

# What makes us the TREASURE COAST?







**Above:** A solid gold reliquary locket with multiple chains, one of many artifacts recovered from the 1715 Spanish fleet, is also on display.

**Right:** A two-handed vessel recovered from the 1715 Spanish Fleet Cannon wreck site may have been used in a communion ceremony and was found along with 40 pieces of silver in 1994.



## FIRST IN A SERIES

**Editor's note:** Three hundred years ago, one of the worst maritime disasters in history left a lasting mark on the area we now call the Treasure Coast. Throughout July, we will commemorate the anniversary of the 1715 Treasure Fleet catastrophe through a series of stories, photographs and videos, and share how the event continues to influence our lives today.

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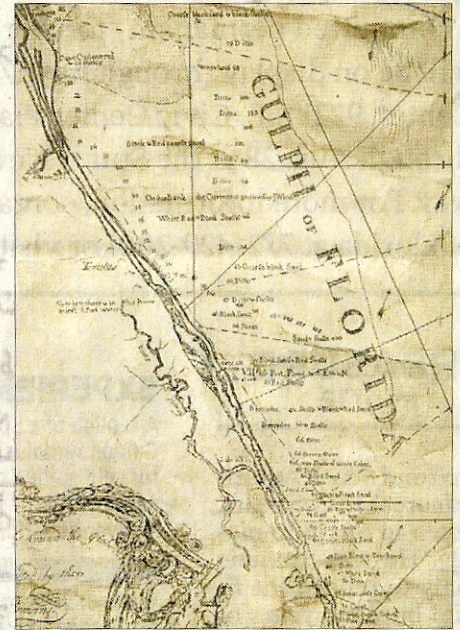
It was a tragic accident.

One of the worst maritime disasters in history — that's how we got our Treasure Coast moniker.

Three hundred years ago, a fleet of treasure-laden ships crashed on the shore between Sebastian and northern Martin County.

Treasure fleets had been making annual trips from Spain to the New World to fortify Europe's finances for almost two centuries. Then the ferocious naval battles of the War of Spanish Succession and greedy pirates impeded the safe passage of the fleets, halting the vital flow of New World treasure and, according to local historian Patrick Mesmer, leaving Spain close to bankruptcy.

"Years of war took a toll on the economy. These were desperate times," said Mesmer, who has been studying the



SAM WOLFE/TREASURE COAST NEWSPAPERS

This map of the Treasure Coast from hundreds of years ago is displayed at the McLarty Treasure Museum in Vero Beach.

disaster for 30 years and is a docent at the House of Refuge Museum in Stuart and the author of two historic novels.

In 1715, shortly after a treaty was signed to end the war, the newly married king of Spain, Philip V, ordered two loaded treasure fleets, which had been waiting in what we now know as

See **TREASURE, 2E**



## TREASURE from 1E

Mexico and South America for more than two years, to return to Spain immediately. He was anxious not only to relieve the financial burdens years of war cost his country, but also to receive his queen's dowry.

Queen Elisabeth would not consummate the marriage until her treasures, which included chests full of jewelry such as a 74-carat emerald ring, a heart of 130 pearls, and a rosary of pure coral, were in hand.

### SETTING SAIL

According to the Queens Jewels, LLC, a group of historic shipwreck salvors focused on the 1715 fleet, two separate fleets, one of five ships, known as the New Spain Flota, loaded with gold, silver and emeralds from Mexico; the other, a convoy of six vessels known as the Tierra Firme, carrying chests of silver and gold and pearls from South America, convened in Havana, Cuba. A Spanish outpost at the time, the vessels met there to regroup, restock and combine forces for the long voyage back to Spain and its restless king. A French warship, the Grifon, sailed with the fleet as a patrol ship to protect against piracy.

Together, the flotilla of 12 ships, mostly galleons — tall-masted, square-rigged,

multi-decked wooden sailboats specifically designed with shallow hulls and rounded bottoms to hold and haul as much treasure as possible — became known as the Plate Fleet. The flotilla set sail for Spain at sunrise July 24, 1715. The estimated value of its cargo varies due to a great amount of undocumented treasure thought to be onboard. Because of a high tax imparted by the king, some salvors and historians believe contraband, hidden in cannons, barrels and elsewhere may be equal to or greater than the documented treasure. Mesmer said he has heard estimates between \$200 million and \$1 billion in today's dollars.

It was five days of smooth sailing for the almost 2,500 people on board as the fleet slowly sailed on gentle breezes

and the natural currents of the Gulf stream. Experienced officers and crew members sensed the proverbial calm before the storm July 29, when winds became so placid, the majestic ships were almost still in the gray sea and captains' logs tell of a strange silence.

Before radar, crew members climbed masts more than 100 feet in the air to the ships' crow's nests to take watch. Sea birds, which usually accompanied the ships for miles, were nowhere to be seen.

Through the night, the storm encroached and the swells and winds grew stronger. The massive wooden vessels groaned and creaked as they dipped and rolled. Cargo was jarred loose and rolled about the decks. As apprehensions grew, so did the

## EXPERIENCE A GALLEON

A replica of a Spanish galleon, the 170-foot, 495-ton El Galéon Andaluía, will be docked in St. Augustine and open for self-guided tours in September. Four of the five decks are open to the public and the Spanish sailors aboard will answer questions.

### EL GALEÓN ANDALUCÍA

**Where:** St. Augustine Municipal Marina, 111 Avenida Menendez (next to the Bridge of Lions)

**Hours:** 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily, starting early September

**Tickets:** Adults \$15; youth ages 5 to 12 \$8; children younger than age 5 admitted free

**Discounts:** Veterans receive a \$2 discount per ticket.

Groups of five or more receive a \$2 off per ticket.

**Purchase:** [www.elgaleon.org](http://www.elgaleon.org) or at the dock; at the Ripley's Red Train booth located at the marina; and at all Old Town Trolley Tours ticket booths located throughout the downtown area.

choruses of prayer.

The next day the skies grew dark by early afternoon. Visibility was so poor, the fleet lit its lanterns to try to guide each other into the wind, away from the storm and clear of the jagged reef and shoals of our coast.

They were unsuccessful.

### SURVIVORS

Before sunrise on July 31, the storm, which might be categorized as a Category 3 or 4 hurricane by today's standards, hit the fleet full force, toppling masts and scattering the fleet. Some of the wooden vessels were capsized by mammoth waves, some ran aground, some disappeared, most disintegrated, crushed like matchsticks on the rocks. Except for the Grifon, which strayed from the official course early on and survived, the entire fleet was lost. Accounts vary, but between 700 to 1,000 people died that night.

As dawn broke, the hurricane was over and the estimated 1,500 survivors tried to assess the scope of the catastrophe. Wreckage and lifeless bodies were strewn along 70 miles of the beaches we now enjoy. At the time, our shore was desolate, home to nothing more than rattlesnakes, disease-carrying mosquitoes and Ais Indians.

"Imagine the shark-feeding frenzy those people witnessed with bodies

floating everywhere," Mesmer said. "These people were at the very base of their humanity."

Salvaged lifeboats were used to seek aid from authorities in Havana and St. Augustine, but with no food, water, first aid or shelter from the sun, many perished before help arrived to the main survivor camp, now the site of the McLarty Treasure Museum in Vero Beach.

It was the end of August when several ships loaded with supplies and equipment began salvage efforts. Most of the treasure ships had wrecked in shallow enough waters for free divers to recover some of chests full of gold, silver and other riches. Word spread about the recovery and pirates also came to our coast.

The salvage operation was abandoned in 1719. Accounts of the recovery of the king's treasure vary from 30 to 80 percent.

Experts believe two-thirds of the bounty remained on our beaches.

### TODAY

Much of this story went untold until the early 1960s, when Kip Wagner, an Indian River County resident and amateur beachcomber, recovered a silver coin known as a piece of eight from the 1715 fleet near the Sebastian Inlet. Wagner did extensive research on the doomed fleet and, with the help of the Spanish Archives, began to tell the story.

Wagner formed a salvage crew with famed treasure hunter Mel Fisher and by the end of 1964 they had brought up about \$3 million in gold and silver coins, jewelry and artifacts from wreck sites in Sebastian and Fort Pierce.

Professional treasure hunters continue salvage efforts today finding gold, silver, cannons, porcelain and other items from seven known wreck sites.

Amateur treasure hunters continue to have success with metal detectors along the dune lines of our beaches. Steve Carr, a retired firefighter/paramedic and part-time history teacher, has found more than 1,000 artifacts over 30 years.

He found 14 coins on a St. Lucie County beach as recently as last winter.

"I'm not a treasure hunter," Carr said. "I'm a history hunter. You hold these artifacts in your hands and the story becomes reality. If we forget our history, we lose our way."

Today, millions of dollars of treasure remains unrecovered on our treasured coast, including the queen's jewels, although the queen eventually acquiesced to King Philip and bore seven children.

Our nickname was bestowed upon the tri-county area sometime in the mid-1960s, after Wagner and Fisher's discoveries. As far as who actually coined the phrase? That's another story.