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September 2010 Newsletter

The Wrecking of the Laden Spanish Slave Ship *Guerrero* off the Florida Keys, in 1827

By Gail Swanson*

Important to American, British, Cuban, Barbadian and Liberian history is the wrecking of the Spanish slave ship *Guerrero* off the upper Florida Keys in 1827. It was one of North America's most dramatic maritime events, involving 561 hopeless African people, some 90 Cuban pirates in the slave trade, the 56 person crew of a British warship, and American seafarers from Key West (Figs. 1, 2).

This article will give an account of the wrecking and then of its aftermath, including involvement by Native Americans from northeast Florida, plantation owner Zephaniah Kingsley, the Captain-General of Cuba, the Governor of Barbados, the people settled at New Georgia, Liberia, and some of the most influential British and American officials of the day, including President John Quincy Adams.

Importantly, the names given to 92 of the African survivors in America were recorded when they reached Liberia many months later. I have compiled a number of their life histories including the names of their wives and children, giving a very human perspective to people who are usually just shadowy victims of the slave trade.

Currently, members of the "Diving with a Purpose" program of the National Association of Black Scuba Divers are mapping wrecks in Biscayne National Park, where I believe the *Guerrero* was lost, looking for the remains of that vessel. In 2009 the group received a "Take Pride in America" award for their mapping efforts in a ceremony in Washington, D.C.

At the time of the wreck of the *Guerrero*, the international slave trade had been banned 20 years before by Great Britain, 19 years before by the U.S. and seven years before by Spain.

But the trade in human beings continued. The planters of the colony of Cuba sought out supplies of forced labor for sugar plantations, and Spain's law was almost totally ignored.

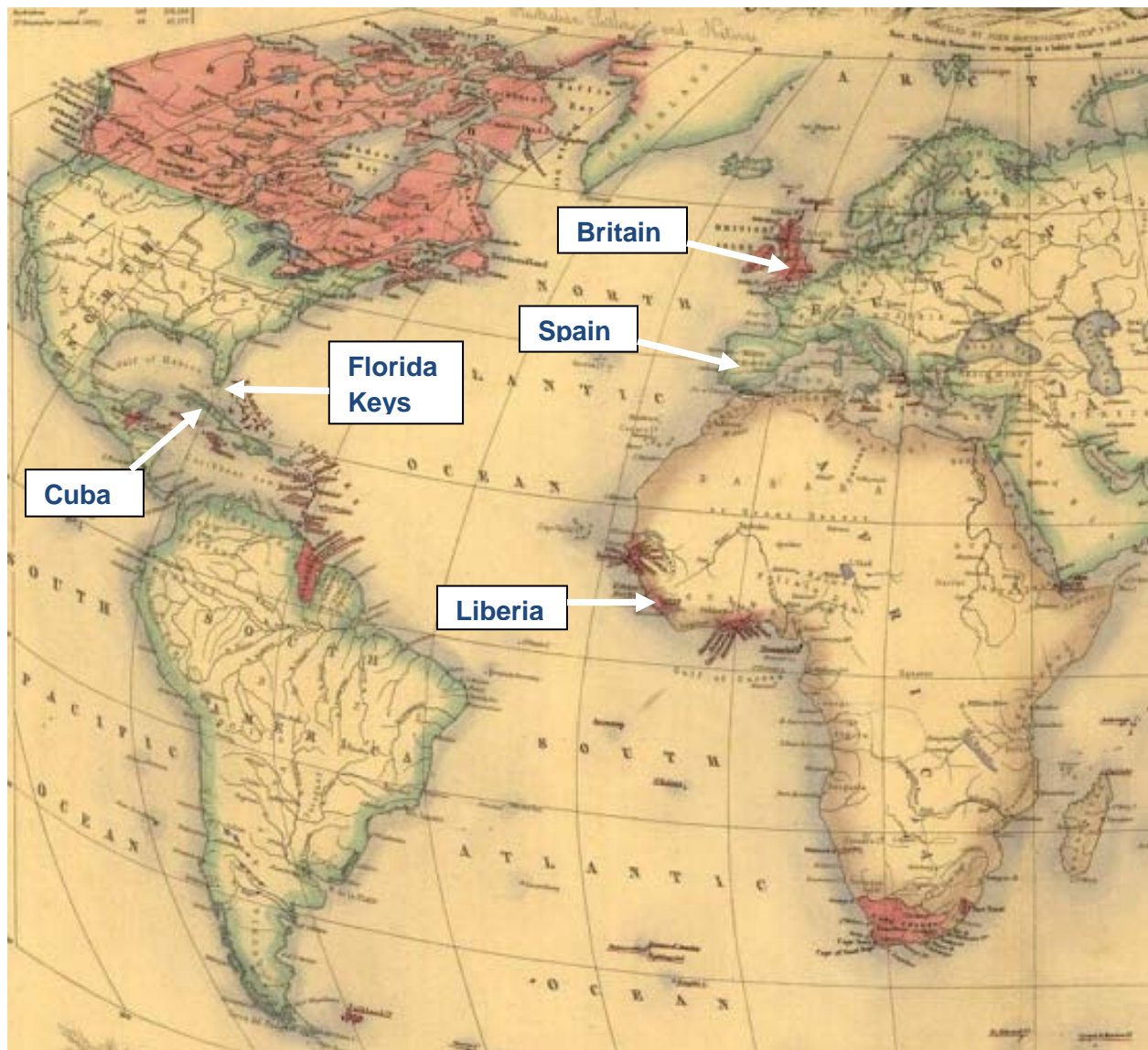


Figure 1. 1852 Map of Atlantic, showing locations of Britain, Spain, Liberia, Cuba, and Florida Keys (image by C. Fennell).

Great Britain appointed herself the police force, and made treaties with other countries including Spain to thwart the horrid “trade.” Most captures of slave ships were by the British squadron off the African coast, but there was a second patrol net around Havana.

On December 17, 1827, the British warship HBM [His Britannic Majesty's] schooner *Nimble* was cruising the Florida Straits to search for slave-trade vessels referred to as slavers. The *Nimble*'s crew boarded a Baltimore merchant ship and shot at another American vessel that for an unknown reason fled, and outsailed her.

Two days later at Orange Cay, the Bahamas, a more real object came into view: the laden *Guerrero*. The brig was sailing from the north down the Florida Straits, attempting to evade the British patrolling the long north coast of Cuba. The *Guerrero* had only 250 more miles to sail before reaching Havana (Fig. 2). It was noon. From the *Nimble*'s log:



Figure 2. Map showing Caribbean locations related to the last voyage of the *Guerrero* and movement of other related vessels (image by C. Fennell).

Observed stranger to be a suspicious looking brig. I set topsail, cleared [the deck] for action & fired 2 guns to bring stranger to whom we observed hauling up to avoid us; made more sail.

The pursuit was on by the *Nimble*, with 56 officers and crew, and Lt. Edward Holland commanding.

The weather turned bad from a cold front pushing through. At 5:00 conditions were “strong breezes and squally with a heavy swell.” Having gained on the slaver, at 6:15 the warship fired a gun. The fire was returned, and for the next half hour a battle at sea with cannons and muskets was fought as dusk became night, and as the ships approached the coral reef off the Florida Keys. The people crammed in the hold could not have known what was going on above them.

At his remote station six miles off Key Largo, lightship keeper Capt. John Whalton both heard and saw the cannon fire. The battling ships were just a few miles to the northeast.

Finally the *Guerrero* pretended to surrender to the British by showing a light. Then she took off again and the chase began anew. From the *Nimble*’s log:

6:45 Having regular soundings from 6 to 4 fathoms [36’ to 24’]
approaching Florida Reef
7:30 Observed chase on shore

Not knowing where in the entire world they were, or what the ship hit, or why, 41 of the 561 people in the hold perished in the *Guerrero*’s collision with the coral. The hull tore open. Then the masts fell. There were about 650 people onboard when this happened, Spanish and African, their cries “appalling beyond description.” Another relation, from the Bahamas newspaper:

The masts of the chase were heard to fall with a tremendous crash,
and a horrid yell from those onboard, which left no doubt of her
being a Guineaman.

The screams crossed perhaps two miles of ocean to the *Nimble*, also on the reef. She had struck five minutes after the *Guerrero* had struck it. An anchor was put out, ballast and shot were thrown overboard, but within a half hour her movement in the swells broke the anchor line. She drove further onto the reef. Twenty minutes later, she floated off the reef, and then, right

back onto it. The tide receded. The *Nimble* moved no more. It was then about 9:00 at night, and still squally.

On the wreck of the *Guerrero* some 90 ruthless men in the slave trade and hundreds of surviving Africans were on a ship off an uninhabited coast some six miles from land, in bad weather, at night, sinking. By morning the ship had turned over onto her side, and was full of water.

Anchored then at Caesar's Creek (now within the boundaries of Biscayne National Park) were the wreckers *Thorn*, commanded by Capt. Charles Grover, and the aptly-named *Surprise*, led by Capt. Samuel Sanderson. Their crews saw the ships at dawn and sailed to the scene immediately. Then Capt. Austin Packer and his crew arrived in their fishing sloop, the *Florida*. Capt. Grover arrived first and instructed his mate to take possession of the slaver while he attended to the grounded warship.

Guerrero's Capt. Jose Gomez saw before him that morning a stuck warship, \$156,000 worth of human cargo (520 Africans that could be sold for \$300 each in Havana), and three small vessels commanded by inexperienced Americans. These were fishermen, and wreckers; the latter were men who anchored for weeks and months at uninhabited, rocky and swampy islets, swatting mosquitoes, waiting for someone to have an accident. In contrast, Gomez commanded a slaver, was a pirate who had taken his human "cargo" from other slave ships, a bluffer, and then, he became a hijacker.

Returning from the warship, Capt. Grover organized the following: one wrecker was to lighten the grounded *Nimble* and pull her off, while the other two vessels would save the people on the slaver. Boarded onto Packer's 39' vessel were 142 Africans and about 20 Spaniards. Packer immediately set sail for Key West, about 100 miles to the southwest, but arrived instead at Santa Cruz, Cuba, near Havana and some 90 miles south of Key West, the first vessel to be hijacked.

Capt. Grover boarded on his vessel 246 Africans and 54 Spaniards. At 11:00 that morning *Nimble's* captain Lt. Edward Holland came on board. His warship had been freed from the coral but could not sail for the rudder had broken off. The British discharged all the loaded arms onboard the *Thorn* that had been saved from the slaver and disabled them with water. Lt. Holland was anticipating Gomez' plan, not even yet knowing the fate of Capt. Packer. At 12:00

that afternoon the third vessel, the *Surprise*, boarded the remaining Africans, 122, and Spaniards, 12.

The tension was high. It became clear to all what the disposition of the slave traders was. They could overpower the Americans. The *Thorn* anchored next to the British warship for the protection of her guns that evening. At a wind change the crew moved her slightly away to avoid fouling her cable with that of the *Nimble*, and then the captain and crew went into the cabin for supper. It was all the Spaniards needed.

When the men heard their boat thumping against the hull they knew they were no longer anchored. The mate rushed out, with another crewman, dropped another anchor over then turned around to see armed Spaniards rushing on them. They jumped overboard.

Capt. Grover tried to go on deck. He was met by Gomez, who had a dagger in his hand, and three other men who had cutlasses and pistols. They told him if he went on deck they would kill him.

The Spaniards raised the sails, the British shot at them, but the *Thorn* sailed away. She too arrived at Santa Cruz. From Packer's and Grover's vessels a total of 398 African people were marched into the Cuban countryside to join the other 286,000 enslaved there.

Another wrecker, the *General Geddes* arrived at the location on Carysfort Reef and her men were positioned with arms all night to protect the remaining vessel and the Africans onboard. The next morning the captain of the *Surprise* put most of his Spaniards onboard the warship and sailed for Key West, with some British officers Lt. Holland had placed on board for security.

At Cuba, Gomez allowed the *Florida* and *Thorn* to leave Santa Cruz. He had a conversation onshore with Capt. Grover, and Grover said in a legal protest he made in Key West on December 26th that Gomez "ordered him not to make sail until the following day." Were the *Thorn* and *Florida* being detained for perhaps another forced voyage, back to the Keys to get the other Africans? For the third vessel, the *Surprise*, had not appeared at Santa Cruz as expected.

Grover's crew became especially terrified at what happened next -- the threat of being killed. *Thorn's* crewmember William Wright, a British subject living in America, later related that:

The master of his schooner went ashore with the Spaniards, and that during his absence reports reached the vessel that it was the intention of the said Spaniards to murder the crew during the night, being alarmed at which this deponent, with three American sailors named Thomas Smith, Acey Kingsbury, and John Gorman abandoned the schooner, and in the open boat sailed for this Port of Havana.

Once in Havana they told the story of the hijackings to the captain of the port, and afterwards to other officials, Wright believing one of them to be the governor of the island, Captain-General Francisco Dionisio Vives. The men were ordered back into their little boat and told to go out to sea but remain within gunshot of the port. They did so, but then they defied the order, for the sea was rough. They came ashore in a small cove to the westward of Havana where they left the boat and came back into the city. Wright reported his experiences with the Spanish to two British commissioners in Havana resident there as members of the Anglo-Spanish Mixed Commission Court set up to decide the cases of illegal slave importation by citizens of both England and Spain.

Back at Santa Cruz, with the assistance of Capt. Packer and his four-man crew, including 11-year-old Samuel B. Ashbey, Grover and his remaining crew got the *Thorn* underway in company with the *Florida*. They arrived at Key West on Christmas Day. The *Nimble*, fitted with the rudder from the *Guerrero* by the Americans, and the *General Geddes* arrived Christmas Eve. The *Surprise* had arrived on December 23rd.

There was notorious collusion between the many wreckers at tiny Key West, who would hold their own “court” to determine salvage fees, usually 50 to 90 percent of the value of wrecked and grounded ships and their cargoes. Lt. Holland was based in the Bahamas, knew the reputation of the Key Westers, and would not submit to their court. He no doubt feared losing a British warship over a salvage award. With 24 hours notice Holland sailed the *Nimble* from Key West on December 27th, without paying the wreckers a dime for their valuable help. The paperwork between the Americans and the British began to fly.

The 121 Africans (1 died enroute) who arrived on the *Surprise* lived in Key West for 75 days and then were removed to St. Augustine, northeast Florida, for their safety by the US Marshal of the Territory of Florida, Waters Smith. Most worked as enslaved laborers on

northeast Florida plantations, including one owned by Zephaniah Kingsley, to provide for their maintenance, as later ordered by Washington officials.

Due to the perseverance of Marshal Smith, Secretary of the Navy Samuel L. Southard, his successor John Branch, and President John Quincy Adams became involved in the case of the Africans. The 92 survivors of the original group of 121 who were at Key West were finally sent to Liberia at the expense of the U.S. government in 1829 and 1831. One man, an African interpreter, was released from custody in a court decision in St. Augustine. Another, a boy, was taken aboard a U.S. revenue cutter at Key West. Three Africans had run away from the Joseph M. Hernandez plantation, and had been living in the wilderness, or were with or captive of Native Americans in the area. Smith paid the Native Americans \$30 for bringing them to him. The Africans, having spent 23 months in Florida, with an American doctor and the appointed superintendent of the Africans, A. Hamilton Mechlin, left Amelia Island, northeast Florida, on September 30, 1829, in the chartered *Washington's Barge*.

After 88 days at sea the *Washington's Barge* came into Carlisle Bay, Barbados in distress. Governor James Lyon made arrangements for the continuance of the voyage on a Barbadian vessel, the *Heroine*. On March 4, 1830, the 91 that had survived the voyage (nine did not) arrived at Liberia. There their American-given names were recorded and they were settled in New Georgia, with recaptives that had been rescued by a U.S. revenue cutter off Florida from the slaver *Antelope*. One boy, held back from the voyage because he had the contagious disease yaws, was sent the next year after his recovery.

The others brought to Key West who never saw Africa again died at Key West, on the plantations, in the care of Justice of the Peace Francis James Ross at Jacksonville (who took in the very ill and blind), at St. Augustine, or on the voyage to Liberia.

The remains of their floating prison, the *Guerrero*, still lay undiscovered by divers in the shallow tropical waters of the upper Florida Keys.

What remains of the *Guerrero*? During three days the crews of the *General Geddes*, the *Capital*, another wrecker that had arrived on the scene, and HBM *Nimble* recovered much from the wreck. The *Guerrero* had not only pirated her cargo but also attacked merchant ships, and at the time of her loss had much valuable merchandise on board. In early January of 1828 the

General Geddes, *Capital*, and *Surprise* returned to the wreck for more salvage. They no doubt then fired what was above the waves, as was the custom of the wreckers, to eliminate evidence of a dangerous place.

But there could be items left on the wreck that had so many captive people aboard that the wreckers may not have been interested in, such as feeding bowls, chains and shackles, and perhaps holding the remains of the 41 people who had not survived the wrecking.

No wrecks of slave ships found to date have been of vessels that had human cargo aboard. “Should it be found and excavated,” Jane Webster (2008: 17) has written in the *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, “*Guerrero* will be [the] first example of its kind, invaluable for future research, but no doubt [will] stimulate ethical debate about the excavation of human cargoes.”

Note

* Gail Swanson is an historian whose work focuses on the Florida Keys region. Sources for the information presented in this article can be found in her book, *Slave Ship Guerrero* (Infinity Publishing, 2005).

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