been forced to accompany the flotilla from Vera Cruz so that the fleet's whereabouts would not be betrayed to enemy ships. She was evidently far enough east to make it possible for her to keep clear of the cape.

According to Duro's report of the ten ships that were lost, *La Francesa* and *San Miguel* under Echevera disappeared completely in the high waves, while the remaining eight were crushed in the shallow waters of Palmar de Ays on Cape Canaveral. General Ubilla and possibly a thousand others died.

The *Capitana*, flagship of the Commanding General, was lost with General Ubilla and 225 persons; and the *Almiranta*,⁶ flagship of the Admiral under Ubilla, ran aground only a stone's throw from the coast with the loss of 123 men. *Almiranta* of Echevera completely broke up with the loss of 124 men. *Nuestra Señora de la Concepción*, which was captained by Don Manuel de Echevera, son of the Commander, disappeared with the loss of 135 men. *Urca de Lima* ended up in the mouth of a river but lost 35 men. *Nuestra Señora del Carmen*, which was known as *La Holandesa* under Don Antonio de Echevera was set on land and did not suffer. Two *pataches* or

⁵ "Armada Española" by Cesareo Fernandez Duro. Madrid, 1900, Vol. 6.

⁶ Capitana and Almiranta were names given to the flagships of the General and Admiral who were first and second in command of the fleet.

patrol vessels which completed the flotilla went down with a loss of 37. Fortunately, a section of the deck of one became detached and acted as a raft for those who survived.

Gradually the survivors rallied in an area close to where, it is thought, the *Capitana* had been driven on a bar just off the shore. From the littered beaches they gathered up planks and broken sea stores which had floated ashore and set up rude shelters. Taking charge of the tremendous task of survival on this barren shore for the fortunate ones who had escaped with their lives, the surviving admiral of the *flota*, Don Francisco Salmon, set men to digging wells for fresh water, gathering supplies and setting up a camp for the injured.

He chose Captain Sebastian Mendez of the lost *La Holandesa* to head a party which was sent to notify the Spanish settlement at St. Augustine 120 miles north of their predicament. Meanwhile a second long boat was prepared to make the long voyage back to Havana to alert the authorities there of the disaster which had overtaken the fleet.

Mendez carried a letter from the Admiral to the Governor General of St. Augustine, Don Sanfrisco de Corioles de Martinez, asking for food and clothing and tools to begin salvage of the capital ship which lay on her side just off the beach near the encampment. He wrote that the situation at the Royal Camp was very poor with the survivors eating dogs, cats, horses and the vile berries of the palmettos.

Upon his arrival at St. Augustine Mendez testified to officials there according to a deposition found in the Archives of Spain, "that although he has sailed the seas for many years and suffered through many tempests he has never seen another like it in violence, and his ship and all the rest were lost, some before and some after Palmar de Ays, at 28 degrees 10 minutes (north latitude) . . . in an area nine leagues (27 miles) from north to south." Palmar de Ays, apparently a large palm grove, was a familiar landmark to navigators along the coast.

It was two weeks after the loss of the Plate Fleet before Havana learned of the disaster. The exhausted couriers in the long boat finally reached their destination in the early hours of the morning of August 15th. A relief expedition was immediately organized by the Governor under the command of

Sergeant Juan del Hayo Solarzano with orders to aid the more than a thousand survivors and to recover as much as possible of the 14 million pesos which had gone down with the ships. It was composed of one frigate and seven sloops.

For the next few years the Spanish maintained their shoreside camp while they worked at recovering what they could of the lost treasure. Meanwhile we may be sure, all who were not needed for this tremendous task were sent back to Havana or on to St. Augustine, for the logistics of maintaining and feeding such a number of people on that isolated sandy shore was difficult. There were also the disciplinary problems of keeping order among these stranded adventurers and dealing with their attempts to conceal portions of the recovered treasure for themselves.

The authorities in St. Augustine also had to be dealt with. Florida was probably Spain's poorest province in the New World, and it was considered unpopular duty to be stationed there. With such wealth lying at their very doorstep, naturally they expected a share of it to be channeled through their own settlement. To their dismay, orders were received that all that was recovered was to be returned to Havana for reshipment to Spain.

The work of underwater salvage must have been difficult for there was little equipment available for the purpose. The salvagers soon found that most of the ships were in such shallow water close to shore that much of the time they were hampered by heavy surge, breaking seas and little visibility. Or if the vessels had gone down further off shore in deeper water, the only way of reaching the cargo was by skindiving without air or by utilizing a crude diving bell which provided an airspace underwater into which the diver could stick his head now and then and gulp a breath of air. As few of the Spaniards had any experience in handling themselves under water, they relied chiefly upon the skill of Indian divers who were brought in to do their diving for them. Duro says they worked chiefly upon the *Capitana* and *Almiranta* which lay near the shore in fairly shallow water. These ships also carried the bulk of the treasure.

By August 1716 the first shipment of the recovered wealth had arrived safely in Cadiz. In all, the salvors succeeded in recovering for the Crown about four million pesos, "...but it was observed, in view of the almost

sudden increment of currency circulation that the corsairs did not care whether the public treasury benefited or not.”⁷

Surprisingly, it had not taken long for news of the shipwreck to travel to all the ports of that then remote part of the world. Soon after the first rescue ships arrived from Havana, even while the Spaniards were diving upon the stranded vessels, (like the earlier time in 1687 when Capt. William Phips of Boston worked at recovering the treasure of a Spanish Plate ship on the Silver Shoals), small sailing craft appeared from nowhere to dive upon the outlying wrecks to salvage whatever they could reach. The Spanish salvors however after a few unsuccessful forays, gave up trying to drive off these petty pilferers. They were too busy with the aid of the Indian divers recovering and storing the wealth of the galleons they were working on.

There was little difference between pirate and privateer in those days when England, Spain and France were in almost constant struggle. By 1716 the war of the Spanish Succession had been over more than three years, yet the pirate Henry Jennings,⁸ who had carried a patent from Jamaica to act as a privateer during the war, still terrorized the seas from Jamaica, his former headquarters, to the northernmost part of the Bahamas from his base at the pirate stronghold of New Providence.

Waiting until the Spaniards had labored for months to accumulate a storehouse full of the sunken treasure, Jennings gathered together a small fleet of two brigs and three long ships and with 300 men set out to attack the Spanish settlement and secure the treasure. His informers had already told him that the hoard was guarded by two commissaries and a detachment of about 60 soldiers, and that most of the encampment would be dispersed at the various diving locations. So it was not difficult to surprise the Spanish, kill or scare away the guardians of the storehouse, and make off with the 340,000 pesos it contained.

A series of small raids and the increasing difficulty of reaching the remaining treasure now locked in inaccessible parts of the lost ships which were rapidly breaking up in the succession of storms which followed year after year finally brought an end to the official recovery efforts. It is thought

⁷ “History of the Island of Cuba” by Don Jacobo de la Pezuela.

⁸ “A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates” published 8 years after the event.

about one-half of the treasure was salvaged. No doubt for many years thereafter, the bones of whatever wrecks could be reached would continue to be picked and repicked from hundreds of small craft.

After the eastern shore of Florida became more settled late in the following century, it became commonplace for miles along the beaches to pick up coins and other small objects from the sunken treasure fleet which had by that time disappeared completely beneath the surface of the sea. The finders had little idea from whence they came. For, on the shore where the Spanish camp had stood, the storehouse which protected the treasure and the crude barracks and other shelters had gradually fallen apart and disappeared beneath the ever encroaching sand and jungle growth. Even the wells which had been sunk and lined with wooden hogsheads joined with pitch vanished beneath the accumulation of detritus.

For years the outer dunes built higher as the southeast prevailing winds swept in from the sea. Then would come another hurricane whose raging waves tore into the beaches gouging out great areas of the sandy bank, spreading both sand and the artifacts it covered thinly over the wasted beach.

I drove out A-1-A from Vero Beach toward Sebastian Inlet to see for myself the location of the Spanish camp. I found it 15 miles north, where the barrier beach was so narrow that the road clung to the inner western edge close to the waters of the Indian River. I had been told that because of the narrowness of the beach at this particular point, Indians, and later white settlers had used it as a haulover for boats between the two bodies of water. A shallow ditch and then a gradual upward grade led to the top of the sand bluff between me and the sea. It was thickly covered with palmetto, sea grape, yucca and cabbage palm.

To reach the sea I had to pick my way along a crude path pitted here and there with almost overgrown excavations where thoughtless treasure hunters in recent years had slashed and dug at the thickly rooted undergrowth in their searches for the remains of the Spanish camp. In places I could see that a bulldozer had been used. A blast of wind and a whirl of sand met me at the top. Rows of white breakers roared in upon the beach below, and just offshore several hundred yards to the southeast a yellow buoy bobbed marking the last resting place of the *Capitana* which was said to have carried three and a half million in silver. To my right was the Higgs site, and some

yards to my left was the 300-foot stretch that Mr. McLarty had presented to the State.

This was the beach where Kip Wagner⁹ had made his first discovery of coins from the 1715 wrecks. Since then he had located and gone on to salvage the ballast-strewn remains of General Ubilla's flagship which lay parallel to the shore directly in front of me beneath the frothing surf. He had recovered a wealth of coins and bullion, precious porcelain from China and choice pieces of jewelry—a treasure trove which had rewarded its finders with more than a million dollars in present day values.

According to Florida State law, 25 per cent of any treasure trove must become the property of the State, and it is this priceless collection which will provide the first displays in the interpretive museum which the State plans to build on the McLarty site. The exhibits will also include a sampling of the artifacts previously uncovered on the Spanish campsite as well as those which will undoubtedly be found in the course of further excavations.

Carl J. Clausen, marine archeologist for the State Board of Antiquities, who was instrumental in arousing Mr. McLarty's interest in contributing the shore property, was delegated to begin a preliminary survey in August 1966 for the Florida State Museum which included the clearing and mapping of the property and preparations for excavation. Using standard archeological procedures, he plans to develop the cultural history of the site. It is his belief that the property donated by Mr. McLarty encompasses a large segment of the north end of the 1715 camps. The south end or Higgs site which was studied scientifically in the 1940's by both Charles Higgs and Dr. Hale Smith, is presently owned by a number of people, and will not be a part of the State Memorial park.

Mr. Clausen became associated with recovery efforts of the lost treasure ships in 1964 when he was assigned by the Trustees of the Internal Improvement Fund as a diving archeologist to accompany a salvage group under search and salvage lease No. 1329. The wreck which turned out to be one of the 1715 Fleet was located about three nautical miles south of Fort Pierce Inlet. He has published an account of the salvage of this wreck¹⁰ which he

⁹ "Drowned Galleons off Florida Yield Spanish Gold" by Kip Wagner, *National Geographic*, January 1965.

¹⁰ "A 1715 Spanish Treasure Ship," by Carl J. Clausen, *Contributions of the Florida State Museum, Soc. Sc. No. 12, U. of Fla. Gainesville* 1965.

believes to be one of the five vessels of the *Flota* under the command of the General Don Esteban de Ubilla which was loaded at Vera Cruz.

Since that time Mr. Clausen has been closely associated with the fast changing developments within the State including the creation of the Board of Antiquities by the Florida Legislature which was designated to take over supervision of the salvage operations from the Trustees of the Internal Improvement Fund.