



The Curse of the 1715-Spanish Plate Fleet: Run Aground on the Coast of Treasure

Jim Willis

On July 24, 1715, a convoy of 11 Spanish ships and one French merchantman set sail from Havana, Cuba to Spain. It was called a “Plate Fleet” because their cargo consisted of valuable treasure looted from the so-called “New World”. *Plata* is the Spanish name for silver coins that made up much of the wealth stored in their holds. Thus, it was a *Plata*, or “Plate” fleet. Generally, two such fleets sailed every year. The *Flota de Tierra Firme* traveled from Spain to Cartagena and Panama, carrying various trade goods and necessities. The *Flota de Nueva España* went to Veracruz. For safety, the two fleets often stayed together until they reached the Caribbean.

It was on the return voyage that problems usually developed. The ships were by then loaded with gold and silver, jewelry, tobacco, spices, and indigo, and were a rich prize for marauding pirates and privateers. By the time they sailed east, the crews were tired and usually sick from tropical diseases, malnutrition, and horrible hygienic conditions on board. All this made them vulnerable to attack. If all this was not bad enough, however, there was another unstable element in the equation. The return trip was apt to run into the hurricane season. Traveling west during the summer, the Atlantic was usually calm, with gently prevailing winds, but in the fall, as anyone knows who lives anywhere near the southeast coast of the United States, tropical storm season can be a tough time beginning in late August. Especially in the days before accurate weather reports, hurricanes could blow up suddenly, without advance warning. The results were often devastating.

Proclamation of Philippe of Anjou as Philippe V of Spain, Versailles, 16 November 1700 by François Pascal Simon Gérard (Public Domain)



War of the Spanish Succession

By 1715, the pattern was well-known to seafaring voyagers. Yet when the fleet sailed, it was only days before the hurricane season was set to begin, and all the captains knew it. That year, the fleet, for a number of reasons, had been delayed by two years in the Caribbean, so their official excuse was that they were attempting to escape marauding pirates and privateers anxious to steal their valuable cargo, but there was also an unspoken and unwritten reason.

Between the years 1688 and 1715, Louis XIV of France had adopted a policy of rapid expansion. Europe was thus ravaged by two expensive wars. Because wars were often fought at sea, they naturally disrupted trade between the Americas and various nations of Europe, one of them being Spain.

The War of the Grand Alliance, ended in 1697 with the Treaty of Ryswick. But another soon began in 1701. This second war, the War of Spanish Succession, came about because of infighting over who was to rule Spain. King Carlos II had died without producing an heir. On his deathbed, he named Philippe, the grandson of Louis XIV of France, as his successor. This created a political problem. Leopold I, the Holy Roman Emperor, wanted his son, Archduke Charles, to wear the crown, and sought to prevent an alliance between France and Spain.



Battle of Vigo Bay 1702, by Ludolf Bakhuizen (Public Domain)

War soon broke out. England and Holland were on one side. Spain, France, Portugal, Bavaria, and Savoy were allied on the other. To finance these wars, Spain was extremely dependent on wealth from its colonies in the New World. Many of the

battles were fought at sea, often by privateers who received Letters of Marque to attack and capture any vessels that might contain loot for the coffers of their sponsoring government. The oceans were no longer safe for commerce. Trade between Spain and the Americas was virtually suspended. Spain suffered major defeats by the English navy.

This War of Spanish Succession came to a close in 1715, with a series of treaties known collectively as the Peace of Utrecht. England and France together agreed that Philippe, the grandson of Louis XIV of France, would, indeed, ascend the throne of Spain, but he would have to renounce his rights to any power in France. In the New World, England would be given Newfoundland, the island of St. Christopher, and the territory surrounding Hudson Bay.

Portrait of Queen Elizabeth of Spain in later years (Public Domain)



The Allure of the Queen's Dowry

The fighting may have ended, except for the marauding hordes of pirates who wanted to capitalize on the new-found trade routes opening up, but Spain needed money badly, and not just to bolster its sagging economy. There was a more pressing reason, as far as Philippe, the new king of Spain, was concerned. His first wife Maria Luisa of Savoy, had died in February 1714 and he wanted to marry Elizabeth of Parma, making her Queen of Spain. Elizabeth was no shrinking violet.

Utilizing the only power most women could employ back in those extremely patriarchal days, she requested ("demanded" might be a better word) a sizable dowry of precious jewelry and gems of various kinds. To put it bluntly, she was not going to come across without being well-paid up front.

Her requests had included a heart made of 130 pearls, 14-carat pearl earrings, a pure coral rosary with large-sized beads, and an emerald ring weighing 74 carats - destined to become an important mystery. King Philippe had thus requisitioned more than 1,200 pieces of rare jewelry from the Americas as a dowry for Elizabeth. With the fleet delayed for two years, he was, perhaps understandably, anxious. They were under orders to hurry things along. That might explain the "unwritten reason" mentioned earlier.



Ships laden with treasure ready to set sail to Spain (MVProductions/Adobe Stock)

Setting Sail for Spain

Whatever the case, Spain was in economic need of financial relief, so the 11 ships making up the Plate Fleet made ready to sail from Havana in the summer of 1715. The *Escuadrón de Tierra Firme*, under the command of Capitán de Mar y Guerra Don Antonio de Echeverz y Zubiza, and the *Flota de Nueva España*, under the command of General Don Juan Esteban de Ubilla, began preparations for the trip back to the home country, after a two-year delay. The fleet's cargo was estimated at 15 million silver *piastres* ("pieces of eight") and untold wealth in jewels and precious gems. Because Spain funneled so much New World wealth into the coffers of European countries, it might be said that the whole economy of Europe was held in the balance. Little did the fleet commanders know that 200 miles away their fate was forming in the south Atlantic.

On July 24, the ships put to sea, intending to round the coast of Florida, pick up the gulf stream east to Bermuda, and then head for Spain. Protected by two huge ships of some 200 guns each, they felt no great fear of pirates. They expected a safe passage as they left Havana harbor in the early morning of a beautiful, calm day, blown forth on a gentle breeze.

The weather held for five days and they had no indication of a rapidly approaching killer storm. On July 29, huge swells started to appear from the southeast. The atmosphere was soon heavy with moisture and the sun shone through a gathering haze. The ships began to dip and roll. Experienced navigators, pilots, and old hands alike, were very concerned. They knew that these were the early signs of an impending tropical storm, traveling northwest, and now situated southeast of the convoy.

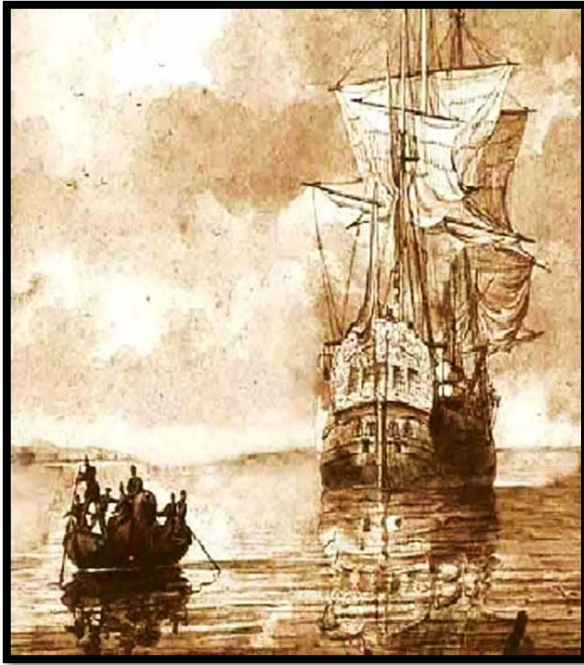
Originally, the HMS Hampton was captured by the French and then sold to the Spanish in 1712 and renamed Capitana. She was wrecked in the 1715-hurricane, by Willem van de Velde the younger (1707) Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (CC BY-SA 3.0)



Into the Storm

By nightfall the hurricane changed course, heading west, directly into the path of the soon foundering convey. On the morning of July 30, as the ships sailed off the coast of Florida, winds picked up. By midday they had increased to over 20 knots, and then to over 30 knots. The waves were some 20 feet (six meters) high, driving the fleet closer and closer to shore.

All ships were commanded to head directly into the wind to avoid the treacherous reefs, but it was too late. At 4 am on July 31, the hurricane struck the doomed ships, driving one after another onto the deadly reefs. There they stacked up, helpless in the face of the storm. The entire Spanish fleet was lost, and of the 2,500 passengers and crew, over 1,000 died.



One ship survived the storm (CC0)

One ship survived to tell the tale. The French warship Griffon, under the command of Captain Antoine d'Aire, had headed towards the northeast, directly into the storm, and arrived in Brest, on the coast of Brittany, on August 31, 1715. Even still, d'Aire was unaware that all the Spanish ships had perished.

Bedraggled Survivors

A few people managed to survive being washed up on the shore of Florida, near present-day Vero Beach. To this day, that stretch of dunes and sand is called the Treasure Coast, due to the valuable artifacts that still wash up on beaches when frequent storms wash away sand, exposing the treasure that lies beneath. In those days, however, the land was inhospitable, at least to Europeans unused to living under those conditions. The survivors found themselves in a land infested with disease-carrying mosquitoes, rattlesnakes, wild animals, and hostile Indians, who saw the place not as an inhospitable wasteland, but home. The Europeans were stranded, far from what they would call civilization, without food, fresh water, or badly needed medical supplies.

The morning of July 31 revealed the full extent of the disaster. The beaches of the land they called *la Florida* were littered with flotsam of the broken ships and bodies. The dazed and bedraggled survivors could hardly comprehend what had happened to them. Wreckage was scattered over many miles, so it was impossible to immediately discern the extent of the tragedy. Many injured survivors died every day, adding to the already devastating number of casualties. Eventually, on August 6, it was decided to send Nicolas de India, a pilot, and 18 men, in a launch toward the island of Cuba. Their mission was to contact the governor, Vicente de Raja. The boat reached Havana 11 days later. Shortly after, ships were readied for the task of rescuing the survivors and salvaging what they could.



Rare 8 escudos lima dated 1710, recovered from the 1715 Fleet (Augi Garcia/CC BY-SA 3.0)

Right away the rescue fleet showed some success. They dragged the sea bottom, bringing up chests of coins, jewelry, and gold. Ships from St. Augustine, some miles north, arrived to help in the recovery effort. By the early weeks of September, the salvage attempt was so successful that 25 armed soldiers were sent to guard the accumulating wealth. By the end of October, over five million pieces of eight had been recovered along with gold, jewelry, and a great portion of the King's treasure. Salvage attempts continued for the next three years, but by then the news had spread like wildfire, attracting unwanted scavengers.

Pirates Smelling Booty

In January of 1716, the notorious pirate Henry Jennings attacked the camp from his 40-ton sloop *Barsheba*, and John Wills arrived on the scene with his 35-ton *Eagle*. Both were under orders of the governor of Jamaica. They commandeered the Spanish salvage camp at Palmar de Ays, detaining the defenders and looting the camp, making off with 120,000 pieces of eight and other valuables, as well as two bronze cannon and two large iron guns.



Jack Rackham from "A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates", published 1725 (Public Domain)

When they returned to port with their treasure, so many people came down with treasure fever that it might be said their voyage gave rise to what is now called the Age of Piracy. Notorious figures of the era, such as Edward Teach (Blackbeard), 'Calico' Jack Rackham, and Charles Vane raided the Florida wrecks throughout 1716. By 1717, the pirates had expanded their operations, working out of their center of operations in the Bahamas, to cover the entire Caribbean Sea and north along the American coastline all the way to Maine. Would these men have congregated in the Bahamas, forming a notorious base of piratical activities, had they not been tempted by the loss of the Plate Fleet? No one knows.

In any event, other such attacks were conducted, some by privateers and others by out-and-out pirates. The Spanish finally abandoned their operations in 1718, but immense wealth remained on the ocean floor. Some of the rotted hulks were clearly visible, protruding above water at low tide. For years to follow, ships sailing these waters would "fish" for treasure, and even to this day, people carrying metal detectors walk the beaches, some finding treasure indeed.

The Queen's Emerald Ring

Gary Drayton, who rose to fame as the chief metal detector on the television series *The Curse of Oak Island*, dowsed this area regularly, and recently displayed for viewers what he calls his "precious," the emerald ring he believes was part of the dowry of Queen Elizabeth of Parma.

By the way, she did finally consent to the marriage, and managed to establish quite a reputation, especially after the death of her husband. But the emerald ring she demanded now has another home. It belongs to Mrs. Drayton, the "queen" of Gary's home.



Shipwreck on the bottom of the ocean (Outlier Artifacts/ Adobe Stock)

Salvage and Treasure Hunters

As often happens, the story eventually faded from memory. But 250 years later it was brought back into the headlines, and the curse began to work once more. It is known that three ships were never found by the Spaniards. General Juan Estban de Ubilla's frigate, the *Santa Rita y Animas*, bought in Havana on July 15, 1715, was one of them. Two ships believed to have been part of the *Tierra Firme Fleet*, the *El Señor San Miguel* and the French *El Ciervo*, were the others. All three carried immense wealth down to the bottom with them.

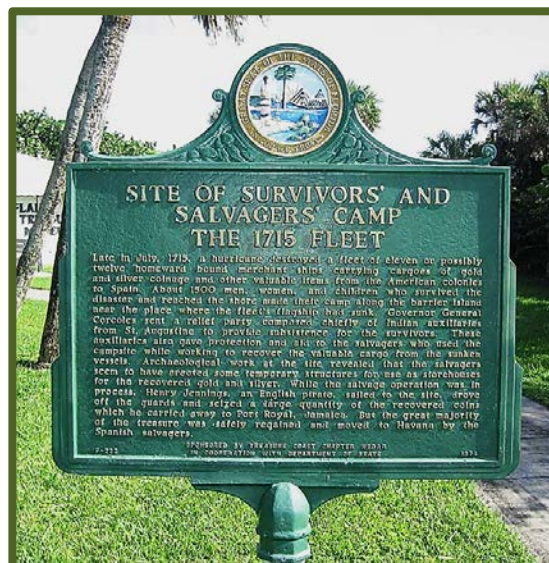
No one can identify for sure which rotting hulk belongs to which name on the manifest back in Cuba, but it is known there are more out there, and treasure still washes up on the beaches from Vero Beach to Cape Canaveral. That is enough to keep real treasure seekers going, which explains why salvage operations sparked new flames in the 1950s.



8 reales Mexican silver cob, full date 1715, recovered from the 1715 fleet (Augi Garcia/CC BY-SA 3.0)

Technology had made great strides by then, so when Kip Wagner, a building contractor from Ohio, discovered a Spanish coin worth eight *reales* on a beach near Sebastian Inlet, Florida, he spent several months combing the beaches between Sebastian and Wabasso on Florida's east coast. He managed to find and uncover the original Spanish salvage camp. Along the way he discovered other coins and artifacts. He even discovered the underwater hulk of the *Capitana*, another nearby wreck, across from the Sebastian River, then called the Ays River. Wagner obtained a salvage permit from the state of Florida, and in 1961, along with his friend Dr Kip Kelso, organized the Real Eight Corporation, also known as The Real 8 Company. He tells his story, and a lot more about the 1715 tragedy, in his book, *Pieces of Eight*.

Historical marker designating the site of the Survivors' and Salvagers' Camp - 1715 Orchid Island, Florida (Leonard J. DeFrancisci/ CC BY-SA 3.0)



Every treasure worth its salt has at least one treasure map, and the lost treasure from the 1715 fleet is no exception. In 1781, a map claiming to be drafted by Bernard Romans in 1774 shows the Sebastian River in Florida with the following notation: *“Opposite this River, perished the Admiral commanding the Plate Fleet 1715, the rest of the Fleet 14 in number. Between this & ye Bleech Yard.”* This note is accompanied by the place name “El Palmar,” and features a drawing consisting of five palm trees.

The bulk of the remaining treasure to be found from the Plate Fleet of 1715 is probably beyond the reach of most casual treasure seekers. But the fact that some of it still occasionally washes up on the shores of Florida’s “Treasure Coast” after a storm is enough to keep the hopes of seekers alive. Hurricanes, the “evil spirits of the wind,” are a yearly reminder of the curse that plagued both the fleet and the fortunes of those who came under the spell of the gold it carried.

Top Image: AI generated image of a ship in a storm (Stream Skins / Adobe Stock)