

## Florida's Shipwrecks and Treasures

Over the last 400 years, many ships have used Florida's coastal waters. Explorers and settlers arrived in Florida by ship. Soon, Spain began taking the riches of the Aztec and Incan empires to Europe. Silver and gold-laden treasure ships sailed along the Florida coastline. But many ships were wrecked because of hurricanes, coastal reefs, shallow shores, and even pirates.

Marine salvage (recovery) was very profitable in Florida by the time it became a U.S. territory in 1821. Florida Indians and crews from Havana often competed for the cargo of wrecked ships in Florida waters.

In modern times, many of the wrecked vessels have been discovered. Some are in waters shallow enough to be explored. Some have yielded treasures for divers and salvagers. The wrecks tell stories about Florida's history and importance to shipping. Some of them are described in the rest of this article.

### **The Tierra Firme Fleet—The Atocha and the Santa Margarita 1622**

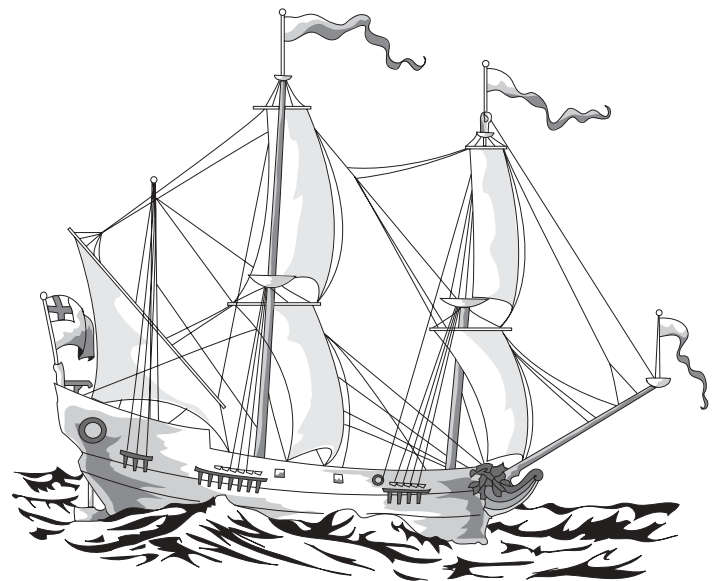
The Tierra Firme fleet sailed from South America heading home to Spain. The fleet of 27 ships had a cargo estimated at more than \$250 million, including silver from Peru and Mexico, gold and emeralds from Colombia, and pearls from Venezuela. Two ships, the Atocha and the Santa Margarita, were lost in the Florida Keys during a hurricane. Three hundred and eighty lives were lost when the two ships went down.

In 1985, salvager Mel Fisher found the Atocha in the Florida Keys. The Spanish treasure galleon contained tons of treasure. Mel Fisher's

Treasure Exhibit in Key West showcases Fisher's search for underwater treasure. Recovered artifacts and gold pieces are on display.

### **The Henrietta Marie 1701**

This slave ship left her cargo of African slaves in Jamaica to work the sugar plantations there. The ship then sank near Key West.



**The Henrietta Marie**

Mel Fisher and his company located the Henrietta Marie in 1972, while looking for the Atocha. When they pulled up ivory tusks from Africa, they thought the ship below had been to Africa. Then they salvaged iron shackles and knew they had found a slave ship. Finally, they brought up the ship's cast iron bell. It had on it the name Henrietta Marie. She is the oldest known wreck of a slave trading ship to be identified by name.

### **The Urca de Lima 1715**

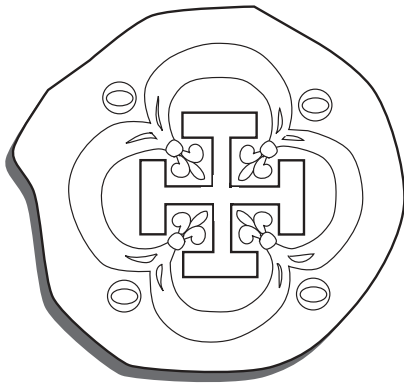
Urcas were flat-bottomed, round-bellied Dutch storage ships designed to go in shallow waters. Due to their capacity for carrying cargo, they

soon were adopted for the Spanish-American trade between Europe and the New World. The Urca de Lima carried cargo that included hundreds of uncured cowhides, packets of chocolate, vanilla, sassafras, and incense. These were items that brought a good price in Europe.

The Urca de Lima was one of 10 treasure ships on their way back to Spain from Havana. They were all lost in a hurricane off the Atlantic coast. More than 700 seamen, including the Spanish Commander, drowned from the 10 ships. More than \$15 million worth of treasure sank to the bottom of the ocean.

The Urca de Lima ran aground in a shallow area. It was probably her stout hull that saved most of her contents from being swept away in the storm. She was the first of the fleet wrecks to be salvaged by Spanish crews from Havana. Then she was burned to the waterline to conceal her position from English salvagers, who also began to arrive at the scene. Spain managed to recover about \$4 million of the treasure. The rest remained on the ocean floor for more than 250 years.

A Florida Underwater Archaeological Preserve is open at the site of the Urca de Lima for divers.



**A gold coin found on the ocean floor.**

The McLarty State Museum, located in the Sebastian State Recreation Area documents the story of the treasure ships.

### **The Nuestra Espana Fleet—The San Pedro 1733**

The Nuestra Espana fleet was one of the last treasure fleets to cross the Atlantic Ocean for Spain. On Friday 13, 1733, the ships left Havana on the return voyage. The fleet consisted of three armed galleons and eighteen merchant ships filled with tanned hides, rare spices, precious jewels, silver and gold, all of which were needed for the economic survival of Spain.

The ships were grounded in the Florida Keys during a hurricane. The remains of the fleet were scattered over 80 miles throughout the keys. The San Pedro's remains were burned to the waterline by the Spanish to prevent looting by pirates. Locations of the wrecks were charted on an official map. Salvage work continued for years. When a final calculation of salvaged materials was made, more gold and silver had been recovered than had been listed on the original lists of cargo.

Professional archaeologists have studied 13 known shipwrecks from the fleet. A Florida Underwater Archaeological Preserve is open at the San Pedro site for divers. The San Pedro is among the most picturesque of the 1733 wreck sites. She is located in a white sand pocket surrounded by turtle grass. Abundant marine life inhabits her grave. A large pile of ballast stones contains flat, red bricks from the ship's galley. This site is one of Florida's oldest artificial reefs, host to a variety of sea creatures living amidst ballast stones and coral heads.