

The *Nuestra Señora de las Nieves* and the Douglass Beach Wreck-Site

By  
Jorge Proctor

April 2021

## **The *Nuestra Señora de las Nieves* and the Douglass Beach wreck-site**

By Jorge A. Proctor © 2021

One of the biggest questions that remains about the loss of the 1715 Fleet is which ship ended up where?

Although at present all the known wreck-sites have been named for one ship or another, almost all the names assigned to these wrecks are tentative at best, with no clear evidence to confirm any of them. This brings us to the Douglass Beach wreck, located south of Fort Pierce Inlet, which today has been identified as the *Nuestra Señora de las Nieves y las Animas*, the *patache* of Don Francisco de Soto Sánchez. The Spaniards used the word *patache* to identify a small vessel often used as a dispatch-vessel, for reconnaissance, or for communication between the vessels of the fleet.

So, how was this wreck-site identified as the resting place of this, the *Nuestra Señora de las Nieves*?

It seems that this designation was a result of misrepresentation of the archival evidence by Robert F. Burgess.

In appendix D of the book *Gold, Galleons & Archaeology: The History of the 1715 Spanish Plate Fleet and the True Story of the Great Florida Treasure Find* by Robert F. Burgess & Carl J. Clausen, an archaeological report is included on the Douglass Beach wreck-site, known back then as the Colored Beach site. This report, entitled *Details and Analysis of the Recovered Treasure*, found on pages 167-174, was prepared sometime before the publication of this book in 1976 by the archeologist on site, and coauthor, Carl J. Clausen. This seems to be the second of two reports by Clausen, with the first report, a 49-page report entitled *A 1715 Spanish Treasure Ship*, published back in 1965 in Contributions of the Florida State Museum, Social Sciences Number 12. Where the first report includes all aspects of the items salvaged from this wreck in 1964, including: the cannons, cannonballs, navigational equipment, ceramics, etc., and many images of the material, this later report seems to limit its purview to the recovered treasure only, with no pictures included. But, from the report itself, it can be presumed that this was a later analysis from the 1965 report, and not just a summary or extract of it, as it now discusses in more details some of the markings on such material as the forks, for example. So, one can presume that this second report was probably made after the completion of the preservation of the artifacts identified in the 1965 report. Of most importance are the conclusions of Clausen, at the end of this report, for which he writes:

"Despite the lack of variety in common artefacts, those in the treasure category were unsurpassed. The recovered specimens provided first-hand evidence of what actually comprised treasure moving from the New World to Spain during this period. From the large number of Mexican-minted coins in the find, it appears that the wreck was one of the five vessels of the *Flota* under the command of Esteban de Ubilla which loaded at Vera Cruz. The size and number of cannon found indicated that it was probably one of the smaller vessels, possibly a *patache*, and since the small vessel had been badly broken up and its contents widely scattered, the early Spanish salvagers had missed getting this treasure."

So, with this, it seems clear that Clausen, from the evidence, had already concluded by this time that this was a vessel that had not been salvaged by the Spaniards. A fact clearly visible from the quantity of the material being salvaged and the location of this material on the wreck-site. If this site had been known to salvors at the time, their salvage would have to have been in the hands of blind divers, not only those employed by the Spaniards, but also those utilized by the English looters who also dove on the *Nuestra Señora de las Nieves*. It makes no sense for divers in shallow water to have missed so much exposed treasure, especially around the ballast pile.

We can certainly surmise that the evidence of this being a virgin wreck-site (un-salvaged by the Spaniards and the English) was being dismissed by the time of this book's publication. Although the book at no point identifies what it called the "Colored Beach" wreck-site directly as being the *Nuestra Señora de las Nieves*, it does do so indirectly, however. On page 44, during the narrative of the disaster, the author (again, likely Burgess) says that the "southernmost" wreck of the fleet was "the *Flota's patache*, the *Nuestra Señora de las Nieves...of Captain Soto Sanchez*". This is in fact not true. Miguel de Lima y Melo, on deposition, assigned this distinction on to his own vessel, the *Santísima Trinidad y Nuestra Señora de la Concepción*, nicknamed the "*Urca de Lima*".

Furthermore, continuing with the narrative on page 44, it goes on to say, "four miles up the coast, on the south side of the inlet, the Sanchez group met the Captain Miguel de Lima and his men, who were preparing to burn off the upper deck of the *Urca...*". Again, this "four miles up the coast" is clearly an interpretation of the author, and not something that is supported by the documentary evidence. In fact, when Miguel de Lima discussed this, he simply said that with their provisions, they were able to sustain, not only themselves, but those of the *patache* which lay two leagues away, without giving a north or south direction as to its location. To Lima, it would have not been necessary to say that this other wreck lay north, as he had already identified his own wreck as the most southern wreck.

These are all important details. But, if you were unaware of them or willfully ignore them, or even that the *patache* of Soto Sánchez had a salvage camp in front of it [AGI: Contratación, 641] and had been heavily salvaged by the Spaniards, and even English looters [AGI: Cádiz, 853], it does explain why the treasure hunters and divers still thought that the Douglass Beach wreck could have been the *Nuestra Señora de las Nieves*. The main concern at the time seems to have been placed on the desire not to leave any of the known wreck-sites as an unidentified 1715 fleet vessel. Carefully scrutinizing the facts of the story from the archival documents and thoroughly looking at the evidence from the archaeological reports at the time was not the name of the game. In the end, the proximity of Soto Sánchez's shipwreck to the *Urca de Lima* seems to have just been enough to make the claim that the Douglass Beach wreck was in fact the *Nuestra Señora de las Nieves*.

So, if the Douglass Beach wreck is not the *Nuestra Señora de las Nieves*, which ship is it?

The wreck provides indications as to its identity. Clausen's 1965 archaeological report includes: "Positive identification as to which vessel of the fleet the wreck represents is lacking. That the majority of the material in the category of treasure can be traced to Mexico may indicate that the wreck was one of the vessels of the *flota* sailing from Vera Cruz rather than one of the *registros*

of Echeverz. The small size of the cannon at the site probably indicates the vessel was not large.” This is further expanded on his later archaeological report to include: “From the large number of Mexican-minted coins in the find, it appears that the wreck was one of the five vessels of the *Flota* under the command of Esteban de Ubilla which loaded at Vera Cruz.”

Of General Juan Esteban de Ubilla's New Spain Fleet (*Flota de Nueva España*), only one of the five vessels was un-salvaged at the time, as its location remained unknown to the Spaniards. A document dated July 15, 1715, discovered by archaeologist and researcher Dr. John de Bry in the Cuban National Archives, *Protocolos Notariales* section, details the sale of a small frigate (*fragatilla*) named the *Santa Rita y las Animas*. This vessel, nicknamed *la Marigaleta*, had arrived in *San Cristóbal de la Habana* (Havana) from Santa Cruz de Tenerife in the Canary Islands, and was now being sold by his owner and captain, Don Felix de Acosta Hurtado, to General Ubilla.

The identification of the Douglass Beach wreck as Ubilla's small frigate, and even the location of the wreck-site of the *Nuestra Señora de las Nieves* as lying further north, is something that was previously explored by researcher Jack Haskins, who points out in his work, *The 1715 New Spain Flota and Tierra Firme Galleons History*, that: “If Lima's wreck was actually the wedge wreck which is located at 27 degrees 30 minutes latitude, we know that Ubilla's *patache* was two leagues or about six miles from it. We assumed that it would be the Colored Beach wreck, because it is located five to six miles south of it. However, there is a good possibility that Sandy Point is site of Ubilla's *Patache*, as it is located in 27d 36m 20s, which would also be six miles from the wedge wreck. If Sandy Point is the *patache*, this would make it right for Lima to say that he is the southern-most wreck. From the amount of gold found on the colored beach site it looks as if this ship was not well salvaged. It is certainly possible that it was one of the other wrecks, like the small frigate Ubilla bought in Havana, and there might not have been survivors and, thus, the reason its treasure was not salvaged.”

An early report had said that this small frigate had been lost, with no further news of survivors [AGI: Consulados, 855]. But in fact, there had been survivors. One of these was Father Francisco León y Cabrera, who was traveling in this vessel at the time of the sinking [AGI: Santo Domingo, 843]. He provided a deposition in St. Augustine on August 12, 1715, from which we know that after the purchase, Ubilla renamed this vessel *Nuestra Señora de Regla*, same as the principal name of his *Capitana* (flagship) and placed it under the command of Captain Francisco Ignacio Barriga. It becomes evident from this witness' account that the ultimate whereabouts of their ship had become unknown to them, since they had abandoned ship on the launch during the storm and not witnessed its sinking. They later asked, and were granted, permission to repair the launch from this vessel and with some naval personnel, use it to try to make it to St. Augustine, which they succeeded.

It is interesting to see the composition of treasure found on this wreck. The silver bar, gold and silver disks, the gold *Galanos* (the Mexican round gold coins) and even the presence, in quantity, of large denomination gold coins from Peru. These are all clear indications of the presence of Royal Treasure. None of this should be on such a small vessel. But rather, on the heavily guarded *Capitana* or *Almiranta* (the Capital ships, chosen specifically for the sole purpose of transporting this type of treasure). But the reason why it is here can be explained by knowing why Ubilla needed to purchase an additional vessel in Havana in the first place.

Upon departure from Spain in 1712, Ubilla's fleet included a vessel named the *San Juan Evangelista*. This 44-cannon vessel was sent to New Spain to augment the *Armada de Barlovento* (Windward Fleet), which had suffered the loss of its *Almiranta*, the *Santísima Trinidad y Nuestra Señora de Atocha*, in 1711. But, with its presence, Ubilla could now use it as an additional vessel to lighten the load of his *Capitana*. Upon turning over this vessel in New Spain, Ubilla immediately started looking for a replacement. From Lowell W. Newton's 1976 article, *Juan Esteban de Ubilla and the Flota of 1715*, we know that on October 10, 1713 Ubilla wrote to say that he wanted to purchase an old frigate of 279 tons. "Extensive lists...of the repair-work needed to make the ship seaworthy, and a very complete inspection was made of the hull, which below the waterline had been damaged by toredo worms". But Ubilla's first order of business upon his arrival to Veracruz had been to insult the General of the previous Fleet, Pedro de Ribera, and the Viceroy of New Spain, Don Francisco de Alencastre Noraña y Silva, Marquis of Valdefuentes and Duke of Linares, for which, despite Ubilla's enthusiasm, the Viceroy at the end decided against the sale of this vessel to him.

The quarrel between Ubilla and Ribera, and his disagreements with the Viceroy culminated with a letter sent by King Philip V to the Viceroy in the fall of 1714, where the monarch instructed that Ubilla do, in "all cases", what the Viceroy ordered, and further expressed a "loss of confidence" in the General.

In 1715, Ubilla was finally able to depart Veracruz, after having been there since December of 1712. Havana would be the last stop and the last opportunity for Ubilla to add another vessel to his fleet. Between Veracruz and Havana, misfortune struck again. One night, without explanation, as the winds were said to be "infrequent and tranquil," the top portion of the foremast of the *Capitana* snapped. This not only caused a longer trip to Havana, but also required new repairs to be conducted upon arrival. This now also caused a clash between the Commander of the *Tierra Firme* Squadron of merchant vessels (*Registros*), Master and Commander (*Capitán de Mar y Guerra*) Don Antonio de Echevers y Zubiza, and General Ubilla, as Echevers had been in Havana since 1714 and had by now grown impatient and was threatening to sail to Spain without Ubilla and the protection of his warships. This incident would have surely motivated Ubilla to order the transfer of *Tierra Firme*, New Kingdom of Granada and Peruvian Royal treasures from Echevers' ships to his own.

As documented in Veracruz on May 17, 1715, the *patache* of Soto Sánchez carried no Royal treasure, and, in private treasure, there were only some 44,000 pesos in coins [AGI: México, 486-B], loaded in 12 chests and several loose sacks, of which most, if not all, were salvaged. With so much gold present, this was an obvious problem for designating the Douglass Beach wreck as the *Nuestra Señora de las Nieves*. So, how was this discrepancy handled? The large amount of gold on this wreck was simply explained by the treasure salvage community as a clear demonstration of the uncontrolled contraband in the fleet system of the period. But the large amount of gold Mexican coins alone, in comparison to the total output of gold production at the Mexico mint at the time, makes this an apparent impossibility. In addition to this, the conditions of the wreck-site, which shows a catastrophic collapse of the vessel during the sinking, would have also made it impossible for this wreck to be the *Nuestra Señora de las Nieves*. If in fact this wreck had been salvaged at the time, the break-up alone would have exposed such a large quantity of contraband,

which would have not gone unnoticed, causing for its presence to be reported on the salvage records.

At the end, the cargo of this wreck seems to provide the clear evidence that Ubilla did use his newly purchased frigate to transfer part of the Royal treasure from his Capital ships to this smaller vessel. His acquisition date of July 15 barely gave him nine days to have this ship ready and loaded for the journey, which began on July 24. This can now explain the large quantity of gold found on this vessel, as loading practices of the time would have made the gold more accessible, for a subsequent move in a short notice.

And as for the true location of the *Nuestra Señora de las Nieves*, Jack Haskins might have unknowingly left us with a clue as to its whereabouts. He writes that “a small pile of ballast has been reported near the beach on the north side of the point” (in Sandy Point). His belief at the time was that this could have belonged to the *Galera* (Echevers’ Dutch captured prize). But, since the reported location of this ballast pile is right where he thought that the *Nuestra Señora de las Nieves* should be, then we can only hope that someone who recalls its location can now come forward, so that it can be properly recorded and in time, be explored, and its significance, if any, be established.

## Bibliography

Archivo General de Indias (AGI):

Cádiz, 853

Contratación, 641, 1274, 1275 and 2400

Consulados, 855

México, 486-B

Santo Domingo, 843

de Bry, John. "Cuban Archives Research," *MAHSNews*, Official publication of the Maritime Archaeological and Historical Society. Vol. 28, No. 2, Fall 2017: pp. 15-18.

Burgess, Robert F. and Clausen, Carl J. *Gold, Galleons and Archaeology*. Indianapolis, IN: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc. 1976.

[Clausen, Carl J. A 1715 Spanish Treasure Ship. Contributions of the Florida State Museum, Social Sciences No. 12. Gainesville: University of Florida. 1965.](#)

Haskins, Jack. *The 1715 New Spain Flota and Tierra Firme Galleons History* [Unpublished and undated research paper].

Newton, Lowell W. "Juan Esteban de Ubilla and the *Flota* of 1715," *The Americas*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (Oct., 1976), pp. 267-281. Published by: Academy of American Franciscan History.

Wagner, Kip. *Pieces of Eight: Recovering the Riches of a Lost Spanish Fleet* (as told to L. B. Taylor). New York, NY: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1966.