

DIVERS BRING TO LIGHT THE TRAGEDY,
and bright side, of a sunken *pirate slave ship*.

unshackling a shadowy

past

As dawn broke over the water, Captain Grover awoke to an incredible sight. A ship lay on its side, dashed into the reef. More than 600 people were hanging from the rigging, struggling to stay alive. As fortune had it, this situation was Grover's specialty. As a wrecker, his job was to save lives and cargo.

by *Karuna* EBERL



[Faded handwritten text at the top of the left page, including "1827" and "Guerrero"]

1	6	2	118	85N
2	2	1	132.5	
3	3	1	145.5	
4	3	6	158.5	
5	3	6	171.5	
6	3	6	184.5	
7	3	6	197.5	
8	3	6	210.5	
9	3	6	223.5	
10	3	6	236.5	
11	3	6	249.5	
12	3	6	262.5	

[Handwritten notes on the left page describing the ship's course and weather conditions.]

[Faded handwritten text at the top of the right page, including "1827" and "Guerrero"]

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[Handwritten notes on the right page, including "All fresh winds & squally" and "On Shore on Florida reef".]

The rover rushed to the scene and soon realized it was a slave ship. The Spanish brig Guerrero held 561 Africans and 90 crew.

A couple miles away rested the British warship Nimble, stranded but intact. Both ships had struck near Carysfort Reef off the Upper Keys.

It was December of 1827. Though slavery was legal, the slave trade had been banned for two decades. The Guerrero's captain Jose Gomez didn't care. There was still a lot of money in it. And after thousands of miles at sea, he had been almost home free. The slave markets of Cuba were just 250 miles away.

During this time, the British policed the Florida Straits for illegal slave ships, like the Guerrero. So the day before, when the Nimble's captain Lt. Edward Holland spotted Gomez, the chase was on. The two ships raced west through the Florida Straits. Though the weather turned rough, the Nimble caught the Guerrero at dusk. A firefright erupted. Both ships drifted toward the reef. Then, to Holland's surprise, Gomez held up a lantern to signal surrender. The Nimble ceased fire. But Gomez was lying. He hoisted his sails in a last-ditch escape attempt. It didn't work. Fifteen minutes later, the Guerrero hit the reef with such force the hull tore open and both masts broke. Forty-one prisoners died. The Nimble's crew said the screams crossed two miles of ocean.

Fearing the same fate, Holland ordered his men to change the sails. But moments later he heard the gut-wrenching sound of his own hull dragging along the reef. The crew threw ballast and cannon balls overboard to try to free the ship, but it was to no avail. They were stranded.

Left: Lt. Edward Holland detailed the tragic events of December 19, 1827 in his captain's log. He was just 26 when his ship, the Nimble, ran aground while pursuing the illegal slave ship Guerrero.

“You can imagine the captain’s thinking at the time,”

says historian Gail Swanson, who first discovered the story and ardently pieced it together from scattered, dusty archives. “Lt. Holland’s duty was to save the people on the ship from a lifetime of slavery in the Cuban fields. In doing that, he accidentally ran them to their doom off the waters of Key Largo, and he could do nothing to assist them. His ship could not sail.”

Around 20 years ago, Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary divers armed with Swanson’s research took up the search for this piece of sunken history. Their effort was then joined by Corey Malcom, Director of Archaeology for the Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage

Society, RPM Nautical Foundation, as well as archaeologists from Biscayne National Park and divers from the non-profits National Association of Black Scuba Divers and Diving With a Purpose, a mostly African-American group who actively help document Florida Keys shipwrecks.

“There’s a lot of significance tied up in this,” says National Park Service archaeologist Chuck Lawson, who’s been spearheading the search in Biscayne for the last seven years. “No archaeologist is going to sit here and be responsible for this stretch of water and not want to find this shipwreck. It fills in the gaps of the triangle trade and a history that was taken from people.”

Indeed, many historians agree that the Middle Passage, or slave trade, is a piece of world history vital to understanding who we are as a society today. It’s a piece that gets only a cursory glance in history books, perhaps because the story is so overwhelming. An estimated 15 million Africans became slaves in the New World. For every one who reached here, six times as many died between capture, internment, and the ocean journey. That puts estimates at 90 million for the total number of Africans killed and enslaved from the 1500s through the 1800s. Some hope the 41 who died aboard the *Guerrero* might help us to decipher this behemoth concept.

“The enormity of the [Middle Passage] becomes surreal,” says Capt. William Pinkney, former master of the Freedom Schooner *Amistad* educational vessel. “It loses its significance in the way we’re able to digest it in our minds. But if we can focus on smaller-range disasters, our brains can wrap around that.”

Tragically, the saga of the 41 ended at the reef, but when the wrecker Grover arrived he began to rescue the 520 survivors. Women and children were first, loaded onto a fishing boat that headed toward Key West. More survivors, along with pirate captain Gomez and his crew filled Grover’s vessel. Anticipating Gomez’s ruthlessness, Holland ordered all weapons thrown overboard. But when Grover’s crew gathered for dinner, Gomez snuck out, cut the anchor line, hoisted the sails, and headed for Cuba.

The next morning, the *Nimble* and another wrecker with survivors set sail for Key West. Surprisingly, it was four days later when Grover and the fishing boat

PHOTO CAPTIONS /// LISTED ON PAGE 22



by Corey Malcom



by Corey Malcom



Photo by Don Kincaid



by Brenda Altmeier, FKNMS



by Susanna Pershern, Submerged Resources Center, NPS



by Corey Malcom



by Matthew Lawrence, ONMS



by Corey Malcom



by Dylan Kibler



arrived to port, both with no Africans on board, but plenty of tales of hijacking. In all, just 121 of the 561 Africans made it to Key West. Despite the wreckers' heroic efforts, many suspected foul play. The wreckers would get no money in Key West from a cargo of people. As such, Cuba might have been tempting. The true story may never be known. Holland, however, had problems of his own. The customs collector was demanding payment for the salvage. Fearing the loss of a British warship to the wreckers, Holland pulled anchor in the night and left the Africans in the hands of the Conchs.

In 1827 Key West was the only colonial settlement south of St. Augustine. The town of just 500 residents struggled with the influx of new guests, many of whom were ill. The Africans surely struggled as well. They had endured capture, internment in African slave camps, a pirate raid at sea, a 4,000 mile journey in a disease-ridden hold, a fierce gun battle, and a violent shipwreck. Now stranded in Key West, they could communicate with no one.

Soon rumors spread that Gomez was arming a ship in Havana to raid Key West for the rest of his human cargo. The town rolled out cannons and put the militia on 24-hour watch. The attack never came, but over the next three months Key West's deputy marshall faced numerous threats and bribes from people trying to take possession of the Africans. Unable to ensure their safety, he sent them to St. Augustine. It is here that the Africans' entwinement with the Keys ends. The rest is an equally enthralling tale, best left for another day.

Today, most agree the Guerrero lies somewhere near the boundary of the southern edge of Biscayne National Park and the National Marine Sanctuary. Malcom, who also oversees the archaeology of the Henrietta Marie slave ship on display at the Fisher Museum, has recovered a number of artifacts he strongly believes are from the Guerrero and Nimble.

"Everything fits," he says, "it's just the issue that there's nothing with a name on it so it's tough to say with 100-percent certainty."

Thanks to a new National Park Service funding initiative designed to advance the understanding of African American history in our parks, this summer

Chuck Lawson's team in Biscayne is undertaking a massive survey of the southern end of the park. So far they have two potential sites, but he, too, stresses the difficulty of absolute identification.

"We all hope that we find it because this is one of the most important historical stories that Biscayne National Park would have to share if it's here," he says, adding that it's still a win even if they don't find it. "This search is without a doubt going to substantially enlighten the archaeological knowledge and historical record of the park."

FKNMS, Malcom and Lawson all intend to keep up the search until such time as the Guerrero is identified with absolute certainty. Most likely it will be in sidestep with the tireless volunteer efforts of the Diving With a Purpose team, who have been instrumental with keeping everyone's enthusiasm at its peak.

"Any archaeology, any history helps put our modern lives into perspective," says Malcom. The more we can do to bring awareness to [the Middle Passage], the better understanding people will have of why things are the way they are today. With sites like the Guerrero, you can make it a physical thing and no longer an abstraction. You know those stories happened for real, and that's where the power is in archaeology."

For more information on the history of the Guerrero, try www.theguerrero.org.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Diving with a Purpose members have been searching for the Guerrero for 14 years. They've helped document many other shipwrecks in the Keys, including the Acorn and Hanna M. Bell | by Matthew Lawrence, ONMS

PHOTOS FROM PAGE 21

Top Row: The iron shot conservation was excavated from the suspected grounding site of the Nimble | 1820s-era blue-edged pearlware dish fragment. Guerrero and Nimble artifacts are on display at the Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Museum | A member of Diving With a Purpose examines an anchor believed to be from the Nimble

Middle Row: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration researchers look for magnetic anomalies that might indicate a shipwreck | National Park Service archeologists Chuck Lawson and Josh Morano document cultural remains in Biscayne National Park | Iron ballast ingots are believed to be from the site of the Nimble's grounding. The crew threw such objects overboard while struggling to free the ship from the reef

Bottom Row: Diving With a Purpose co-founder Ken Stewart observes the work of lead instructor Kamau Sadiki as he draws a sketch | Iron shots located in last two images are now on display in the Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Museum