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The Maravillas' Silver & Rise of the
Pirates Republic of New Providence

The Maravillas' Silver & Rise of the Pirates Republic of New Providence

Carl Allen, Sean Kingsley,
Michael P. Pateman & James Sinclair

The sinking of the Spain-bound *Nuestra Señora de las Maravillas* off the Little Bahama Bank, while trying to negotiate the Florida Strait on January 4, 1656, created a major logistical recovery problem for Spain. The wreck lay in shallow waters but the absence of stores, supplies and a safe haven in The Bahamas complicated the salvage process. Historical sources show how the stricken wreck, with a seemingly endless supply of treasure, attracted colonial and European speculators.

By the early 1690s, the lure of sunken treasure saw Nassau in New Providence developed into a rendezvous port for wreckers trying to fish the *Maravillas*. At the same time the town's residents and visitors started to be condemned as pirates. This report uses primary sources to connect the sinking of the *Maravillas* with the rise of Nassau and, in turn, the emergence of the golden age of piracy on the island.

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1. The Maravillas Sinks

On 4 January 1656 a fatal combination of a storm, problematic navigation and inescapable reefs sank the *Nuestra Señora de la Maravillas* off the western Little Bahama Bank when the Spanish galleon was returning to Cadiz after loading silver bullion in Cartagena and Panama.¹ The *Maravillas* was infamously transporting not just its own manifested cargo of treasure, but part of the gold and silver wrecked on and salvaged from the *Jesus Maria de la Limpia Concepción* off Chanduy in Ecuador.² The two cargoes were valued at over five million pesos (Figs. 1, 8).³

By the year 1656, the Lucayan people, The Bahamas'

indigenous population since the 7th century AD, had been forcibly enslaved by Spanish colonists and were annihilated working in the gold mines of Hispaniola and the oyster beds of the Costa de la Perlas off Venezuela.⁴ As a result, The Bahamas was almost entirely depopulated.⁵ The first European attempts to re-settle the islands by the Company of Eleutherian Adventurers in 1647 failed. The archipelago remained lightly inhabited.⁶ So, what changed The Bahamas' fortunes?

The sinking of the *Maravillas*' rich cargo at first attracted Crown-appointed Spanish salvors and from the 1680s wreckers from other European nations and the colonies.⁷ The work off the exposed environment of the western Little Bahama Bank was dangerous and logistics were complicated by the absence of a local supply



Fig. 1. An AllenX diver discovers a silver contraband bar along the *Maravillas*' scatter trail.
Photo: © Allen Exploration.

base and port. However, we propose, a direct line can be drawn between the sinking of the *Maravillas*, its salvage and the birth of the pirates' lair of Nassau on the island of New Providence.

2. A Sea of Salvors

The 891-ton, two-deck *Maravillas* was heavily salvaged by Spanish wreckers almost immediately after sinking. English and colonial American crews subsequently fished for unrecovered treasure in the early 1680s. Overall, the shipwreck was salvaged at least 21 times between 1656 and 1683.⁸ The Bahamas had become a competitive destination for visionary wreckers convinced its seas could make their fortunes. Spanish and colonial salvors from the Caribbean world and the Americas recovered at least five million pesos' worth of silver bars, coins and worked silver in these years, excluding perhaps equal volumes of smuggled



Fig. 2. AllenX's *Axis* research ship deploys a submersible to explore the western Little Bahama Bank. Photo: © Allen Exploration.

contraband, which was never officially entered in a manifest.

The loss of the *Maravillas* inspired William Phips' world-famous treasure hunt that helped develop shipwreck salvage as a lucrative marine industry. Phips first operated off the Bahama Banks in March and April 1684,⁹ before successfully salvaging the wreck of the *Nuestra Señora*

de la Concepción, lost in 1641 off northern Hispaniola, the Dominican Republic, to become internationally famous. King James II knighted Phips in 1687.¹⁰

The *Maravillas*' presence in The Bahamas was due to Spanish treasure fleets sailing between Seville and Havana, Portobelo and Cartagena using the Florida Strait as a preferred maritime highway. None of their fleets anchored in The Bahamas because the archipelago had no stores or warehouses to offer. Fleet admirals' objectives

Fig. 3. AllenX's *Axis* research ship recovering a submersible exploring the *Maravillas*' shipwreck scatter trail off the western Little Bahama Bank. Photo: © Allen Exploration.





Fig. 4. The approaches to the harbor of Nassau, New Providence. Photo: © Sean Kingsley.

were to sail through the passage as quickly and safely as possible.

Into June 1682, after 26 years of salvage work on the *Maravillas*, The Bahamas remained a backwater for agriculture but attracted maritime speculators. Sir Thomas Lynch, the governor of Jamaica, wrote then how “This ‘New Providence’ and ‘Theory’ [Eleutheria] are the Bahama Islands that lie to north of Cuba. They are barren and good for little, frequented by only a few straggling people who receive such as come to dive for silver in a galleon wrecked on that coast.”¹¹ Two months later, Lynch added further details about the islands’ reputation:¹²

“it is known that your Islands are peopled by men who are intent rather on pillaging Spanish wrecks than planting, that they carry on their work by Indians kidnapped or entrapped on the coast of Florida, and that all the violence you complain of arises only from disputes about

these wrecks, from which the English and French have driven the Spaniards.”

A year later, Spanish forces attacked New Providence on January 19, 1684,¹³ not in search of its natural wealth or to confront English soldiers, but to prevent salvors from using Charles Town, later renamed Nassau, as a rendezvous base for hunting the *Maravillas*’ silver. A report of the attack on the town described how:¹⁴

“One Abraham Passmore arrived two days past from New Providence, which is the only settled place by the English where the vessels and the men that come to recover the Spanish wrecks in the Bahamas are refreshed. The people of Providence number about four hundred men that bear arms, and half as many women, and have got a considerable treasure out of the deep in ‘pigs and sows of silver,’ as they are termed. The Spaniards knowing this planned to recapture

SPANIARDS PLUNDER NEW PROVIDENCE – JANUARY 19, 1684

“At daybreak they landed 120 of their men at the town, while fifty assailed the shipping – six vessels – in the harbour. The people in the town being surprised, fled from it to the woods, those in the ships also deserted them and fled on board a New England vessel of ten guns. This and one more ship stood out to sea; the rest were all pillaged and three men murdered. The Spaniards killed no one in the town, but kept it till four o’clock in the afternoon, in which time they took away all the wrought and unwrought plate that they could find, a quantity of English dry-goods, and such provisions as they wanted, and loaded their booty, valued by the English at 14.000l., in a pink that they took in the harbor. While the Spaniards were in possession of the town, fourteen Englishmen got together and drove all the Spaniards before them. They would have driven them from the town and retaken the plunder if they had had powder and ball enough, and if the inhabitants had known of a rallying point, and had found but fifty firearms they might have saved all. All might also have been saved by the ship of ten guns if she had but stayed. But three men were killed, but many were carried off prisoners by the Spaniards, as suspected of being pirates.”¹⁵

it. At the beginning of January about two hundred of their choicest men were fitted out from Havana, well armed, in two barco-luengos, the one of forty, the other of thirty oars.”

After landing in New Providence, the Spanish governor of Havana “burnt all the houses, murdered the Governor and several more in cold blood, stripped the rest of the men naked, and carried away the women, children, and negroes to Havana.”¹⁶

3. From Wreckers to Pirates

In the spring of 1694 the wreckers fishing the *Maravillas* were denounced as pirates for the first time. New Providence’s Governor Richard Lilburne reported in March that he sent “one Captain Thomas Paine, with a ship of eight guns and sixty men... to take pirates.”¹⁷ Tempted by the reality of riches for

all, Paine, however, quickly turned to piracy and treasure as well.

The worry that competition for salvaging sunken Spanish treasure would transform The Bahamas into a pirates lair continued to escalate. In March 1684, Governor Lilburne was already troubled that searches for Spanish ships and wrecks would stimulate piracy:¹⁸

“Paine then went wrecking, but a strong ship coming in shortly after the Governor manned it and went off to the wreck himself, but Paine and the rest had already sailed. The Governor on this represented to the Council the danger of allowing these weak islands to be made a place for pirates to assemble in and start from in their depredations against the Spaniards... There are also many pirates whom the Governor is powerless to suppress without a man-of-war,

WRECKING IN THE BAHAMAS – OCTOBER 1688

Henry Hordesnall to Lords of Trade and Plantations, England: “I have, by searching a man from the wreck, recovered over thirteen pounds weight of treasure for the King. It was shipped on board Captain Robinson. I put the man on his oath, and found that he had secreted a thousand pieces-of-eight in the Bohemia [? Bahama] Islands. Considering the dangers of pirates and the loss on the cleaning of the money, which was rusty [from the sea], I compounded for four hundred and fifteen pieces-of-eight, white money, which I hope will be approved. I have another man, one Samuel Harvey, in custody, who brought and entered five hundred pounds weight of silver before I came, but agreed to give the Governor thirty-four pounds, and divided the rest with his men. I recovered the tenths from him some time ago, but no more.”¹⁹

Figs. 5-6. Edward Teach (Blackbeard) & Charles Vane from Charles Johnson's *The History and Lives of All the Most Notorious Pirates, and their Crews* (London, 1725).

and he begs for a man-of-war lest the pirates should seize upon some place and make it a second Algiers.”

Piracy was a serious problem by June 1688 when The Bahamas’ rising population struggled to secure honest ways to make a living. Henry Hordesnell accordingly advised the Lords of Trade and Plantations that month that “The Governor does things as if he intended nothing but the country’s ruin and his own interest, cloaking his illegal actions under the King’s name... About a fortnight ago seventy pirates came in a Portuguese man-of-war, who submitted to the royal proclamation.”²⁰ The nascent pirates’ republic of New Providence was taking root.

4. Corrupt Governors

A fresh glimmer of a new order emerged in August 1694 when New Providence’s latest governor, Nicholas Trott, arrived from Bermuda to start building a structured settlement. Charles Town was re-built from April 1695



and re-named Nassau in honor of one of the titles of England’s king William III of Nassau. By 1700 the harbor (Fig. 4) was ringed by a town of 160 houses and a church. Fort Nassau was armed with 28 guns, paid for from customs’ revenue, and operative from February 1697 to protect the port entrance.²¹

Trott turned out to be immensely corrupt and self-serving.²² From the start the governor recognised New Providence’s capacity to draw major revenue from the sea. He was fully conscious, as John Wentworth, the governor of New Providence, wrote in 1672, that “many

of the inhabitants range amongst the banks and kayos in pursuit of wrecks or other profitable drift.”²³

The foundations for cashing in from shipwrecks was essentially built into The Bahamas’ English charter. Governor Cadwallader Jones had been authorized by land-grants by November 1689 to cut wood and search for wrecks and ambergris. The following year, John Oldmixon accused the governor of inviting pirates to The Bahamas and encouraging anarchy to “have a free Trade, and nothing to do with the King’s damn’d Officers... He pardon’d and discharg’d Pyrates without Tryal. He gave Commissions to Pyrates, without, and

NICHOLAS TROTT FOUNDS NASSAU PIRATE TOWN – APRIL 12, 1695

The Lords Proprietors of the Bahamas to Governor Nicholas Trott: “We are well pleased to hear of your safe arrival in the Islands and that by your prudent management you have reduced the inhabitants to a contented condition which encourages new persons to come and settle among you... We approve your design of building a city called Nassau and shall be ready to grant it any privileges that you may reasonably propose, but that should be done by charter from us... As to what you write of the three pirates under sentence of death, we dare not give such encouragement to piracy as to pardon them, having so lately had complaints of that nature, but since their crime was not accompanied by any aggravating circumstances and did not extend to murder, and since you may have heard further matter on the other side we leave the case to your discretion and confirm your pardon if you think fit... We note your report that our revenues amount to over £800 annually...”²⁴

contrary to the Advice of the Council.”²⁵

To Spanish authorities, the people of The Bahamas were most “wretched portions of mankind,” while Nassau was “one of the miserable spots of the universe.”²⁶ Against this negative reputation, New Providence quickly adapted its position from a supply base to a black-market space to offload salvaged wreckage.

The connection between fishing for shipwrecks and piracy in The Bahamas was widely understood by 1700. Governors like Elias Haskett pretended to try to eradicate piracy and crush unlawful wrecking, but were intimately implicit in the illicit economy.

When Peter Dearlove, a pirate captain imprisoned in Marshalsea, London, spread rumors about a rich wreck near The Bahamas called the *Bon Jesus*, he managed to secure his freedom thanks to the intervention of Lord Fairfax so Governor Haskett could support him and the pirate John Breholt on the wrecking venture.²⁷

Bolstered by the governor’s good reputation, the pirates raised even larger funds from “Lord Rivers and several other gentlemen to the expence of many thousand pounds in providing and equipping ships for going upon such pretended wreck.” The wreck, indeed, was an invented scam. Instead, their “reall design... was to get out to sea and then to carry the said ships to Madagascar, upon a Scotch pardon for the pyrats there.” The pirates were never captured for their ambitious sting.²⁸

Haskett, in all fairness, had inherited a dangerous situation



Fig. 7. Anne Bonny in Charles Johnson’s *The History and Lives of All the Most Notorious Pirates, and their Crews* (London, 1725).

those seas” who, “without interruption... sending out or conniving with others in sloops they build for

Fig. 8. Gigi Allen recovers from the *Maravillas*’ shipwreck scatter trail a gold pendant once owned by a knight of the Order of Santiago. Photo: © Allen Exploration.



when he was appointed governor. At Nassau, “disaffection and insecurity” ruled. The new fort was already in ruins in 1701, the Admiralty court ineffective and piracy rampant. Haskett, like most early governors in Nassau, rode the tide of easy cash by accusing people of piracy and then demanding backhanders to look the other way. Sailors who refused to be implicit in the crime were threatened with being roasted alive and, at the very least, were put in jail or expelled to New York.²⁹

By 1702 even Haskett realised the chaos that was now prevalent. The Bahama islands were “composed of the cast-out pirates of that purpose, and whatever they plunder they give it the name of wreck goods.” Nassau’s inhabitants had “cherished and traded with the greatest pirates who came into those seas.”³⁰

The mixed fortunes of hoping for treasure from salvaging wrecks was supplemented by the sinister plot of deliberately stranding ships ashore, sometimes with the collusion of their captains, and then plundering them. An infamous pirate called Kelly deliberately drove two ships onto the coast, 40 leagues from New Providence, after failing to wreck them on the Bahamian reefs in November 1698.³¹

The threat of The Bahamas’ pirates and wreckers was temporarily crushed in October 1703 when French and Spanish forces sacked Nassau, plundered the town, spiked the cannon, killed many people and seized prisoners. The survivors of the raid

were described in 1704 as not even possessing “a shift to cover their nakedness.”³² New Providence’s population of 250 whites was almost deserted.³³

5. Law & Order

The House of Lords realised that the situation was out of control and likely to continue to deteriorate. If the pirate threat forced the hands of France or Spain to attack and capture the port of Nassau, “it would be of dangerous Consequence.” Nothing changed. Once more, “the English Pyrates had made Providence their Retreat and general Receptacle; then ’twas found absolutely necessary, in order to dislodge that troublesome Colony; and Informa-

tion being made by the Merchants to the Government, of the Mischief they did...” (Figs. 5-7)³⁴

The tough solution would be the English ex-privateer and slave trader Captain Woodes Rogers, who reached New Providence in July 1718.³⁵ For just over 20 years, the pirates of the Caribbean had enjoyed the freedom to run riot. The lure of riches was linked from the start to the sea and, specifically, to the Spanish galleon the *Maravillas* and its millions of pesos-worth of gold and silver. Sunk off the western Little Bahamas Bank during an almighty storm on January 4, 1656, by 1718 the legend of the *Maravillas* was a distant echo of the enormous wealth that could be harvested from these Caribbean waters.

Notes

- ¹ Allen *et al.*, 2024: 69.
- ² Allen *et al.*, 2023b: 7.
- ³ Allen *et al.*, 2023a: 3; Horner, 1999: 181.
- ⁴ Romero, 2003: 1017.
- ⁵ Ostapkowicz, 2023: 313-314.
- ⁶ Craton and Saunders, 1999: 66.
- ⁷ Allen *et al.*, 2023a.
- ⁸ Allen *et al.*, 2023a.
- ⁹ Karraker, 1932: 731-52.
- ¹⁰ Earle, 1979.
- ¹¹ Fortescue, 1898: 552, June 12, 1682, Jamaica.
- ¹² Fortescue, 1898: 568, August 29, 1682, Jamaica.
- ¹³ Fortescue, 1898: 1540, February 14, 1684, New Providence.
- ¹⁴ Fortescue, 1898: 1590, March 15, 1684, Barbados.
- ¹⁵ Fortescue, 1898: 1590, March 15, 1684, Barbados.
- ¹⁶ Fortescue, 1898: 1927, November 7, 1684, Whitehall.
- ¹⁷ Fortescue, 1898: 1707, May 27, 1684, Virginia.
- ¹⁸ Fortescue, 1898: 1707, May 27, 1684, Virginia.
- ¹⁹ Fortescue, 1899: 1,899, October 5, 1688, Bermuda.
- ²⁰ Fortescue, 1899: June 1, 1688, to Lords of Trade and Plantations.
- ²¹ Craton, 1986: 79.
- ²² Kingsley and Cowan, 2024: 74-75.
- ²³ Goodall, 2016: 122.
- ²⁴ Fortescue, 1903, Lords Proprietors of the Bahamas to Governor Nicholas Trott; 1,774, April 12, 1695.
- ²⁵ Oldmixon, 1708: 356; Hanna, 2015: 153.
- ²⁶ Craton and Saunders, 1999: 169.
- ²⁷ Goodall, 2016: 124.
- ²⁸ Goodall, 2016: 124.

- ²⁹ Craton and Saunders, 1999: 106-107.
- ³⁰ Goodall, 2016: 103.
- ³¹ Craton and Saunders, 1999: 106.
- ³² Craton, 1986: 87.
- ³³ Craton, 1986: 87.
- ³⁴ Johnson, 1724: 31.
- ³⁵ Headlam, 1933: 498, May 19, 1721, Admiralty Office.

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Fig. 9. Fort Montagu protecting the eastern harbor of Nassau in New Providence. Photo: © Sean Kingsley.

