

The Price of Amity: Of Wrecking, Piracy, and the Tragic Loss of the 1750 Spanish Treasure Fleet

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La flotte de trésor espagnole navigant de La Havane vers l'Espagne en août 1750 a été prise dans un ouragan et a échoué sur les bancs extérieures de la Virginie, du Maryland et des Carolinas. En dépit des hostilités alors récentes et prolongées entre l'Espagne et l'Angleterre, 1739-48, les gouvernements coloniaux britanniques ont tenté d'aider les Espagnols à sauver leurs navires et à protéger leurs cargaisons. Ces gouvernements, cependant, se sont trouvés impuissants face aux "naufreurs" rapaces à terre et les pirates en mer qui ont emporté la plus grande partie du trésor et de la cargaison de grande valeur.

The Spanish treasure fleet of 1750 sailed from Havana late in August of that year into uncertain waters. The hurricane season was at hand, and there was little reason for confidence in the nominal state of peace with England, whose seamen had for two centuries preyed on the treasure ships. The bloody four-year conflict known in Europe as the War of Austrian Succession and in the Americas as King George's War had been finally concluded with the signing of the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle only in October 1748 by the wearied principal combatants, France and Spain, which had been aligned against England. England and Spain, in fact, had been at war since 1739. Like many such contests between great empires throughout history, the initial Anglo-Spanish conflict and the larger war of 1744-48 had ended in little more than a draw. The treaty for the most part restored conquered colonies in the Americas and the Far East to their original owners. Indeed, little had been resolved by force of arms except to insure that the paranoia infecting the mightiest kingdoms of Europe would continue unabated. No nation was more xenophobic about its rich empire in the Western Hemisphere than Spain.

Within a few decades of Columbus's discovery of the New World, Spain had enslaved the great Aztec, Mayan, and Inca empires and established hegemony throughout most of Florida, Central and South America, and in much of the West Indies. The efforts to explore, appropriate, and colonize these vast and rich new territories, and to carry home the enormous wealth gained by conquest, had quickly led to the establishment of a complex maritime system linking the Old World with the New. Over time, a sophisticated convoy operation was instituted and refined. By 1566, two heavily armed fleets were being sailed annually. The first, called the Flota, departed from Spain in the spring, usually in April or May, for calls at Mexico, the Mosquito Coast of Central America, Cuba, and Hispaniola. After provisioning and watering at Puerto Rico, the Flota passed

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Hispaniola, Jamaica, and Cuba before landing at Vera Cruz, Mexico, to take on the treasures of New Spain. The second fleet, called the Galleones, embarked for Panama about August to take on the treasures brought up from Peru and Chile and carried across the isthmus. It was then on to Cartagena and the Spanish Main to take on emeralds and other precious stones, and pearls from the fisheries of Isla Margareta. Both the Flota and Galleones then sailed to rendezvous at Havana for the return voyage to Spain. The usual homeward course from Cuba was through the Florida Straits, riding the Gulf Stream northeastward up the Atlantic coast of North America. After passing the latitude of Bermuda, the fleet turned due east to the Azores and then toward home. It was a tried and true course that would vary little for more than two hundred years, a pipeline of treasure that insured Spanish supremacy in both the Old and New Worlds. By the end of the War of Austrian Succession, that supremacy, which had been sorely tested, had been all but exhausted.

Havana Harbor was a hotbed of activity as the 1750 Spanish treasure fleet readied itself for the long and perilous voyage to Spain. It was August and the hurricane season was already upon them. Yet this convoy was a far cry from the enormous hundred-ship armadas that had sailed during the heyday of the great plate fleets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Indeed, the vessels that were assembling beneath the mighty guns of Morro Castle numbered just seven. They had been placed under the overall command of Captain-General Don Juan Manuel de Bonilla, a courageous man but occasionally prone to indecision.¹

The most important ship was the Almirante, or "admiral" of the fleet, Bonilla's five-hundred-ton, four-year-old, Dutch-built *Nuestra Señora de Guadeloupe*, also known as *Nympha*. She was owned by Don Jose de Renturo de Respaldizar, commanded by Don Manuel Molviedo, and piloted by Don Felipe Garcia. *Guadeloupe* was a big ship, and had been allotted a substantial cargo of sugar, Campeche dyewoods, Purge of Jalapa (a laxative restorative plant found in Mexico), cotton, vanilla, cocoa, plant seedlings, copper, a great quantity of hides, valuable cochineal and indigo for dyes, and most importantly, as many as three hundred chests of silver containing 400,000 pieces-of-eight valued at 613,000 pesos. Among her passengers was the president of Santo Domingo, Hispaniola, as well as a company of prisoners.²

¹ Pedro de Pumarejo to Don Francisco de Vares y Valdes, 15 October 1750, Legajo 5157, Sección de Contratación, Archivo General de Indias, Seville, Spain (hereafter, AGI).

² Ibid.; William L. Saunders et al., eds., *Colonial Records of North Carolina*, 10 vols. (Raleigh: P. M. Hale et al., 1886-1890) [hereafter cited as *CRNC*], 4: 1300-1308; Account of the vessels that departed from Havana to Spain on 10 August 1750, their cargo and halting place, Legajo 5157, Sección de Contratación, AGI (hereafter cited as Account of the vessels); *New York Gazette*, 17 September 1750; *Maryland Gazette*, 12 September 1750; Governor Gabriel Johnston to Duke of Bedford containing "An Account of Five Ships of the Spanish Flota put on Shore on the Coast of North Carolina by the Great Storm August 18, 1750" (hereafter cited as Respaldizar's report), *CRNC*, 4:1304, 1305; A report given to the Honourable Thomas Lee, Esq., Proceedings from the Council of Virginia in Williamsburg, 28 September 1750 (hereafter Report to Lee, 28 September 1750), in Richard Cook and Daniel Koski-Karell, "An Account of the Spanish Shipwreck 'La Galga' and the Loss of the Treasure

The thirty-gun galleon *Nuestra Señora de los Godos*, commanded by Captain Don Pedro de Pumarejo with Don Francisco de Ortiz sailing as supercargo (a representative of the cargo's owner) and silvermaster, was crewed by a hundred men. She carried perhaps the most illustrious passengers in the fleet, who included the viceroy of Mexico and his consort, the governor of Havana and his family, and the intendant (quartermaster general) of Chile and his family.³ Her cargo included 150,000 pieces-of-eight in 350 chests, cochineal, and other objects valued at over \$600,000, as well as general goods similar to those in *Guadeloupe*. One passenger carried an unregistered personal fortune of 200,000 Spanish milled dollars as well as a great quantity of diamonds.⁴

Three "register" ships, two Spanish and the other Portuguese, also readied themselves in the harbor. The Portuguese register *San Pedro*, belonging to Lisbon, was largely owned by English interests and was one of only two annual ships from Portugal permitted to sail with the Spanish fleet. Described variously as a frigate and as a snow, she had most recently sailed in May 1749 from Lisbon for Cartagena, on the Spanish Main, laden with bale goods. Having reached South America without incident, she had then taken on a cargo of cocoa, Brazil dyewoods, cochineal, logwood, and "a great quantity of money estimated at \$600,000," and then embarked for Havana to join the annual homeward-bound fleet. Her commander was an Irishman named John Kelley who, like many of his Catholic countrymen ever since the conquest of his homeland by Protestant England, had found comfortable employment in His Most Catholic Majesty the King of Spain's navy. His ship's

Fleet of 1750" (unpublished paper, 1989, copy in author's collection), 22. Various reports later reaching Virginia of the treasure aboard stated that the ship was carrying between 15,000 pesos and \$300,000.

³ Pumarejo to Vares y Valdes, 15 October 1750; President Lee to the Commissioners for Trade and Plantations, 30 August 1750, in Cook and Koski-Karell, "La Galga," 40-41; President Lee to Secretary of State, 30 August 1750, S.R. 246, Colonial Office 5/1338, ff. 85-86, Kew, United Kingdom, The National Archives; Report to Lee, 28 September 1750; *Maryland Gazette*, 12 September 1750. The *Maryland Gazette* claimed *Los Godos* carried forty guns, but President Lee's count is certainly far more reliable, although some guns tossed overboard may account for the difference.

⁴ Account of the vessels; Report to Lee, 28 September 1750; Henry R. McIlwaine and Wilmer L. Hall, eds., *Executive Journals of the Council of Virginia, 1680-1754*, 5 vols. (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1945) [hereafter cited as *EJC*], 5:334, 481; *Maryland Gazette*, 12 September 1750. It was reported that besides the 350 chests of dollars on board, *Los Godos* was also laden with a great quantity of cochineal, sugar, indigo, cocoa, and dye woods when she reached Norfolk. The *Maryland Gazette*, 12 September 1750, stated the ship carried 12 million pieces of eight onboard. Originally an English-built warship captured in the last conflict, *Guadeloupe* was somewhat atypical of the vessel types that made the annual round-robin tour between Old and New Spain. During the late war she had once narrowly missed capture by a British expedition that attacked an assembling fleet off Cuba. In late October 1749, she had sailed from Cadiz for Vera Cruz with European commercial goods, discharged her cargo, picked up another intended for Cuba, and at Havana loaded with sugar, logwood, and other merchandise intended for home. Lee to Secretary of State, 30 August 1750; *EJC*, 5:334-35.

master and supercargo was Don Manuel Martinez de Aquair.⁵

The second register ship, *Nuestra Señora de Soledad*, referred to as both a Spanish brigantine and as a small frigate, was captained by Don Manuel de Molbudro. Don Jose Renturo de Respaldizar, her supercargo (and owner of *Guadeloupe*), was also on board. Like other vessels of the fleet, the ship was laden with cochineal, hides, sugar, and at least fourteen chests containing \$40,000 in silver.⁶ The Cartagena packet ship *El Salvador*, nicknamed *El Glonorico*, was referred to as a snow, like *San Pedro*, in some reports. She was also owned by Don Jose Respaldizar who, although already embarked aboard *Soledad*, was to serve as her supercargo. Laden with 240,000 pesos register treasure besides private money, \$140,000 in gold and silver, cocoa, logwood, Brazil dyewood, cochineal, and balsam, the ship was commanded by Captain Don Juan Cruanas with Don Francisco Arizon serving as master.⁷ A small zumaca, or schooner-rigged advance boat, one of the king's ships, called the *Nuestra Señora de la Merced*, had also joined the gathering fleet. Like the rest, she was laden with a cargo of mahogany, cochineal, hides, snuff, and "a good many Chests of Money." Manned by eight men, *La Merced* had last sailed from Campeche to Porto Bello and from there to Havana under her commander, Captain Don Antonio Barroso.⁸

The guardian and most heavily armed ship of the fleet was *La Galga*, "the greyhound." This big fifty-gun frigate had sailed once before from Cadiz, in March 1748, as one of three convoy escorts for a fleet of merchantmen bound for New Spain. She was thus no stranger to the American coastline, or the dangers posed along the route by nature and the enemies of Spain alike.⁹ Command of *La Galga* had fallen to Don Daniel Huoni, (variously referred to as Don Daniel Huony, Woni, Mahoney, and even Onness). Like John Kelly, Huoni was "an Irish Gentleman" who had long been in the service of the king of Spain. The ship's master, like most of its crew, was a Spaniard: Don Thomas Velando.¹⁰ Because she was well armed and manned, and designated as the only convoy

⁵ Pumarejo to Vares y Valdes, 15 October 1750; *South Carolina Gazette*, 29 October 1750; *EJC*, 5:335; *Maryland Gazette*, 5 September 1750. A more accurate estimate of the value of her treasure was provided to the Council of Virginia as 150,000 pesos. Account of the vessels; Report to Lee, 28 September 1750. A snow was a two-masted merchant vessel, rigged as a brig with square sails on both masts but with a small try-sail mast stepped abaft the mainmast.

⁶ Pumarejo to Vares y Valdes, 15 October 1750; Account of the vessels; Respaldizar's report; Report to Lee, 28 September 1750.

⁷ Pumarejo to Vares y Valdes, 15 October 1750; Account of the vessels; Respaldizar's report; Report to Lee, 28 September 1750; *South Carolina Gazette*, 29 October 1750.

⁸ Pumarejo to Vares y Valdes, 15 October 1750; Account of the vessels; Report to Lee, 28 September 1750; *Maryland Gazette*, September 12, 1750. The vessel is variously described as a schooner, a sloop, a brig, and a brigantine.

⁹ Registry of *La Galga*, Legajo 138, Sección de Contratación, AGI.

¹⁰ Pumarejo to Vares y Valdes, 15 October 1750; Registry of *La Galga*, Captain, D. Daniel Huoni, master, D. Thomas Velando, Legajo 2476, Sección de Contratación, AGI; *Maryland Gazette*, 5 September 1750; *Virginia Gazette*, 5 September 1750. The official inventory included 480 pesos "fuertes"; 4,800 pesos in doubloons; 218 "castellanos", seven "tomines"

escort ship of the fleet, *La Galga* carried a most valuable cargo. Most of her lading had been shipped by the king's own Royal Company and included more than six hundred sacks of snuff, bundles of tobacco wrapped in fine linen, thirty cedar chests containing more than a million cigars, hundreds of mahogany planks ("the best which could be got" and destined for use in the construction of the interior of a new royal palace in Madrid), and four chests of official papers relating to the Spanish empire in the Americas. There was also a substantial quantity of gold and silver plate, numerous chests of doubloons, and treasures and other property belonging to the Catholic Church. As aboard *Guadeloupe*, chained below decks were more than fifty English, Dutch, and French prisoners, mostly mariners being sent home to Spain for purportedly violating Spanish colonial territorial waters for the purpose of smuggling.¹¹

Huoni was well aware that Spanish gold had more than once tempted the English to attack both the Spanish Main and homeward-bound plate fleets. As recently as October 1748, during the last days of the recent war, a British squadron had assaulted seven war galleons off the north coast of Cuba in a bold effort to capture an entire treasure fleet that had been delayed in sailing. Although the effort had been defeated after seven hours of combat, it had cost Spain two of its finest warships. Spanish privateering raids against English settlements on the Cape Fear River in North Carolina and on the Delaware coast did little to compensate for the loss. Now Huoni would have to pass perilously close to one of those same shores that had so recently been assailed.¹² Nevertheless, the Spanish were anxious to get under way. Even though Spain was temporarily enjoying a brief state of amity with her traditional rivals, they knew that the longer the fleet remained in port, the more danger there was for enemies, even pirates, to prepare an ambush. But it was the weather that proved the most worrisome. Through bitter experience gained over two hundred years, the Spanish were well aware that the hurricane season was already upon them. Yet they were willing to crowd that season, gambling that fear of the weather had driven potential attackers from the sea lanes. Finally, on 18 August, after all preparations had been completed, Captain General Juan Manuel de Bonilla ordered the flag raised aboard the *Almirante* to signal departure.

Although the weather was less than favorable, the Spanish fleet managed to depart Havana harbor and cross the Florida Straits to the coast of Florida without mishap. With experienced pilots aboard, they proceeded to enter the hazardous Bahama Channel. At the head of the fleet, *La Galga* plowed through the turquoise waters followed by *La Merced*, *Los Godos*, *San Pedro*, *Guadeloupe*, and *El Salvador*, with *La Soledad* bringing

and 8 grains of goldware; 30 marks of silverware; 119 "castellanos" of gold in three small chests; two pairs of "hevillas" and one of Inquisition emblems; five marks, six ounces of silver in seven little silver boxes; one Ivaro de Asta with gilded foot; and one leather bag and twelve ornate spoons (or scoops) of shell. The name Huoni may possibly be derived from the Gaelic Mahoney.

¹¹ Registry of *La Galga*, Legajo 138; *Maryland Gazette*, 5 September 1750.¹² Peter Wood and the Editors of Time-Life Books, *The Spanish Main* (Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1979), 171.

¹² Wood, *The Spanish Main*, 171.

up the rear.¹³ They proceeded past the Florida Keys, always keeping within sight of land but a safe distance from the deadly coral reefs that had claimed the lives of so many of their predecessors. Their speed increased as they picked up the powerful Gulf Stream. On 25 August, as the fleet entered latitude 29 degrees north off the deadly shores of Cape Canaveral, Don Pedro de Pumarejo, commander of *Nuestra Señora de Los Godos*, eyed the skies with increasing concern. In the early afternoon great Cimmerian clouds began to blacken the horizon to the northwest. Suddenly, "at three in the afternoon the wind hit us with great force from the north." Within a few hours, the blow had achieved gale force, hurling now out of the north-northeast with a terrifying intensity that increased with every passing minute. By evening, the tempest had shifted, now attacking from the south-southeast. By 8 p.m. the wind was so strong and loud that even voice communication on the quarterdeck of *Los Godos* was impossible. The storm was soon a full-blown hurricane, with the deadly winds now varying from every point of the compass.¹⁴

At the head of the fleet, *La Galga* began taking on water but plowed resolutely on, seemingly impervious to the increasingly vicious assaults of nature. Others, however, found themselves in more desperate straits. *Los Godos* was forced to sail with only fore and mizzenmasts unfurled. She soon found herself drifting to windward of *La Galga* and *Guadeloupe* and was obliged to furl her mizzens to bring her back to the fleet. By nightfall, she had safely rejoined her sister ships, but her difficulties were immediately renewed as she was forced to sail before the wind. In an instant, her tiller was carried away, and her foretopmast sheets were ripped asunder. Control of the ship and contact with the fleet were entirely lost. Her launch and boat had been severely damaged. Desperately, Pumarejo struggled to regain control of the ship. He ordered the mizzen cut away to bring her around to the wind; the lower deck was awash under several feet of water but the flooding still seemed manageable. On the evening of 26 August, the hold began to fill. "Then," Pumarejo later reported, "our work started." Unable to reduce the flooding even with two pumps working constantly, the captain ordered the great guns, the oven, and the damaged boats thrown overboard. The larger livestock onboard, many of which had already been killed "by the pounding seas," were also tossed over, but to little avail. The mountainous black ocean waves repeatedly washed over the ship. After each onslaught, *Los Godos* emerged intact, but always a little weaker than before. The timbers at her head were soon pounded so badly that the sea gushed freely through opened seams, filling her with nine feet of water below decks.¹⁵ *San Pedro* was in an equally dire situation. The stern of the Portuguese register had been stove in, and all of her boats had been carried away. With six feet of water in the hold and one mast already blown away, she began wallowing ever deeper in the heavy, dark troughs of the ocean. Captain Kelly also ordered as much of the cargo as could be spared tossed overboard to prevent

¹³ The sailing order is conjectural and is based on the final disposition of the fleet following the storm of 25-31 August. However, it was standard procedure for the most valuable vessels, such as *Los Godos*, *San Pedro*, and *Guadeloupe*, to have taken up position in the center of the fleet, proceeded, followed, and/or flanked by lesser ships.

¹⁴ *South Carolina Gazette*, 29 October 1750; Pumarejo to Vares y Valdes, 15 October 1750.

¹⁵ Pumarejo to Vares y Valdes, 15 October 1750.

foundering.¹⁶

Los Godos briefly sighted *Guadeloupe* on the twenty-eighth and observed that her mizzenmast was gone. By signals the two captains agreed that their ships were probably "dangerously close to the Carolina coast" and should seek to avoid it at all cost. Then contact, the last there would be between them, was lost. By dusk, the wind had subsided somewhat, but the heavy seas continued to pound away. The water level in the hold of *Los Godos* was still increasing. "Our two pumps," Pumarejo later reported, "only made us lose our breath. Even the chaplain and I worked the pumps, swimming in the water that always reached above the waist." A new tiller, installed to replace the old one washed away, was soon split in half. Pumarejo ordered yet another one rigged, but the seas simply stripped the bolts from the locks. Then the majestic lion figurehead that had graced the bow was ripped off by a giant wave. With each sickening roll, the forecandle dipped deeper and deeper beneath the troughs yet somehow managed to resurface. By now there was eleven-and-a-half feet of sea in the hold. "We kept taking water," recalled the captain, "and now realized there was no remedy to our plight other than the *Virgin Mary* . . . Thus we hoped for the dawn of the 29th, and as we waited, the top foremast fell, which was our only control of the ship."¹⁷

Pumarejo refused to surrender and everyone, including the captain, officers, priests, crew, and prisoners, worked without respite, struggling for their lives to keep *Los Godos* afloat. Holes were chopped through the between decks floors to let the waters pass more readily to the pumps below. By the morning of the twenty-ninth, depression was universal. "Finding ourselves in a miserable condition," Pumarejo reported, "we started dumping things overboard: chests, mattresses of officers and passengers, and cargo between decks, such as hides, dyewoods, meat, boxes – and always manning the pumps as our only hope of survival. At 8 [a.m.] we were hit by a great sea, and then another at 9½ [a.m.], so that all the oakum of the first deck were wiped out, water running all the way down, flooding our victuals, sails, gunpowder, etc."¹⁸

By now, every man and woman in the fleet despaired for his or her survival. As the distended gaggle of ships reached 33 degrees north latitude, all pretensions of maintaining convoy formation were abandoned.¹⁹ For seven days and nights, sea and sky had merged as one vast gray entity, visibly bifurcated only by the white-tipped frothing of gigantic wave crests. Now, as the hapless fleet, dispersed over many miles, was pushed relentlessly toward the coast of the Carolinas, each ship's crew assessed the grim prospects awaiting them. Many prayed for salvation, others for redemption.

The Outer Banks of North Carolina, toward which most of the ships were being driven, is a narrow strip of low, sandy coastal barrier islands, occasional perforated by shallow inlets, like much of the Delmarva coast to the north. Each island is isolated and separated from the mainland by vast, shallow sounds, occasionally thirty or more miles

¹⁶ *EJC*, 5: 335.

¹⁷ Pumarejo to Vares y Valdes, 15 October 1750.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *South Carolina Gazette*, 29 October 1750.

broad. The most prominent and easternmost feature of these remote isles is a hook of land known as Cape Hatteras, which juts into the Gulf Stream like the fin of a giant shark. It is here that the warm northbound current collides head on with the frigid waters of the Labrador Current. At this juncture a submerged, shallow, treacherous bar stretches many miles seaward. Known as Diamond Shoal, it causes the waters to remain in a constant, dangerous state of turbulence even in the calmest weather. Southwest of Hatteras, projecting from the underbelly of the Outer Banks, lies a second but no less hazardous projection called Cape Lookout, from which another perilous, submerged sand bar quietly awaits the unfortunate.²⁰

The crewmen of the Cartagena register packet boat *El Salvador* were the first of the Spanish fleet to encounter the ship-killing shoals of the Outer Banks, and certainly among the most unfortunate. On the night of the twenty-ninth, when they first discerned the sound of breakers on the shore near Topsail Inlet, not far from Cape Lookout, somewhere between fifteen and eighteen leagues south of Ocracoke Inlet, it was already too late. Whatever *El Salvador's* precise location may have been, the historic record is quiet about her last moments as she was driven ashore, stove by the waves, and split asunder on the beach. Only three crewmen and a ship's boy managed to escape from the shattered wreckage, albeit after saving eleven big boxes of the king's silver. Even as the bodies of the dead were dashing against the beach, human scavengers arrived to pick the bones of the late transport.²¹

El Salvador had not initially been alone in her final struggle for survival near Topsail Inlet, for near the site of her tragic loss, a Bermuda sloop had also become briefly stranded. Commanded and owned by a pair of Englishmen, Ephraim and Robert Gilvert, the sloop had been fortunate enough to escape destruction and had been quickly refloated. Then, incredibly, as the four bruised and half-drowned survivors of *El Salvador* watched in utter disgust, the Bermuda sloop came to anchor by the sandbank where the packet boat had split open. Despite the turbulent seas, the Gilverts commenced salvaging whatever could be removed, including sails and rigging, and then several chests of registered treasure. Not long after the Bermuda sloop departed, the wreck was again savaged by a renewed assault of wind and waves, and rapidly disappeared forever beneath seven- to eight-feet of sand.²²

²⁰ David Stick, *Graveyard of the Atlantic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1952), 1. The Outer Banks are a series of undersea sandbars but differ from the Newfoundland Banks and Bahama Banks in that they are also above the surface. They were first shown on Theodore DeBry's engraving of John White's 1585 map as "Promontorium Tremendum" and on the Velasco map of 1611 as "Cape Feare." The Outer Banks were used by Spanish privateers in the 1740s as a hiding place. Bankers living in the vicinity were sometimes employed in whaling, sighting them from the higher hills and then going out in rowboats. *Ibid.*, 2, 308.

²¹ Account of the vessels; Respaldir's report; Report to Lee, 28 September 1750; *South Carolina Gazette*, 29 October 1750; Pumarejo to Vares y Valdes, 15 October 1750; *New York Gazette*, 17 September 1750; *CRNC*, 3:1300-1308.

²² *South Carolina Gazette*, 29 October 1750; Respaldir's report; Account of the vessels.

The crewmen of *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* were far more fortunate than their compatriots aboard *El Salvador*. Captain Molbudro and his men had fought bravely to manage their charge to the very last, although everyone aboard knew their probable fate. Somewhere between ten and twelve leagues south of Ocracoke, near old Drum Inlet, the little frigate was also lost, together with most of her cargo of cochineal, hides, and sugar. Miraculously, her officers and crew not only survived but also managed to haul ashore all fourteen boxes of silver, later reckoned by North Carolina authorities to contain 32,000 pieces-of-eight, as well as some other lading.²³

The majestic *Nuestra Señora de Guadeloupe*, the Almirante of the fleet, with "its Masts broke Short," somehow rode with the storm until 30 August. Having been unable to take a reading because the sun had not appeared in days, Bonilla suddenly found his ship helpless, being blown toward a low, sandy coastline he correctly assumed was Hatteras. When "the weather became [a] little less boisterous and the wind shifted to S.W.," he brought the ship to anchor with two cables on end approximately five to six leagues south of the cape. Throughout the night, his ship rode out the storm, her cables straining and stretching, and her crew "expecting every moment to be driven ashore." But the anchors held.²⁴

The next morning, Bonilla took stock of his ship's shattered condition. She had lost her rudder, mizzenmast, main and foretop mastheads, and all of her sails. Her hold was full of water, and there were few provisions aboard (most having been ruined or thrown overboard). It was, he knew, imperative to seek a safe anchorage inside Ocracoke Bar to make whatever repairs possible. To maneuver the great ship in such a damaged condition across the notoriously dangerous bar in dirty weather would require not only a superb act of seamanship but also a considerable dose of good luck. Fortunately, the winds had subsided somewhat, although the seas remained dangerously high. He thus ordered a jury rig, a new sail fixed to the yard, and "after a great deal of trouble, care and charge," the ship was again able to maneuver a bit under her own sail – but just barely.²⁵

Bonilla was aware that he was now in a former enemy's territory, where hostility toward the Spanish for depredations conducted less than two years earlier were still fresh in everyone's memory. Moreover, many of his crewmen, led by a charismatic boatswain's mate named Pedro Rodriguez, wanted to run the ship ashore and save themselves. Some panicked crewmen, ignoring orders, even went into the hold and began throwing overboard everything they could lay their hands on. Apprised of their wishes and actions, Bonilla was furious. "I opposed it," he later reported, "considering that the lading would

²³ Respaldizar's report; Account of the vessels; Report to Lee, 28 September 1750. The first report of Soledad's loss was carried north by a merchant captain named Rivers who reached Philadelphia in but a few days, where it was soon being reported – out of all proportion to the truth – that the unfortunate register ship had been "cast away about 12 Leagues more to the South [of Ocracoke], and had on board a Million of Dollars, which was saved." *New York Gazette*, 17 September 1750; Pumarejo to Vares y Valdes, 15 October 1750.

²⁴ *South Carolina Gazette*, 29 October 1750; Respaldizar's report; *New York Gazette*, 17 September 1750.

²⁵ Harold T. Wilkins, *Pirate Treasure* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1937), 57-58.

be lost, and spoke to the officers and sailors in such strong terms as I could, to induce them to take care of His Majesty's interest. I promised them in the name of the principals, double wages as soon as we were in safety." His appeal fell on deaf ears, and a state of outright mutiny threatened. When he ordered one of the ship's boats to be lowered to explore the coast for a safe haven, the insurgents senselessly hacked it to pieces. Unable to trust his own men, Bonilla managed quietly to dispatch several passengers ashore in a tiny pinnace to reconnoiter the country. On their return, they informed him that they had seen cattle tracks going inland indicating the presence of inhabitants. He immediately determined to see for himself. Accompanied by an Englishman (possibly one of the prisoners) who had once lived in the Carolinas and had been entered on the muster roll of the ship at Havana, he set off to reconnoiter. From a few isolated inhabitants on the coast he discovered he was indeed on a most wild and desolate shore. The closest safe anchorage was inside Ocracoke Inlet, five leagues away. They were the same killing grounds where the infamous pirate Blackbeard had been defeated and beheaded in bloody battle more than thirty years before.²⁶

Bonilla and the Englishman did not return to *Guadeloupe* empty-handed, for while ashore they managed to hire an experienced local pilot to determine if it was even feasible to get the *Almirante* over Ocracoke Bar. The ship, it was soon evident, would have to be substantially lightened to get her in. Bonilla promptly purchased a small packet boat fortuitously found lying at Ocracoke to tow his ship over the bar. To protect the king's interests in the event the effort failed and the ship was lost, he took the precaution of ordering the chests of treasure brought up from the hold and carried ashore in the pinnace and several canoes that had also been purchased at Ocracoke. He nevertheless fretted that once ashore the treasure would be liable to capture by any strong force that might be in the vicinity.²⁷ After two days of backbreaking labor, more than fifty chests of silver had been hauled onto Ocracoke Island. Yet, even as the unloading was under way, a near mutiny once again interceded. Again led by Rodriguez, a large party of sailors seized all of the arms they could find. The sailors, fearing the loss of their ship might be used as an excuse to deny them payment of their salaries, since she had not completed her voyage, threatened to abandon ship unless immediately paid. Bonilla gave in. "I will give you your wages, and a gratuity," he promised, "if you will carry all of the silver and cochineal ashore." The sailors demanded their wages on the spot. Bonilla noted caustically that there was certainly enough money onboard for everyone to be paid off but that he had no authority to dip into the king's treasure to do so. As far as the mutineers were concerned, however, they had already ended their voyage and demanded their pay without delay, \$100 a man. If the admiral refused they would simply abandon the pumps and let the ship sink where she lay outside the bar.²⁸

Somehow, Bonilla convinced the mutineers to return to work, but his troubles continued. While in the middle of breaking bulk, several sailors began to indiscriminately smash open passengers' trunks, robbing them of jewelry and private property and

²⁶ Ibid., 58.

²⁷ Ibid., 58-59.

²⁸ Ibid., 59; Respaldizar's report.

committing other "outrages." Neither the captain nor Rodriguez, hitherto the acknowledged leader of the disgruntled crewmen, could persuade the thieves to return the stolen goods. The mate, having lost control of some of his own followers and worried of charges that likely would be leveled against him, now "looked upon himself as a man lost for ever."²⁹

Bonilla eventually regained control and the unloading was finally resumed. Preparations to bring *Guadeloupe* across the bar proceeded, albeit not quite as planned. The pilot, who had returned from the shore with Bonilla, had brought with him a makeshift rudder to replace the one lost by the Almirante, but it did not fit the ship and proved useless. Nevertheless, the packet boat began the slow process of towing the galleon toward the inlet. Finally, after a three-day effort, the great ship lay securely ensconced in the anchorage behind Ocracoke, the same road in which the greatest pirate in history had fought his famous battle to the death.³⁰ Sadly for Bonilla, *Nuestra Señora de Guadeloupe* pirates still abounded at Ocracoke. The remaining vessels of the fleet, which had swept even further northward, had continued their individual life-and-death struggles with the sea. For seven days Captain Pumarejo and his crew had fought valiantly to save *Los Godos*. They tossed everything overboard, retaining only the king's treasures and some small cargo. There was little more that could be done except pray for a miracle and plug up holes. "The wind and sea," wrote the demoralized commander, "are so strong we are persuaded to die."³¹

On August 30, a half hour after noon, as Pumarejo's men completed more work reinforcing the hull, a sudden calm fell over the sea, "but the sky looked horrible." The eye of the storm was passing over, and the captain seized the moment to put on some canvas to regain a modicum of control, but in vain. Within ninety minutes, the hurricane resumed, this time with a ferocious wind blowing in from the southeast. *Los Godos* ran on under bare poles, pressed first in a north-northwest direction, then on a north-northeasterly course, and finally back to the west, her stern always to the sea. Collision with the land seemed inevitable, yet all aboard hoped "to prolong our drift and to hit the shore with the least possible force."³²

The weary men of *Los Godos* continued to work the pumps throughout the night and into the morning of 31 August. About 8:00 a.m. the winds began to subside and conditions improved dramatically. The storm had finally passed. Pumarejo ordered some sails raised on the naked masts and began to search for a landing spot. At 9:00, land was sighted. Three hours later the sun appeared, and the captain took his first sighting in a week. He estimated his position at 36 degrees 4 minutes north and knew that the beach lay due west. With his ship in sinking condition, there was now little choice but to steer for it and hope for the best.³³

²⁹ Wilkins, *Pirate Treasure*, 59-60.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Pumarejo to Vares y Valdes, 15 October 1750.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

"By noon," Pumarejo later reported, "we were two leagues from shore, in latitude 36 degrees, 38 minutes. Noticing a creek which seemed like a port entrance, we sailed for it. About one league from shore, in 6 braces of water, I decided to drop anchor, persuading everyone that we were already safe, and that we [had] worked too hard to abandon the ship now. A Spanish flag was hoisted, and we fired our cannon repeatedly. We were approached by a pirate [wrecker's] canoe that was there to pick up the spoils of two English ships that had sunk on Saturday the 29th, with no survivors except a boy. The canoe approached us around five in the afternoon. We brought a man aboard, who informed us this was the end of the coast of Carolina to the north, that there were no port facilities, that the two lost ships were about half a league away, and that 15 miles to the north was the Virginia River [Chesapeake Bay]. He said he would guide us there, where we would be able to find a local pilot. Accepting his offer, we awaited a divine favor. The water [in the hold] stayed 7 feet through the night."³⁴

With weather improving, *Los Godos* pressed on for the Chesapeake at 2:30 the next morning, "hoping to save the remaining cargo that had not been damaged by the sea." Soon after noon, as the ship approached Cape Henry, Pumarejo saw two vessels limping toward his own. One was *San Pedro*, almost mastless, and the other was a stranger, a Spanish sloop later identified as *Mariana*, Captain Don Antonio Ianasio de Anaya, blown well off course while bound from Campeche for Santo Domingo with a cargo of logwood, hides, and snuff. Pumarejo later reported, "When defeated by the hurricane, she [*Mariana*] met the aforesaid Portuguese [*San Pedro*] in whose company she arrived at this inlet of Cape Henry." Several hours later, a pilot boat from Hampton appeared on the scene to shepherd the "terribly shattered" trio into the harbor. The miracle Pumarejo and his men had prayed for had been granted. It was not so for *La Galga* and the little *zumaca Merced*.³⁵

Six leagues above Cape Charles, Don Antonio Barroso and his seven men had struggled to keep their charge, *La Merced*, a safe distance from the coast without losing their lives or the "good many Chests of Money" and other cargo aboard. The Machipongo Shoal proved their undoing, where the king's schooner was driven ashore. Barroso and the crew managed to reach the beach soon after their ship was stranded on the shoals. They watched as its back was broken and the vessel was then savagely beaten to pieces.³⁶

³⁴ Ibid.; *EJC*, 5:333-36. The creek that was sighted was probably Currituck Inlet, which was closed off entirely some years later.

³⁵ The President of Virginia, Thomas Lee, reported the vessel was heading for Porto Bello. *EJC*, 5:480; Pumarejo to Vares y Valdes, 15 October 1750; Report to Lee, 28 September 1750; *South Carolina Gazette*, 29 October 1750.

³⁶ Pumarejo to Vares y Valdes, 15 October 1750; Account of the vessels; Report to Lee, 28 September 1750; *Maryland Gazette*, 5 September 1750. The only suggestion that part of the treasure might have been saved, and that the ship was lost, came in a report published in the *Maryland Gazette* stating that "the Brigantine [sic], having on board a good many Chests of Money, was drove on Machapungo Shoals, and lost, but the Crew and part of the Money saved." *Maryland Gazette*, 12 September 1750. Pumarejo reported only that the vessel was "grounded" (not lost) and that there was no news of the eight men aboard.

But what of the great and majestic shepherd of the fleet, *La Galga*, the greyhound? Captain Huoni's command, like all of the ships under his care, had indeed been pushed helplessly before the winds, albeit far to the north of the rest. He had, in fact, parted company with the Flota about the latitude of Bermuda, and passed by the Outer Banks and Virginia capes without sighting them. Like all of the ships in the convoy, however, *La Galga* had been driven relentlessly westward, as her mainmast, foretop and mizzen masts snapped, and more than seven feet of water filled her hold. At Huoni's order, seven guns had been pushed overboard as the lumbering giant wallowed deeper and deeper between each crest of the sea. Later, another fifteen would follow.³⁷

When the first chilling sound of waves dashing against a shoreline was heard above the storm, Huoni and all aboard knew their ship's inevitable fate. Then, with a sickening bump that jarred all aboard, *La Galga* struck a shoal, tearing off her rudder in the process. Within seconds she was driven into a shallow trough between the mainland and the bar. The captain immediately ordered an anchor dropped. The big warship's forward motion came to a sudden halt in five fathoms of water, albeit straining every fiber of her cable to hold firm.³⁸ Even as the great anchor clawed its flukes into the sandy bottom, pandemonium ruled on deck. The ship had already "received so much damage, that they could scarce keep her from sinking," and the crew were well aware that she might soon bilge and break up beneath their feet. In a near panic, several men hoisted out the small boats, but to no use as all were immediately stove to pieces as they were lowered.³⁹ Captain Huoni retained his composure throughout the crisis, even if many of his men did not. With the ship certain to break up at any time, he ordered the release of the prisoners confined below decks. Many crewmen and prisoners alike chose to take their chances by swimming ashore through the pounding surf. Three unfortunates drowned, including two Spaniards who had "tied so much Money round their Waists, that they sunk with it," and a Mr. Edgar of New York, who had succumbed while swimming toward his freedom.⁴⁰

Never losing sight of his mission, Huoni struggled to save both his crew and as much of the king's property as possible, particularly the treasure. With enormous waves smashing against the side of his ship, the captain set his weary men to lashing together a raft, probably from the deck cargo of mahogany, upon which they might transport both the treasure and themselves to safety. The official Spanish account later stated that the endeavor was a success. Only one soldier was lost and "a good deal of Money" and "other Things of Value" were brought ashore and "mostly saved." The effort was probably more costly than the formal government reports indicated, however. Reports in the colonial American press, undoubtedly related by liberated prisoners who had been

³⁷ *New York Gazette*, 10 September 1750; *South Carolina Gazette*, 29 October 1750.

³⁸ *New York Gazette*, 10 September 1750.

³⁹ *Maryland Gazette*, 5 September 1750; *South Carolina Gazette*, 29 October 1750.

⁴⁰ *Maryland Gazette*, 5 September 1750; *New York Gazette*, 10 September 1750. The initial Spanish report stated that everyone aboard except one soldier was saved, although Pumarejo's account correctly reported five men lost but incorrectly noted they were all sailors. Account of the vessels; Pumarejo to Vares y Valdes, 15 October 1750.

there, stated that "two Men, and two Chests of Money, were wash'd off and lost."⁴¹

After considerable effort, *La Galga's* haggard survivors, Spanish, English, French, Irish, and Dutch alike – now leveled to equality through misfortune – finally gained the shore.⁴² Don Daniel Huoni may have pondered his good fortune at surviving, but the struggle that lay ahead, to bring his men and the king's treasure home safely to Spain, was undoubtedly foremost in his thoughts. For as far as the eye could see lay nothing but an uninhabited strip of sand backed by shallow dunes and hummocks covered by sparse vegetation. A hasty reconnaissance revealed that behind the dunes lay a wide, shallow sound. They were, the captain suspected, on one of the coastal barrier islands of either Virginia or Maryland, entirely cut off from the mainland. Yet, the Spanish were anything but alone, for English eyes had watched them from the dunes, even as they had hauled their weary bodies onto the beach – along with the king's treasure. The wreckers had arrived. As night fell, no one noticed the prisoners as they slipped off into the darkness and freedom.

It was not long after the stranding of *La Galga* that the Spaniards and the local inhabitants made contact. The initial encounters proved entirely peaceful. Huoni was first informed that his ship had come to grief on Assateague Island, in Virginia territorial waters. The locals of these destitute shores were no strangers to shipwrecks and had for years eked out profits from scavenging materials and cargoes from many strandings. "The Commodore who is an Irishman and Speaks very Good English," the Sheriff of Worcester County, Maryland, later wrote, was asked by the inhabitants "for the Vessell to give it [to] them but he told [them that] the Owner of the Land owned the Ship and he could not give her." The captain was, however, delighted to learn that at the little river port of Snow Hill, in Worcester County, Maryland, he could procure a vessel to carry his men and the salvaged treasure to Hampton Roads where they might regroup with other survivors of the fleet. Thus, with renewed hope and a final look at the sad wreck of *La Galga*, the Irish sea captain and his Spanish stalwarts set off. "The Commodore and his crew of Soldiers," it was reported soon after in Annapolis, "got of the Neighbours Small Crafts and Came a Cross our Sound to the Main, and got his Riches Over and Carted them to Snowhill, which Consisted Chiefly in Silver Several very heavy Chests, and got two Sloops at Snowhill" to carry them to Elizabeth River, Virginia.⁴³ With the Spanish finally gone, the wreckers of Assateague immediately set about their work.

It was probably while at Snow Hill that Huoni first learned that almost as soon as he had departed from the beach, the "Country People" began to turn out in numbers to

⁴¹ *Maryland Gazette*, 5 September 1750.

⁴² Although as many as 50 prisoners may have been aboard *La Galga*, it was reported in the *Maryland Gazette* that "By the Man of War's being lost, about 20 Englishmen, who had been made Prisoners by the Spaniards, and were on board her, have got their Liberty. One of the Men belonged to Capt. Walter Wrench, in a fine Ship from Virginia; who we hear, was seized at the Havanna, where Capt. Wrench now remains a Prisoner." *Maryland Gazette*, 5 September 1750.

⁴³ "Proceedings of the Council of Maryland, 1750," Archives of Maryland, 28: 481-82, 493; *Maryland Gazette*, 5 September 1750.

plunder the wreck, which remained ensconced on the bar just as the Spaniards had left her. Indeed, it was soon being reported as far away as Annapolis that "People at and about Worcester County, are every Day, in good Weather, fishing what they can out of her, and have found a considerable Booty." Huoni was further informed that there were four Virginians, Ralph Justice, William Gore, Thomas Crippen, and Thomas Bonnewall, apparently managing the organized looting of the Spanish king's property "to the value of some Hundred Pounds." Still believing that the wreck lay in Virginia territory, the captain wrote to the president of the Executive Council of Virginia requesting an opinion as to what might be done.⁴⁴

In the meantime, as word of the disaster spread, Sheriff John Scarborough of Worcester County arrived on the scene to investigate and found that the wreckers and their slaves were indeed already hard at work. Their scene of industry was formidable. The ship still lay on a shoal of sand. "She has," the sheriff reported, "many large Pieces of Cannon on board two fine Anchores at her bowes abundance of all Sorts of Rigging and Sails in her hold and amount Supra." The salvors had already removed two hundred small arms, together with belts and slings, swords and bayonets, some very large copper pots of several sizes and smaller ones in abundance, all of the ship's standing and running rigging, iron crow bars and a variety of tools, as well as many thousands of pounds of tobacco "made Strong in Wrappers." The salvors had "hove the Tobacco out for the Sake of Linnen Wrappers and the Tobacco now on board is [in] good Order." Moreover, there was still onboard a substantial quantity of very valuable mahogany. "There is many thousands of pounds worth," the sheriff noted, "if it could be got before the Ship bursts with the Sea and Sinks into the Land."⁴⁵

The initial reportage on the location of *La Galga's* fatal contact with the coast of America was muddled at best and totally inaccurate at worst. The first official Spanish account, which was replicated by a report presented to President Thomas Lee of the Virginia Council, acting governor of Virginia, stated the loss occurred fifteen leagues north of Cape Charles. The first account reaching a major port, the city of Philadelphia, was carried by former prisoner Captain James Maloney, of the ship *Shepherdess* that had earlier been seized at Havana. Maloney stated that *La Galga* struck Chincoteague Shoal and two days later was driven onto Chincoteague Island. It was also reported the ship was cast away fourteen leagues south of the Delaware capes. Another prisoner account, that of Captain Walter Wrench, master of a Virginia ship also seized at Havana, was published at Annapolis in the *Maryland Gazette* but possibly confused the wreck with that of *Merced* stranded on Machipongo Shoal.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Archives of Maryland, 28: 482; *EJC*, 5:337; *Maryland Gazette*, 5 September 1750.

⁴⁵ Archives of Maryland, 28: 482.

⁴⁶ Account of the vessels; Report to Lee, 28 September 1750; *New York Gazette*, 10 September 1750; *South Carolina Gazette*, 29 October 1750; *Maryland Gazette*, 5 September 1750. Maloney stated that the gale occurred on August 18 and 19, and she struck the shoals on August 24 and the island on August 26, which contravenes Pumarejo's sequence for the storm, which is obviously extracted from a daily log of the event. As Maloney had long been a prisoner and may have lost track of time, he is to be forgiven. If *La Galga* had been lost 14 leagues south of the Delaware Capes, the position would be about 24 miles north of the

Although Scarborough had conversed with some of the wreckers, he was uncertain as to whether or not the wreck lay in Virginia or Maryland waters and recommended that the salvors "be easy" until he had secured the opinion of Governor Samuel Ogle and the Council of Maryland. As they had told Huoni, the wreckers informed the sheriff in no uncertain terms that "the Vessel was in Virginia as there were several Gentlemen with their Slaves all at work from Virginia" and they simply were not about to pay heed to anything anyone said to them, least of all some official from Maryland.⁴⁷ The sheriff, however, got a different version from the actual inhabitants of the area, who had already asked permission from Huoni to salvage the ship. The "People living on the Beach," Scarborough informed the governor, "tell me that she lies two miles within Maryland lines," and therefore right of salvage belonged to Lord Baltimore, the proprietor of Maryland.⁴⁸

Taking the opportunity of informing Ogle and the Council of Maryland of the disaster, via one Thomas Harris, who was traveling to Annapolis, Scarborough reiterated from what he had learned that the Spanish warship had, in fact, "Stranded on our Beach." On September 13 the governor took action, noting that *La Galga* "hath been deserted by the Commander Officers & Mariners thereof after they had Saved all they could of the Rigging Equipment & Cargoe of the said Ship" and that "Several Evil Minded Persons have contrary to all Law and Justice" taken possession of the ship's guns, tackle, apparel and equipment, and other goods and cargo, as well as "several Parcells of Money" for their own use. He instructed Sheriff Scarborough to retrieve all of the materials salvaged by the locals "untill the Right thereto shall be Lawfully determined," and empowered him to call into service as many persons as deemed necessary to execute the directive. Moreover, he was instructed to find out who the culprits were and what had originally been left behind in the ship's inventory when the Spanish departed. Ogle also wrote President Lee of Virginia requesting that he find out where the materials were that had already been stolen from the wreck "taken into the Possession of some Persons within your Govern[men]t" but "lost within the Limits of this Province."⁴⁹

It may have been when Sheriff Scarborough met with Captain Huoni, presumably while the latter was securing transports at Snow Hill, that Scarborough informed him "that her Decks were cut up by the Country People of both Provinces and Carried away." The captain may also have informed him that not only the Virginians already mentioned but also a "Gang" of Marylanders, including Thomas Robins, Daniel Mifflin, and one Mr. Dalason, had "carried away Effects and Stores to the Value of a Considerable Sum." These had already been seized by the sheriff.⁵⁰ Huoni and his men had proceeded without incident from Snow Hill to Hampton Roads. On reaching Norfolk the captain penned a letter to Ogle to request that the King of Spain's rights and interest in the wreck be preserved. In the interest of amity and the recent treaty of peace agreed by England and

present Maryland-Virginia border and clearly in Maryland territorial jurisdiction.

⁴⁷ Archives of Maryland, 28: 482.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 483, 486.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 493.

Spain, the king must be allowed to recover what rightfully belonged to him "after deducting the Customary Salvage" or "what the Law allows to the Possessors in such Cases." The captain concluded with a sad note that he had learned "that a late Storm having broke the Hull to Pieces, 200 Stock or Planks of Mahogany that were Cast on Shore on [the] Virginia Side [of the border] were Purchased (as reported) at a very low Price by a Merchant of Snow Hill."⁵¹ Upon receipt of Huoni's letter on 3 November, Ogle responded favorably. He assured the captain that he would do everything he could to recover the plundered goods and had already issued orders to that effect. He recommended that the captain authorize some person to receive the mahogany and the other effects previously recovered.⁵²

As the affair at Assateague was playing out, that at Ocracoke was entering a new phase. As soon as Bonilla managed to subdue his rebellious crewmen with promises and bring his ship to a questionably safe haven behind Ocracoke Island, it had been necessary to temporarily remove much of the crew from *Guadeloupe* to offload the rest of the treasure. Unfortunately, during the ship's first night behind Ocracoke, while Bonilla and part of his crew were still ashore, a Bahamian snow named *Carolina* appeared on the scene and quietly made fast to the ship. Bonilla had worried about such unexpected arrivals. "I was afraid," he later wrote, "of the insults from Englishmen who resorted to the coast." Deeming the Almirante fair game, the snow's crew boarded her, apparently without opposition from the handful of Spaniards left aboard, stormed the guard room in an effort to seize firearms locked therein and then tried to steal some silver that had been stored in the pilot's house ashore. The guards Bonilla had placed at both places had remained loyal and soon repulsed the invaders. Nevertheless, before the raiders left they proceeded to plunder part of the ship's lading and break open a chest containing a packet of letters.⁵³

The prevailing lawlessness seemed only to revive the mutiny. The crew again demanded more money. The captain offered them nine dollars a month, but they wanted twelve. Again he promised them their wages, and again most were subdued, but not for long. Undoubtedly fearing retribution later when they returned to Spanish authority, and convinced they would receive little more than promises, some found and chartered an English snow and then departed, leaving Bonilla with but a handful of loyal seamen and passengers to protect the treasure. Ironically, Rodriguez was among those who chose to stay.⁵⁴ Beleaguered at every turn, Bonilla had little choice now but to seek the assistance of his country's erstwhile enemy, the provincial government of North Carolina. The Ocracoke pilot was thus sent by sea to obtain the support of Governor Gabriel Johnston to provide adequate vessels to take *Guadeloupe's* lading to Hampton Roads or to some other secure port. Bonilla was unaware that the governor was already well apprised of the tragedy that had befallen the Spanish.

Don Jose Renturo de Respaldizar, supercargado aboard *La Soledad*, who had

⁵¹ Ibid., 493-94.

⁵² Ibid., 494.

⁵³ Wilkins, *Pirate Treasure*, 60.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

survived the calamity that had befallen his own ship and then made his way to New Bern, had informed the governor of the loss of possibly as many as five of the seven ships in the fleet. He had also lodged a complaint regarding the looting of *El Salvador*. Johnston immediately issued orders for the apprehension of the piratical Gilverts and their crew and the confiscation of their sloop. Indeed, he may have even helped the survivors secure passage to New England from whence they planned to take ship for Cadiz. Bonilla, however, was entirely ignorant of the events to the south and stayed focused on his own preservation and that of the king's property in his charge. He also dispatched a letter to Captain Huoni, whom he learned had arrived at Norfolk, seeking his assistance in moving the far more important treasure from Ocracoke to safety. The captain-general was well aware that the treasure was no longer safe in a simple pilot's home, no matter how strong the guard might be. He had had to split up his few remaining loyalists, with one party guarding the ship and the other protecting the treasure ashore. He thus decided to reconsolidate his forces, treasure and cargo by moving them all back to the ship.⁵⁵

Returning to *Guadeloupe*, Bonilla again found himself in a most precarious position. Though lying behind Ocracoke Island, the low shoreline provided poor shelter against the foul fall Atlantic weather that buffeted the coast. Moreover, the anchorage he was in was so shallow that even at high water *Guadeloupe's* keel was bumping against the bottom. When the tide ebbed, the hull was literally battered against the shoal by the rise and fall of the water, and the sternpost was now in danger of collapse. He tried shifting his anchorage, but to little effect.⁵⁶ At this critical juncture, two bilander sloops appeared on the scene. One was a New Englander called *Seaflower*, commanded by Zebulon Wade of Scituate, Massachusetts, the other a New Jerseyman from Perth Amboy named *Mary*, Samuel FitzRandolph master and owner. Despite the piratical actions of the last English visitors to the scene, and his own fears that the newcomers might play another "scurvy trick," Bonilla guardedly viewed the arrival of the two sloops as an opportunity. The winds remained high and the water quite shoal in the shelterless cove, and his ship might be bilged at any worsening of the weather.

For Bonilla there seemed to be little choice: "the Intrigues and Artifices of Pedro Rodriguez Boatswain of the said ship [made] His Men very mutinous and ungovernable, the said Boatswain having got most of the Men on His side and under Pretence of going to Virginia." Calling his remaining loyalists together for a conference, the admiral proposed employing the two shallow-draft sloops "to keep his money and other effects on board, 'till he could either hire or buy another ship." It was so agreed. For some reason, perhaps to curry his favor, Rodriguez was sent aboard *Mary* to negotiate an arrangement to carry the cargo to Norfolk. One of FitzRandolph's crew, William Waller of Woodbridge, New Jersey, served as interpreter. Within a short time, *Mary's* master had agreed to transport the lading to Virginia for a fee of 570 pieces-of-eight. A similar agreement was made with the master of *Seaflower*. Soon afterward the Spaniard returned with fifteen hands in a launch to haul the two sloops alongside *Guadeloupe*.⁵⁷ On or about

⁵⁵ Ibid., 61; Respaldizar's report; Account of the vessels.

⁵⁶ Wilkins, *Pirate Treasure*, 61; Respaldizar's report; Account of the vessels.

⁵⁷ Wilkins, *Pirate Treasure*, 61; Respaldizar's report; Account of the vessels; *South Carolina*

October 5, as the transfer of treasure was under way, a certain Colonel Innes arrived bearing a letter from Governor Johnston, summoning Bonilla to New Bern to answer charges of illegally breaking bulk in the colony without permission. Bonilla, who had been expecting assistance, not a summons, was stunned. Fortunately, having also been sent to specifically inquire into *Guadeloupe's* situation, the colonel was not unsympathetic to the Spaniard's plight. He had become immediately suspicious of the intentions of *Mary* and *Seaflower* and expressed his fears to Bonilla that the sloops would attempt to run away with the treasure. He even volunteered to take possession of them. In the meantime, a sloop-of-war might be provided for the purpose of carrying the money to safety. But to do so, it would be necessary for Bonilla to accompany him to meet with the governor. The Spaniard readily accepted. Rodriguez, however, now backed by many of the remaining crew and fearing that if the English got their hands on the treasure neither he nor his men would ever be paid, vehemently protested and "would not suffer the Money to be moved." Nevertheless, Bonilla set off immediately with the colonel.

To prevent any larceny while he was away, although fifty-five chests of treasure along with a substantial cargo of cocoa, cochineal, and sugar had already been transferred to *Seaflower* and upward of fifty-four to *Mary*, Bonilla ordered the loading operation halted. He issued written instructions to the mate, signed by both himself and Captain Molviedo, to have the two vessels' sails carried ashore where they would be guarded until his return, for without sails the two sloops could not possibly leave. Then he ordered ten loyal armed men placed aboard each vessel to prevent any underhanded actions. The holds of both vessels in which the treasure chests had been stowed were to be barred, locked, and kept under constant guard.

Such precautions, it turned out, mattered little. Seven crewmen aboard *Mary*, at first without the knowledge of their captain, had already conspired to rob the kitty locked up aboard their own vessel. Two of the conspirators, Thomas Edwards and Kinsey FitzRandolph, slipped into the water and cut a hole at the foot of the larboard cabin, through the bulkhead and into the hold in which the treasure had been stored. With the guards standing outside the cabin entirely unaware, the bank was successfully raided twice without detection right under their noses. In one robbery alone, FitzRandolph retrieved 748 pieces-of-eight, 708 of which he gave to his father while retaining the rest for himself. The raids continued, and the piratical crewmen were so successful that they twice divided the spoils. Some among them, however, were for calling it quits before their thievery was discovered. William Waller took the opportunity of a visit to another sloop that was then riding innocently at anchor in Ocracoke to book passage back to his home at Middletown, New Jersey, and escaped clean with his share of ill-gotten gains. Yet the seamen's escapades palled by comparison to a cabal hatched between Captain Wade, Captain FitzRandolph, and one Owne Lloyd, who "had armed themselves for that purpose, to run away with what was put on board their vessels."⁵⁸

Gazette, 29 October 1750; *CRNC*, 3:1306-7; Frederick W. Ricord, ed., *Documents Relating to the Colonial History of the State of New Jersey* (Trenton: John L. Murphy, 1891), 4: 278.

⁵⁸ Wilkins, *Pirate Treasure*, 61-62; *South Carolina Gazette*, 29 October 1750; *CRNC*, 3:1307; Ricord, *Documents*, 4: 278, 279.

True to form, Pedro Rodriguez proved as untrustworthy as ever and may have even been a partner to the conspiracy that ensued. Whatever his later excuses may have been, he had neglected to remove the sails of at least one, and possibly both, of the bilanders and had posted no guard on board *Guadeloupe*. On 9 October, with Bonilla far away, and a fresh, fair wind blowing, the English pirates, led by Owne Lloyd, put their plan into action. About noon and without warning, the two vessels cut their cables and put out to sea. The astonished Spaniards immediately took up pursuit in a longboat, firing their guns as they scuttled along like an elongated water bug. *Seaflower*, commanded in the action by one William Blackstock, alias William Davidson, and navigated by Lloyd, nevertheless successfully carried off "55 chests of money, some trunks of gold and silver wrought plate, and 155 bales of cochineal and other things." Though described as a "dull Sailer" and carrying no more than ten men aboard, and soon also pursued by the *Guadeloupe*'s pinnace, the pirate sloop made a clean escape over the bar and sailed away for the West Indies. FitzRandolph's sloop, however, had the misfortune of missing stays and, perhaps slowed in the escape effort by the plugged hole in her side cut by the crew, ran aground in the roads. She was quickly boarded and captured by a launch from *Guadeloupe*. On learning of the piracy, Bonilla was devastated. "I fell very ill of shock," he morosely informed the Marquis de la Ensenada, "and nearly died. I am very weak and in ill health now." He placed the blame for the affair squarely on Rodriguez, who with fifty men under his command had failed to stop the slow-sailing *Seaflower* and had succeeded in taking *Mary* only because she had run aground.⁵⁹

Bonilla once again requested aid from Governor Johnston. The governor immediately ordered His Majesty's sloop-of-war *Scorpion* to sail for Ocracoke Bar and take onboard "fifty Chests of Dollars, and thirteen Bags of Cochineal, and a few small other matters," as well as some wrought silver, one small chest of precious jewels, twelve silver plates with spoons and forks, and 134 bales of cochineal, all that remained of the cargo. He also dispatched expresses to the West Indies and all parts of North America "to give Notice of the Robbery, and likewise Two Schooners well Man'd and Arm'd, to Search the Coast least they [the pirates] should be lurking [in] some Creek there." Boatswains mate Rodriguez, with the help of the English, was placed in irons for his refusal to move the silver, an act of mutiny punishable by death.⁶⁰

The fateful hurricane of August 1750 had been a dreadful disaster to shipping on the coast. Besides the Spanish casualties, no fewer than nine English ships had been lost on the mid-Atlantic seaboard alone, three of which had succumbed at Currituck Inlet, leaving but a single survivor. Two ships and a schooner from Barbados had been lost at Ocracoke, and two sloops and a schooner had stranded at Hampton, Virginia. Yet for days, weeks, and months after the loss of the Flota, the two ships that had managed to make Hampton Roads, *Los Godos* and *San Pedro*, and their officers and crews lived in a

⁵⁹ Wilkins, *Pirate Treasure*, 62; *South Carolina Gazette*, 29 October 1750; *New York Gazette*, 12 November 1750; *CRNC*, 3: 1307.

⁶⁰ *CRNC*, 3: 1307. The value of the treasure carried back to Spain aboard *Scorpion* was later reported by Johnston "to the Sum of 16275½ heavy Dollars, as well for the Freight of the Ship at the Rate of 2 p cent." *Ibid.*, 1310.

netherworld of colonial English bureaucracy. Hoping to refit and sail for home with what treasure remained, they soon learned that both their ships' repairs and departure would be seriously delayed.⁶¹ President Lee ordered an inspection of their papers and the inventory of their cargo "and so take care that no civility due to the subject of a Province in amity with His Majesty be wanting, and they be not on any Pretence whatsoever suffered to carry on any illicit Trade as this is a Thing that is new, never having happened here before."⁶²

By early October, Don Felipe Garcia, *Guadeloupe's* pilot, who was unaware of the latest events at Ocracoke, had finally arrived at Norfolk to charter a vessel to begin the salvage of his ship and what cargo remained in her. He brought news of the loss of *El Salvador* and *Soledad* and informed his comrades in the city that Governor Johnston had already begun investigating the illegal salvage of the former by the Gilverts and the impounding of their sloop and imprisonment of its captain. Captains Huoni of *La Galga* and Anaya of *La Merced* had by this time also arrived safely at Norfolk. Huoni quickly petitioned President Lee, albeit not without some trepidation, for permission to hire ships to transport the cargoes salvaged from the fleet back to Spain. His fellow officer, Captain Pumarejo, was not sanguine about their chances. "Because greed is inseparable from these neighbors," he had already concluded about his nation's former blood enemy, "because of their limited reasoning, and the great disobedience of our own seamen, added to the rebellious character of the inhabitants of this coast who know no Justice and Government other than their interest, I live in constant fear of being insulted [assaulted] with no defence [other] than Providence."⁶³

Pumarejo's fears were not to be realized, for the Council of Virginia readily gave its permission to land and warehouse all cargoes and to dispose of at public auction whatever goods were damaged. If the ships were found unseaworthy and had to be condemned, all passengers aboard were to "have Free Liberty to go home with all their Goods and Effects in the Ship *Jubilee* or any other Vessel they shall think proper."⁶⁴ Soon after permission was granted to unload the ships, a survey of *Los Godos* was conducted and reported to the president of the council. The inspectors discovered "that by the violence of the weather the ships bow is started from the butts end and the stern post loose from the transum two beams and several knees broke the ends of several other beams worked off the stamps and upon the whole find the floor and futtock timbers quite rotten and decayed and of consequence incapable of being repaired and in our opinion ought to be condemned." A survey was also carried out on *San Pedro*, which was determined to be "too rotten to be repaired" and without "being wholly rebuilt anew

⁶¹ *New York Gazette*, 10 September 1750; *Maryland Gazette*, 12 September 1750; *EJC*, 5: 333-36, 347; Pumarejo to Vares y Valdes, 15 October 1750.

⁶² *EJC*, 5: 333-36; Lee to the Lords of Trade, 3 October 1750, in Cook and Koski-Karell, "La Galga," 40; Lee to Commissioners of Trade and Plantations, 30 August 1750.

⁶³ Pumarejo to Vares y Valdes, 15 October 1750. One might suggest that there is some irony in Pumarejo's attitude regarding the English, especially in light of Spanish seizures of English vessels and men on the high seas and their own cruel treatment of them.

⁶⁴ Lee to Commissioners for Trade and Plantation, 30 August 1750; *EJC*, 5: 335-36; Lee to Secretary of State, October 3, 1750, in Cook and Koski-Karell, "La Galga," 49.

which will amount to the value of a new ship she cannot proceed nor be repaired."⁶⁵

On 6 November, Lee gave Pumarejo and his associates permission to carry their cargoes to Europe and expressed the desire, for their own safety, that "they will leave this colony before Winter sets in too hard." Undoubtedly with an eye to the issue of territorial sovereignty in the Spanish American colonies and cordial reciprocity for future treatment of English mariners, he insured that they be furnished with everything that was necessary as friends and trusted "that the good image they have had here will occasion those Nations to use his Majestys Subjects well that may at any time fall into their hands." Not until the end of March 1751 would Bonilla, ailing and humiliated, petition the Council of Virginia, into whose colony he had moved after saving what was left of the treasure and abandoning *Guadeloupe* to an uncertain fate. A broken and dispirited man whose career was unquestionably at an end, he sought only permission to hire a ship to transport himself, his officers, and his passengers to Spain.⁶⁶

In the meantime, Captain Huoni, having also vigorously sought a passport to Spain, did his best to address the issue of the illegal salvage of *La Galga* by the wreckers on Assateague. He wrote the Council of Virginia complaining that valuable properties had been stolen from the wreck by Virginians "and desir'd the Opinion of the Board what Measures were proper to be taken." The Council promptly ordered the individuals mentioned to appear before it on Friday, 2 November to answer the complaint. No one appeared – or ever would – but Captain Huoni and his men were granted their passport and were soon homeward bound, carrying what was left of the king's treasure with them.⁶⁷ By then, the bones of their great ship, guardian of one of the last great treasure fleets to sail from the Americas, had already begun subsiding beneath the moving sands and shoals of Assateague Island.

The treasures of the ill-fated 1750 Spanish fleet, purloined by the likes of Zebulon Wade, the Gilverts, and the wreckers of Assateague Island, were not easily forgotten, either by the Spanish or the colonial administrations of Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina. Indeed, the capture of *Mary* had given the Spanish some cause to crow. While recognizing the lawlessness of the acts of some of their countrymen, however, many Englishmen in the colonies feared the consequences of potential Spanish reprisals against mariners of their own nation. "It is much feared," wrote the editor of the *New York Gazette*, "the Master and Mariners [of *Mary*] will meet with condign Punishment besides bringing a lasting Infamy on the British Nation, for their Treachery to People in Distress; – and give the Spaniards a Plea for using poor Englishmen ill, that may have the

⁶⁵ Survey Report [of *Nuestra Señora de los Godos*]; 46; Lee to Secretary of State, 6 November 1750; Survey Reports [of *San Pedro*], all in Cook and Koski-Karell, "La Galga," 46, 51, 47.

⁶⁶ Lee to Secretary of State, 6 November 1750; *EJC*, 5:346. The only conditions set forth by the Council of Virginia were that the Spanish be obliged to pay out of the proceeds of the public vendue for the transport to Spain of the passengers who had been aboard the fleet, and that the commanders of both *Los Godos* and *San Pedro* be permitted to leave only if they carried them onboard their European-bound charters. Overall, the Virginians were, given the recent state of affairs, quite moderate. *EJC*, 5: 340.

⁶⁷ *EJC*, 5: 337; Lee to Secretary of State, 3 October 1750.

Misfortune to fall into their Hands. They will doubtless think they ought to have Justice done them; notwithstanding if any of our Vessels from the Bay [of Campeche] happen to be lost on their Coast, or put into their Ports in Distress, they not only seize the Vessels and Cargo, but make the Men Prisoners; altho' they have in Nature no more Right to the Wood in the Bay, than the English have to the Mines in Mexico. Their Depredations and Captures on the High Seas by the Guarda Coastas, is a Piece of Villany little inferior to this robbery; tho' tamely suffered by us, who are near becoming the dupes of all nations."⁶⁸

In mid-November, it was reported in Boston that a mysterious, unnamed "Spanish gentleman belonging to a large and rich ship of his nation" lately cast away on the Carolina coast, possibly Respaldizar, was in town attempting to locate and retrieve \$150,000 in silver coin and other effects, including \$100,000 worth of cochineal, purloined from the wreck of the *Guadeloupe* by Zebulon Wade's sloop *Seaflower*, which was believed to be in New England. Bostonians were anything but positive about the Spaniard's chances. "But we dare not promise," wrote one newspaper editor, "upon the skill in Astrology as to predict that all the money, &c. will be recovered, and that the master and his accomplices will be apprehended. For a man with such a number of dollars about him, may be said to have powerful hands."⁶⁹

There was, however, to be some justice. On 5 November, William Waller, who had participated in the *Mary's* piracy before that ship's capture and then returned home with more than two hundred pieces-of-eight, was interrogated about his role in the act. He quickly implicated everyone who had a hand in it before and after, and he was immediately arrested for the crimes of piracy and robbery on the high seas. Ever the weasel, Waller managed to escape before his trial, but by July 1751 he had been recaptured, tried, and presumably punished. Then it was learned by an express from the island of St. Thomas, in the West Indies, that his former associates, Owne Lloyd and his men, had also been captured on St. Eustatia, but not before having buried much of the money on a small key known as Norman's Island. A treasure hunt of substantial proportions soon ensued on the islet, where as many as ninety thousand pieces-of-eight were dug up by a horde of residents from nearby Tortola before authorities could step in.⁷⁰

The unheralded arrival of the once formidable and heavily armed Spanish fleet on the Virginia coast had served to point up glaring weaknesses in the colony's defensive posture even while at peace. "This accidental coming of the Spaniards," wrote President Lee to the Commissioner of Trade and Plantations, "has shown the necessity of one or more forts to the seaward for it was not in the power of this government to have prevented their coming as they did without leave into the harbour of our most considerable town of trade."⁷¹ As it was, the government had been equally powerless in

⁶⁸ *New York Gazette*, 12 November 1750, reprinted in *Maryland Gazette*, 23 November 1750.

⁶⁹ *Maryland Gazette*, 15 December 1750.

⁷⁰ Ricord, *Documents*, 4: 278-82; 7: 599-600; *Boston News Letter*, 20 December 1750; Wilkins, *Pirate Treasure*, 63-75.

⁷¹ Lee to Commissioner of Trade and Plantations, 6 November 1750, in Cook and Koski-

the face of the lawless acts of the wreckers of Assateague. Irate over the failure of their first summons to the wreckers to account for the actions, the Council of Virginia again issued a directive on 21 July 1751, that they appear at Williamsburg.⁷² Again no one came – or ever would.

On 7 February 1751, an advertisement appeared in the *Virginia Gazette* announcing the sale at public vendue of the hulk of *Guadeloupe*, alias *Nympha*, said to be "not Five Years old, as she now lies lately moored in a Harbour near Core Banks, not far from Occocck [sic] Inlet . . . with her Rigging, Guns, Sails, Stores, &c." The sale was to be held at Edenton, North Carolina, on Tuesday, 5 March 1751. An inventory was to be seen at the time of sale at the house of Messrs. Watson and Carries, merchants, in Suffolk, and Andrew Sprowles, merchant in Norfolk. The ship was purchased and refitted by one Charles Elliott and entered back into commercial service. On 27 October 1752, Elliott advertised for seamen "willing to enter themselves on board the ship *Nympha*, bound for Cadiz."⁷³

Karell, "La Galga," 50.

⁷² *EJC*, 5:347.

⁷³ *Virginia Gazette*, 7 February 1751; 27 October 1752.