

De Campos was determined to return to Spain as quickly as possible. The *Concepcion* was only out of port one day after their September 13, 1641 departure when a plank broke out and the ship took on water so badly that the crews under Admiral Villavicencio had to keep the bilge pumps working continuously. A signal cannon was fired, and the entire fleet had to turn around and return to Havana.

There were more delays while the *Concepcion*, with her 496 passengers and treasure, had to be offloaded to lighten the ship so the vessel could be repaired below the waterline. Repairs were made, cargo and passengers returned to *Concepcion*, and on September 20, 1641, she sailed with the fleet once more.

As soon as the fleet cleared Havana harbor and headed into the Straits of Florida the weather showed signs of trouble. When the storm struck full force only a few days after the fleet left Havana, the disaster was apparent.

STRUCK BY HURRICANE

When the hurricane struck on September 28, 1641, the *Concepcion* was in the vicinity of 30 degrees north latitude off St. Augustine, Florida.

On September 29, with decks awash with waves, the *Concepcion's* mainmast had to be cut away. All of the deck cargo was lost overboard. Eight bronze cannons were thrown into the ocean to lighten the ship. Nine other ships in the fleet sank, and others became grounded on shoals and reefs.

When the fury of the hurricane had passed, Admiral Villavicencio rigged sail from spars and canvas that were left and maintained steerage with the ship's rudder. They could make some headway but were uncertain of their position; they assumed they were in the northern Bahamas while they were actually off St. Augustine.

De Campos had sighted the *Concepcion* but rendered no aid and eventually sailed directly back for Spain.

The admiral hoped to bring his ship onto a sandy beach where the treasure could be saved. But unfavorable winds prevented his navigation to safety in what is now one of the large Bahama islands. It was October, and by modern reckoning, the ship was west and south of Bermuda.

Villavicencio made the decision to head south to Puerto Rico. The vessel was leaking badly; with pumps jammed, sailors bailed with buckets. In the hurricane, food and fresh water was washed overboard or contaminated with salt water. Unsanitary conditions aboard the ship in the ensuing three weeks caused sickness and death among many passengers who were already weakened from lack of food and water.

A dispute arose between Villavicencio and his pilot, Bartolome Guillen, about where the ship was. Becalmed, they floated aimlessly in now-tropical summer weather, lost at sea without water or supplies. Latitude was determined with rudimentary instruments. A system to measure longitude would not be invented for many years.

The pilot had authority vested in him by Spain's *Casa de Contratación*, the governing

THE *Concepcion*

The Nuestra Señora de la Pura y Limpia Concepcion left Cádiz, Spain, on April 21, 1641, with the Nueva España Flota bound for Veracruz, Mexico. The vessel had been constructed in 1620 in Havana as a merchant ship, refitted for the Atlantic trade with thirty-six bronze cannons.



A Spanish galleon coming ashore wrecked and broken apart in a hurricane. Original oil painting in the Bob and Margaret Weller collection. Used by permission.

The ship itself displaced 650 tons and was 140 feet long with a 44-foot width. Captain Eugenio Delgado allowed the vessel to leave Spain already leaking and with a hull that should have been recaulked.

The crown had consigned the *Concepcion* to the captain-general, thus making it the Capitana. Distinguished passengers on the voyage to Veracruz included the new Viceroy of Mexico, Don Diego Lopez Pacheco y Bobadilla, the Marquis of Villena, the Duke of Escalona, and the Archbishop of Mexico. The *Concepcion* reached Veracruz on June 24, 1641.

The new viceroy disembarked in Veracruz after establishing plans, with officials and captains he assembled, for a fleet to be created to protect convoys leaving Mexico against corsairs and pirates.

The new viceroy traveled overland 200 miles to Mexico City to assume his duties while the New Spain Fleet unloaded its cargoes and loaded treasure aboard.

The fleet captain-general Roque Centeno y Ordonez died in Veracruz of what appears to have been yellow fever, a mosquito-borne virus that causes vomiting and hemorrhages. The fleet's new commander was Juan de Campos. De Campos examined the *Concepcion* as its hull was being careened and recaulked in Veracruz for the return voyage.

The vessel was twenty-one years old. It had leaked on the outward-bound journey from Spain. De Campos eyed the lead sheathing that was being nailed over holes in the planking. Wisely, the new fleet commander transferred his flag to another ship in the convoy—the *San Pedro y San Pablo*, which became the Capitana. The *Concepcion* became the Almiranta, the armed ship that would bring up the rear of the convoy.



Brass pistol butt and lock.

The Archbishop of Mexico became a passenger aboard *Concepcion* for the return trip to Spain with his treasure of gold and jewelry.

The *Concepcion* was loaded in Veracruz with specie and bullion belonging to the crown along with general cargoes that included Chinese porcelain.

The trip across the Gulf of Mexico from Veracruz to Havana took thirty-five days, and the fleet arrived on August 27, 1641. Seventeen days were required to load more cargo, make repairs to the leaking *Concepcion*, which

had fared poorly on the stormy voyage from Veracruz to Havana, and take passengers and their personal belongings aboard.

Admiral Don Juan de Villavicencio, age thirty-seven, a seasoned veteran of Atlantic crossings, bemoaned the condition of his ship. Villavicencio petitioned Captain-General de Campos for a delay, to effect repairs that were sorely needed since *Concepcion* was still leaking.

It was already late summer and well into hurricane season. De Campos had twenty-one ships in his Nueva España Flota for the return trip to Spain and was anxious to leave Havana. He refused to even wait for the Tierra Firme Flota that was due from South America. It was also a matter of ego. De Campos would have been junior to the officer in command, Admiral Francisco Diaz Pimienta, of the Tierra Firme Fleet, if they left together.

It was jealousy that sealed the fate of the *Concepcion*. De Campos knew the crown was in dire need of the treasure output from New Spain. No treasure fleet had sailed from Spain in 1640, thus the amount of treasure loaded aboard the ships in his command was vital. De Campos knew of Admiral Pimienta's reputation.

In May of 1640, Pimienta had fought and captured the well-defended and fortified pirate and freebooter stronghold of Providence Island in the Bahamas. He had landed with 600 soldiers and routed the English, setting siege to the governor's quarters until the pirates fled. Pimienta captured 600 black slaves and recovered treasure that had been taken from Spanish ships by the corsairs, amounting to some 14 million *reales*.

TREASURES *of the* SPANISH MAIN

Shipwrecked Galleons
in the New World

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