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Buccaneers of the South Carolina coast

□ Legends tell of buried pirate booty stashed away in the inlets and sandy beaches of Georgetown County.

By Elizabeth Robertson Huntsinger

The allure of buried pirate treasure has captivated imaginations for hundreds of years. The vast amounts of wealth stolen by pirates during their glory days and the belief that some of it was later buried on remote sea islands is enough to intrigue even the most staid scholar.

Of course, no pirate ever buried treasure with the knowledge he would never come back to retrieve it. The purpose of hiding it was to save it for a safer, more convenient time. Pirates' time, however, often ran out suddenly, when they were captured and sent to the gaol, never to return for their carefully hidden caches of pilfered gold and jewels.

Exactly how much of their plundered wealth the "Brethren of the Coast" covertly stashed away is a matter of conjecture. Still, no matter how enhanced by lore, the knowledge that pirates roamed the quiet inlets and barrier islands in and around Georgetown County is historic fact.

One band of pirates that frequented Murrells Inlet is said, according to local lore, to have stranded a pirate named Jack on a very small island there. The island had no food or water, but Jack's crew left him with a case of rum.

Returning many months later, the pirates found Jack's bleached bones upon the island and dozens of empty rum bottles scattered up and down the shore. Ever after, this island has been known as Drunken Jack's Island.

Many a pirate crew sought the remote areas of the Georgetown coast when taking shelter, hiding out, laying over to do maintenance on their ships, or perhaps even burying their treasure.

Speed was essential for successful piracy, and for a vessel to be swift she had to have a sleek hull. Thus it was necessary for pirate ships to undergo frequent bottom cleaning. Unable to



Photo by John Burbage

The Jolly Rover — a throwback to days when the skull and crossbones struck fear in the hearts of seafarers — offers tours of the Georgetown harbor.

sail into seaports, pirates would seek the privacy of secluded inlets such as Georgetown County's North Inlet and Murrells Inlet to careen their boats.

Careening, which left the pirates and their vessels completely vulnerable from one high tide until the next, required the remote and hidden areas of coastline that Georgetown's quiet inlets provided.

Easing their ship into shallow water at high tide, a pirate crew would keep their vessel there as the tide went out, allowing her to slowly careen to one side. As the water receded to expose the encrusted hull, the crew was then able to scrape below the vessel's natural waterline until the tide turned and rose to float the ship upright once again.

Another element in successful piracy was fear. After pirates caught up with the ship they planned to capture, they did not want to wage a

bloody battle to seize their prize unless there was no other way. They preferred their victims to surrender in horror of the consequences of resistance.

If the sight of the dreaded black-and-white jolly rover flag with its macabre skull and crossbones insignia was not enough to strike terror in the hearts of victims, often the sight of the sunburned, rakishly dressed, cutlass-waving pirates themselves was.

The notorious Edward Teach, or Blackbeard, long believed to have roamed Murrells Inlet waters, was perhaps the most fearsome-looking pirate of all time. He was captain of the *Queen Anne's Revenge*, a swift French vessel he had stolen and armed with 40 cannon. Blackbeard tied black powder fuses into the curls

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of his dense thick beard before overtaking a ship.

When bearing down upon the soon-to-be-captured vessel, he would light the fuses and then greet his victims, boarding their ship with what appeared to be the fires of hell burning all around his face.

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Many pirate victims simply gave up in order to save their lives. This is exactly what the pirates wanted them to do. Unless their victims resisted, pirates often did them no harm, taking the ship's valuable cargo but not seamen's personal possessions.

If the captured ship was a better or faster vessel than the one the pirates had, they would often take it and give the victims their ship. Sometimes, the pirates would maroon unresisting victims in an area where they were bound to be picked up by a passing ship.

Blackbeard once held captive a group of passengers — including a S.C. legislator. He sent a communiqué to S.C. Gov. Johnson asking in exchange for their safe return a shipment of medicine. Were his needs not met, the pirate captain made clear, all the passengers would be killed.

Gov. Johnson gave him the shipment of medicine he demanded. The fierce Blackbeard, true to his word, then released all his hostages.

Those aboard seized vessels, provided they had surrendered willingly, were rarely harmed. There were exceptions, however. If the captured crew of a merchant ship told pirates that their captain had ordered unnecessary floggings or extreme punishments, that captain would often find himself flogged by the pirates. This served to endear the pirates to captured crews of Royal Navy as well as

merchant vessels, resulting in lawful seamen gladly turning pirate.

Anne Bonny, the most famous of all female pirates, hailed from a plantation located on, by one account, Georgetown County's Black River.

Born in Ireland, Anne was the daughter of attorney William Cormac and his mistress. She was brought into her father's wealthy household as a foundling to be raised by his wife. When the truth of her paternity became obvious, Anne's father sold lucrative holdings in Ireland and sailed to South Carolina with his mistress and their daughter. Soon Cormac had bought a plantation and settled there with his mistress, now known as his wife, and their daughter.

Anne's mother died of a fever shortly after their settling in, leaving Cormac to raise the child. He took her everywhere with him, teaching her to ride like a man, shoot, hunt, and plant rice and indigo on their numerous other plantations. When Anne reached young womanhood and her father began expecting her to become a lady and prepare to be a gentleman's wife, she had other ideas. She had not been raised to be a lady and she was not going to live like one!

By most accounts auburn-haired and very attractive, Anne began to frequent the Charleston waterfront and had soon fallen for pirate James Bonny. Despite her father's threats of disinheritance, she eloped with her seafaring beau, hoping to live happily and adventurously ever after. They sailed for New Providence, Bahamas, where James Bonny took a Royal pardon in exchange for informing on fellow pirates. This unloyal behavior disgusted Anne.

A short time later she fell in love with pirate captain Jack Rackham, who asked James Bonny to give Anne a divorce so he could marry her. James Bonny refused, so Anne and her captain took to the sea abandoning Anne's husband.

Anne relished her new life of piracy. When she found she was going to

have a child, she and Capt. Rackham went back to the pirate settlement in New Providence, by some accounts, or to the pirate haven in Cuba, by others, to await the birth.

Anne did not linger long with her newborn child, however, leaving it to be raised by a more sedentary pirate family while she and her captain went back to sea.

By this time pirate Anne, happy with Capt. Rackham's attentions and tired of fending off amorous advances from other male pirates, had begun to dress as a man. She soon made a fast friend in Mary Read, another female pirate who had also found freedom sailing the high seas in male disguise aboard Capt. Rackham's Curlew.

As was the potential fate of many pirates, Capt. Rackham, Anne Bonny, Mary Read and the rest of the Curlew's crew were eventually caught and sentenced to be hanged.

Observing her beloved Captain Rackham just before he met the gallows, Anne is said to have commented that she was "sorry to see him there, but if he had fought like a man he need not have been hanged like a dog."

Anne's and Mary's sentences were suspended due to the fact that each was expecting a child. They remained in prison where Mary died in childbirth and Anne delivered her second child.

After the birth she was pardoned, and she and her child disappeared. Anne was less than 21 years old.

Where did Anne and her baby go?

According to one legend she came back to the South Carolina Lowcountry and married a gentleman, as her father had once wished.

Anne Bonny may have outlived her pirate past, but most were not as lucky. Many were hanged and never had a chance to retrieve the pilloined riches they had hidden away?

Buried treasure may be out there yet — awaiting the pirates' return.

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