

## ST LUCIE COUNTY

# Case of stolen Spanish coins from 1715 Fleet started with a text confession, officials say

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For nearly a decade, Brent Brisben believed a treasure hunting family he hired to salvage the famous 1715 Fleet shipwrecks had been wildly successful by finding 51 Spanish gold coins, including a rare “Tricentennial Royal” coin that was destined for the King of Spain.

The reported haul, recovered on June 17, 2015, was worth about \$1 million, according to Brisben, 56, who founded 1715 Fleet - Queens Jewels LLC, which owns the shipwreck salvage rights in the area — from 13 miles north of Sebastian to 13 miles south of Fort Pierce.

In addition to the Royal coin, 17 Eight Escudos, 22 Two Escudos and 12 One Escudos coins also were discovered.

Eric Pearce Schmitt, 38, and other members of their family-run business, Booty Salvage - owned by his father, Richard “Rick” Schmitt - found the coins and 40 feet of ornate gold chain in 15 feet of water off the coast of Fort Pierce.

At the time, Brisben touted the Schmitts – including Eric, his sister and parents - as the only family he’d subcontracted with that searched for treasure together.

“They’re professional, well-intentioned and work extremely hard,” Brisben told TCPalm in June 2015, standing with Eric Schmitt and his sister Hillary Schmitt, during a news conference at Capt Hiram’s Resort, in Sebastian to reveal the shiny gold artifacts.

“This type of discovery,” Brisben added, “is what everyone dreams about.”

At least until early on April 30, 2024.

That's when Brisben received 36 texts sent over 32 minutes from Eric Schmitt who admitted keeping 50 gold coins found during the same June 17, 2015 salvage dive that were never reported, according to state criminal records and a federal court filing.

“In these texts ... Eric Schmitt confessed to a conspiracy where he and his father Richard decide to keep 50 of the 101 coins found,” Brisben stated in an affidavit filed with a federal judge seated in Key West. “He claims to have a receipt signed by his parents, and a photograph of the entire find taken on the day of the recovery that his parents did not know he possessed.”

Reached last week, Brisben declined to comment for this story.

## **Criminal probe, Eric Schmitt's arrest**

Within weeks of Eric Schmitt texting his reported confession to Brisben, federal and state law enforcement agents launched an investigation that included recorded “controlled” phone calls, interviews with people who unwittingly purchased stolen coins from Eric Schmitt, and searches of safe deposit boxes and residences that belonged to the Schmitt family.

By Nov. 26, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission officials announced they had arrested Eric Schmitt after recovering 37 of the 50 gold coins stolen from the 1715 Fleet shipwrecks, “valued collectively at over \$1 million,” according to a news release.

“Five stolen coins were reclaimed from a Florida-based auctioneer, who unknowingly purchased them from Eric Schmitt,” FWC officials reported, noting too, that geolocation data linked him to a photograph of the stolen coins taken at a “Schmitt family condominium in Fort Pierce.”

“It was also discovered that Eric Schmitt took three of the stolen gold coins and placed them on the ocean floor in 2016 to be found by the new investors of 1715 Fleet - Queens Jewels, LLC,” FWC officials stated.

Three stolen coins were recovered in St. Lucie County that were sold by Schmitt to three separate buyers in 2023 and 2024, “for a total monetary loss to the victims exceeding \$50,000,” FWC investigator Camille Soverel wrote in an arrest affidavit.

Schmitt also admitted to consigning five stolen gold coins to auctioneer Daniel Sedwick, in Maitland, which Soverel reported were recovered and verified “as being part of the gold coin heist in 2015.”

Sedwick refunded \$106,500 to the buyers, and gave the coins to FWC investigators, according to 1715 Fleet's federal filing.

On Nov. 25, Eric Schmitt was charged with six counts of dealing in stolen property related to the recovery of eight stolen coins: Three counts are pending in Orange County, and three counts were filed in St. Lucie County, where he was arrested and later released in lieu of \$60,000 bond, court records show.

"The statute of limitations for grand theft that allegedly was committed by the Schmitt family for theft of the 50 coins has expired," Soverel wrote in the Orange County arrest affidavit. "The subsequent dealing in stolen property violations committed by Eric Schmitt has occurred within the last two years, and the statute of limitations for those charges has not expired."

Each count carries a maximum punishment of 15 years in prison and a fine of \$10,000. Schmitt's attorney, Brian Hobbs Mallonee, who has filed not guilty pleas on his behalf, declined to comment.

In a Nov. 27 Facebook post, 1715 Fleet - Queen Jewels said it was "shocked and disappointed" by the theft and was working "closely" with the state and law enforcement.

"The recovered coins are now going through the proper process for legal adjudication," the post said.

On Dec. 20, FWC officials discovered one more coin, bringing the total of recovered coins to 38 of the 50 reported stolen, spokesperson Ashlee Brahier Sklute said in a Jan. 6 email.

And despite evidence FWC developed that could implicate other Schmitt relatives in the coin thefts, Eric Schmitt is the only one criminally charged, Sklute confirmed.

"The other Schmitt family members were believed to be present and participated in the theft in 2015, but the statute of limitations has expired on the state's charges of theft," Sklute noted. "The state does not have evidence that other family members have since dealt with this stolen property and does not currently have any additional charges against any of the other Schmitt family members."

## Confidential settlement

Sklute said of the 38 stolen coins recovered, FWC agents documented the return of 25 coins “from settlement agreements between the Schmitt family attorneys and Brisben.”

A federal document filed Dec. 2 with U.S. District Judge James L. King shows 1715 Fleet - Queens Jewels LLC on Sept. 13 “entered into a settlement agreement and release with members of the Schmitt family to secure the return of the stolen coins and financial compensation to make Fleet and other interested parties whole.”

Terms of the settlement remain confidential, according to court papers filed by 1715 Fleet attorneys Arthur Eugene Lewis, of Tallahassee, and Mathew T. Charles, in Ocean City, New Jersey, who declined to comment when reached by phone.

## What preceded Schmitt’s reported text confession?

Eric Schmitt is currently incarcerated at the St. Lucie County Jail on unrelated charges of aggravated battery of a pregnant woman and criminal mischief, stemming from a Dec. 30 incident, according to court filings.

A review of court records show in 2024, he had multiple run-ins with local law enforcement officials and he’s being prosecuted in three separate criminal matters in St. Lucie County.

And it’s the second time Eric Schmitt has faced criminal charges that involved the pregnant woman. He was taken into custody on Dec. 31, and records show a judge revoked his bond in the stolen coins case.

He was arrested in November and charged with aggravated battery with a deadly weapon after he was accused of intentionally ramming the back of a vehicle. Prosecutors dropped the charge less than two weeks after his arrest, according to court filings.

Eric Schmitt also faces charges of robbery by sudden snatching; criminal mischief and disorderly conduct related to an incident in August involving a security guard at a Harbour Isle condo in Fort Pierce, owned by his father.

On May 7, a week after Schmitt first texted Brisben, Fort Pierce police file a 27-page risk protection order petition seeking to remove six weapons from his possession, which a judge approved on June 17.

The petition stated Eric Schmitt “was involved in a recent act or threat of violence against themselves or others,” and “engaged in an act or threat of violence, including but not limited to acts or threats of violence against themselves, within the past 12 months.”

The risk protection order extends to June 16, 2025, according to an order signed by Circuit Judge Brett Waronicki.

## About the 1715 Fleet

In 1715 an 11-ship fleet set sail from Cuba laden with gold bars, coins, diamonds, emeralds and pearls bound for King Philip V of Spain and included the dowry for his new bride, Elisabeth.

En route from Cuba to Spain, 11 ships sank and their crews died during a hurricane on July 30 off the Treasure Coast.

The wrecks and their hidden bounty is what have given the area the nickname of Treasure Coast.

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