The Shipwreck of the
GIL BLAS:
Investigations

by Bill Raymond

The wrecking of a ship off the east coast of Florida was not an uncommon event in the early 19th century. However, one particular Spanish brig, the Gil Blas, played an important role in a sequence of events that shaped the destiny of south Florida and postponed the development of southeast Florida by more than half a century.

The Wrecking of the Gil Blas

The September 1835 hurricane that hit southeast Florida was one of the worst to strike in more than fifty years. The Lewises could recall no other hurricane of such destructive force or gale with the ability to disable every wrecking vessel southward to the Keys, William Cooley's excepted. The Lewises, husband, wife and children, were the first known settlers of present day Broward County. They had come to Florida from the Bahamas in 1783. Among those ships caught by the hurricane was the Gil Blas, a Spanish brig that was on her maiden voyage from Havana to Spain. The 200 ton wooden ship was carrying a load of Cuban segars (cigars) and sugar.

In a futile attempt to hold the Gil Blas off the Florida coast, the Spanish captain ordered that the ship's anchor be let out. Fortunately, they were barely a few miles north of the Florida Reef. Otherwise, the captain would have lost the ship and cargo altogether. However, at the point where they were being driven ashore, the shallowest reef exceeded thirty feet in depth and the coastline consisted of a wide, sandy beach with a high, sparsely vegetated dune to the west of the beach.

The captain could not keep the Gil Blas off the beach; but her heavy ground tackle, including a long length of heavy chain, allowed him to keep the stern into the waves and prevented the ship from being battered to pieces by the storm waves. Testimony in subsequent claims indicated that the ship was pointed "about northwest" with a stern anchor and "chain cable" running out to seaward.

After the storm, the captain assessed the situation. The ship had not been seriously damaged; it was beached, but not bilged. The cargo was intact. She could be refloated and continue on to Spain. For some unknown reason, however, the Spanish captain hired William Cooley, the local Appraiser of Wrecks and Justice of the Peace of the New River Settlement, to salvage the cargo and carry the captain, his crew and the bulk of the vessel's cargo to Key West. Cooley happened to possess one of the few boats that had survived the hurricane. The captain sold the cargo and vessel separately in Key West and promptly returned to Havana.

Key West merchant John P. Baldwin purchased the vessel, including what cargo remained on board, at a Key West auction in December 1835. Although legal documents, presented in court in 1858, did not indicate how much money Baldwin had paid for the brig, his itemized claim for the vessel and remaining cargo was $1,200. Ground tackle and lead ballast, sometimes referred to as cargo in subsequent depositions, comprised the bulk of the claim.
Baldwin hired Cooley to salvage the vessel for him, to refloat her and to bring her to Key West. Heavy weather and, probably, the Christmas holidays delayed the salvage attempt until January 1836.

Cooley enlisted the aid of several other residents of the New River Settlement. Among them were William and Wade Rigby, Edward Basely, Edward Mar, David Williams, Daniel Mallus and Peter, Cooley's Negro slave. At that time the New River Settlement was the largest white settlement on the mainland of Florida, south of a line between Tampa and Volusia, near today's Daytona Beach.

On January 6, 1836, the salvors sailed from New River on Cooley's shallow-draft, ten ton sloop which could cross the sandbar at New River Inlet, six miles south of New River. At that time, the inlet was situated at today's Hollywood Beach. The beached brig lay fifteen miles away, nine miles north of New River.

Six or eight tons of lead, in 200 pound pigs, and five tons of kentledge remained in the vessel's hold. Presumably, these would have been removed to make the ship as light as possible.

But Cooley never had the chance to finish the job. Later on that same day, on January 6, 1836, tragedy struck. The horrifying news reached Cooley that all his family had been massacred by a band of angry Seminole Indians. Unknown to the residents at New River, a band of Indians had ambushed and massacred Major Francis Dade's troops north of Tampa on December 28, 1835. That was the beginning of the Second Seminole War.

The Indians blamed Cooley for an earlier injustice when Cooley, as Justice of the Peace, had sent some white men to the Key West courts for the killing of an Indian chief. The Indians believed that Cooley had withheld vital, incriminating evidence and blamed him for the men's acquittal. In addition, the Seminoles had lost an earlier war with the United States in 1818 and, reluctantly, were being removed to lands west of the Mississippi.

Upon hearing the tragic news, Cooley immediately sailed south to the Key Biscayne lighthouse where the entire New River population had taken refuge after fleeing the area of the massacre. Some had run barefoot all the way, a distance of twenty-six miles, without stopping to save belongings, shoes or food. Along the way they warned other settlers at Little River and Miami River.

The group that took refuge at the lighthouse feared another Indian attack, so they continued south to Indian Key. Once again, the Seminoles and the United States were at war. Furthermore, all salvage efforts on the Gil Blas were abandoned when all the white settlers fled southeast Florida.

In July 1836 the United States Navy set fire to the hulk of the Gil Blas "that she might become covered with sand and that all traces of her be destroyed to prevent the Indians ever getting from her any lead or other articles which would be of any use to them."

Acting as a local guide, Cooley was aboard the schooner Motto with United States Naval Lieutenant Thoms Lieb, who was charged with destroying the Gil Blas. Cooley recovered two cannons from the brig and took them to Indian Key for armament.

Key West wrecker George Alderslade; Napoleon Le Coste, captain of the revenue cutter Campbele; and former New River resident William Rigby later gave depositions that indicate that there was no visible trace of the vessel soon after the fire.

After burning the brig, the crew of the Motto returned south and rescued the lighthouse keeper at the Cape Florida lighthouse on Key Biscayne. It was under attack that same day by Indians who succeeded in killing the lighthouse's assistant. The lighthouse, left for dead, was stranded at the top of the lighthouse.

Excerpt from "Map of Florida," author and surveyor J. Lee Williams, 1837.
Two years later, in 1838, legal depositions were taken from the principals who had been involved in the burning of the brig *Gil Blas* and from those who had been involved earlier in salvaging her. None of the deponents, including Cooley, could say whether the lead actually was aboard the vessel at the time of the burning, although they presumed it was. Whether the lead was salvaged, either before or after the burning of the vessel, is now a key point in the identification of the remains of the *Gil Blas*.

Other information is known about the brig *Gil Blas*. She was “coppered and copper fastened,” that is, the bottom of the hull was copper sheathed “up to her bends” and at least some of the fastenings in the hull were copper. According to William Rigby, the brig was aground in eight feet of water. And, because the *Gil Blas* was Spanish, she probably was heavily constructed. We assume that she was built in Havana since she was on her maiden voyage from that port.

John P. Baldwin unsuccessfully sued the United States for burning his boat. The court (1) ruled that Baldwin did not show proof of title to the brig; (2) denounced the captain’s right, under the circum-

"Schedule Referred to:" equipment, with estimated value, for the *Gil Blas*.

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19th Century Brig

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ABOVE: Ship fastenings, found by Donald King of Pompano Beach at the Hillsboro Beach shipwreck in 1963; top: copper pin; bottom: bronze spike; rule in inches. BELOW: Artifacts found at the Hillsboro Beach site; top left: pottery shard; top right: turtle bone; bottom left: iron conglomerate, brick and stone, found by Jack Chew in 1968; bottom right: copper sheeting; these other items were found by Donald King in 1963.
Hillsboro Beach/Stalcup Wreck, 1975.

The straight chain, heading ENE from site, is not shown. Note burned north end, coin and portion of chain with an end that resembles the eye of a giant needle. Courtesy, Norman Scott, Expeditions Unlimited.

River would equal the number of settlers living there in 1836. These circumstances set local history back more than half a century!

Only two relics, the Cape Florida lighthouse and the remains of the Gil Blas, have survived the 150 years since that infamous period in local history. The lighthouse is listed on the National Register of Historic Sites and Structures. The Gil Blas, however, had remained an uncharted, unidentified shipwreck until 1976 when its remains, battered by waves and picked over by treasure-seeking divers, were brought to the attention of the Broward County Historical Commission.

Modern Salvage Attempts

The shallow site at 1001 A1A, Hillsboro Beach, about one mile north of Hillsboro Inlet, has been known to divers and treasure hunters for decades. At least five separate salvage expeditions are known to have been conducted there. One was led by the well known treasure hunter Norman Scott. Another expedition was conducted by a group of local divers, including Dr. Donald King of Pompano Beach, Florida. Dr. King borrowed Mei Fisher’s salvage boat, the Dee Gee, which had recovered millions of dollars in Spanish silver and gold from the Spanish Plate Fleet of 1715 off Fort Pierce, Florida. King’s group recovered ballast rock, bronze spikes and nails, copper pins and a clay pipe from the Hillsboro Beach site. None of the treasure-seeking groups found treasure or reported finding anything of value.

Historical Importance

Of the Gil Blas

The Gil Blas shipwreck is probably the most important marine historical site in Broward County because this ship played a major role in the demise of the early New River Settlement. Had the Gil Blas not wrecked on the Florida coast, Cooley probably would have been at home, along with the other able-bodied men of the settlement. Would the Indians have attacked a better defended settlement? Maybe. With a little warning, however, Cooley’s presence might have averted an Indian massacre, and the whole event might have been nothing more than a skirmish. In any case, another sixty years would pass before the number of non-Indians living in the vicinity of New
Unlike many old shipwrecks along our coast, this one has no cannons, no ballast pile and no apparent cargo. Other than hull structure and chain, little remains at the site. It is apparent that this ship had been salvaged soon after its beaching. That this ship was beached is evident by the presence of a heavy, seaward anchor chain, an uncommon situation in the case of ships sunk near the beach in a storm. Veronika Stalup, an upland property owner, found one coin and reported her discovery to the Broward County Historical Commission in 1976. The coin was taken to Germany soon after its discovery, but it is reported to be an 1824 copper coin from Batavia, East Indies.

The Creation and Role of the Marine Archaeology Advisory Council

The late Judge L. Clayton Nance, founder of the Broward County Historical Commission, and Dr. Cooper Kirk, its historian, immediately recognized the possibility that the wreck site was in the range to be the remains of the Gil Blas. They appointed marine geologist Bill Raymond, an Historical Commission volunteer, to form a shipwreck advisory council and to investigate the Gil Blas and any other historical shipwrecks in Broward County. Thus, the Marine Archaeological Advisory Council (MAAC), was formed in 1976. In early 1977 the MAAC applied to the State of Florida, Division of Archives, History and Records Management (DAHRM), for a research permit to investigate the Hillsboro Beach wreck. State underwater archaeologist Wilburn A. "Sonny" Cockrell provided the expertise in a co-operative agreement from which the MAAC and the DAHRM both benefitted. In July 1977 Secretary of State Bruce Smathers awarded the MAAC the first underwater antiquities permit ever granted by the State of Florida. Furthermore, Smathers dived on the site during a televised excursion.

Under the supervision of Larry Murphy from DAHRM, council members used a small injection dredge to excavate a long section of keel and ribs. No trace of the lead or iron ballast was found. On the assumption that the two metals should not have become separated by natural forces, it was then decided to conduct a magnetometer survey to locate the iron. Neither the state nor the council possessed a magnetometer, however, and there were no funds to procure one.

In 1981, Florida Atlantic University [FAU] loaned the MAAC a magnetometer. Subsequently, it was used twice under the field supervision of Dr. R.F. McAllister, professor of Ocean Engineering at FAU and the council's advisor. The Broward County Erosion Prevention Division loaned its 24 foot boat, the Monitor, for the field magnetometer mapping survey. It was equipped with precise electronic positioning. On both days, however, problems were encountered with the magnetometer and search efforts were suspended.

Magnetometer specialist Rick Horgan made another attempt in January 1983. Rick’s magnetometer head was placed on the beach and the “fish,” an underwater sensor attached to a 300 foot cable, was moved across the site by a swimmer. Magnetic anomalies were detected over visible portions of the hull structure but no large anomalies, indicative of tons of iron, were found within a 300 foot radius from the beach upland of the wreck site. None of the former salvors found, or admit to having found, any lead or iron pigs.

Site Description

The remains of a copper-sheathed wooden vessel, with some copper spikes and bronze pins, comprise the Hillsboro Beach wreck. Its keel bolts are iron and the wood in the frames and keel appears to be oak. The site is in two sections. The keel section is oriented west-northwest. Its one foot wide frames and poured cement ballast, with small stones, are visible only on the north side of the keel. The other section, approximately 180 feet to the north, consists of planks and lighter frames in an area approximately twenty-five feet square. Both sites are in eight feet of water, approximately 100 feet from shore, and are covered by two feet of sand most of the year.

During the winter months, such as January 1983 when the southern site was photomapped, both sites become uncovered. An old fashioned chain with links six inches long, of a style that pre-dates 20th century non-kinking chain, runs seaward, that is, northeastward, from the northern site. A rectangular iron tank, four feet by ten feet, lies near the northern site.

Both the site-remains and chain are lying on subsurface bedrock which is coquina limestone, that is, cemented shell sand. However, it is not known whether the coquina is composed of natural, former bedrock or iron-cemented, sand concretions. Significant amounts of iron-cementation in the area suggest that the chain may have formed rock out of the sand on which it is lying. Although less than 100 feet of chain were visible in January 1983, Dr. King reported that he had traced it seaward for several hundred feet in 1963.

A mixture of ballast materials has been found in small quantities. These include the cemented mass along the keel and some brick-and-stone conglomerate in cement. Small amounts of clay pottery fragments have been found. One plank at the northern site obviously had been burned on one end.

In 1975 Norman Scott found a large anchor, typical of those used during the 19th century, on the second reef, northeast of the site. The anchor was raised and brought to Treasure Cove Marina, Pompano
LEFT: Mosaic photograph of a section of six inch link chain found at Hillsboro Beach northern wreck site. BELOW and RIGHT: Aerial photograph of Hillsboro Beach wreck site with enlarged insert, January 1976, soon after Expeditions Unlimited had used a blower to expose portions of the shipwreck. Bulbous white area is sand; note double row of white spots, oriented NE, which may be part of the Gillius chain. Courtesy, Florida Department of Transportation.
Beach, where it was re-submerged under the docks. Its present whereabouts are not known. That the anchor was found in water reported to be more than thirty feet deep makes it doubtful that it was the one at the end of the chain. On the other hand, perhaps William Cooley had only assumed that there was an anchor attached to the chain; whereas, in reality, the anchor already might have broken loose during the hurricane, thereby allowing the Gil Blas to drift ashore.

Identification of the Gil Blas

To date, no positive identification can be made as to whether or not the Hillsboro Beach site is the remains of the Gil Blas. But several unique, common elements do substantiate the hypothesis that the Hillsboro Beach site is, indeed, the Gil Blas. Moreover, there has not been one bit of evidence to prove that the Hillsboro Beach site is not the Gil Blas. Thus, the following list of elements common to the Hillsboro Beach site and to the Gil Blas shipwreck is offered as a defense for the hypothesis that the Gil Blas has been found.

The heavy oak construction of the Hillsboro Beach wreck is consistent with the type of vessels built by the Spanish in the 17th and 18th centuries. Although little is known about the construction of Spanish vessels in the 19th century, it is probable that Spanish ships were heavily constructed in 1835.

The similarities of such features as heavy construction, copper sheathing and heavy ground tackle, found on a shipwreck in the right location and at the correct depth of water with, even, the correct orientation of the keel, serve as strong evidence that this site could be the Gil Blas. The additional coincidences of the chain going seaward and the burned wood are the most positive evidence that this site could be the Gil Blas.

Normally, ships that were driven ashore in a storm along the Florida coast suffered one of two fates. With their anchors let out on a reef and with their breakable, fibrous rope cables, the ships often were destroyed when the anchor line broke. With the aid of a heavy chain, such as the one that was aboard the Gil Blas, they might survive the storm and, often, could be salvaged successfully. Thus, there would be no remains left on the beach.

There are only two known cases in Broward County's maritime history when a salvageable ship was left unsalvaged, only to be destroyed by the elements. These are the brig Gil Blas and the steamer Copenhagen. The latter, a steel vessel grounded on Hillsboro Rocks, was abandoned in 1899 or 1900 when the salvage tugs got an urgent call to proceed to New Jersey to salvage ships damaged by a great dock fire. Hillsboro Rocks, a submerged reef-like ridge of coquinaid limestone that continues southward offshore from the Hillsboro Inlet,

Similarities of Details
Common to Both Shipwrecks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gil Blas</th>
<th>Hillsboro Beach Shipwreck</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. 9 miles north of Cooley's site on New River</td>
<td>1. 9.6 nautical miles north of New River</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. 8 feet deep water</td>
<td>2. 8 feet deep water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. beached, not wrecked on reef</td>
<td>3. beached, where no shallow offshore reef exists.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. oriented &quot;about northwest&quot;</td>
<td>4. keel oriented west-northwest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. copper fastened, copper sheathed, heavy built</td>
<td>5. copper/bronze/iron fastened, copper sheathed, large oak frames</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. burned</td>
<td>6. partially burned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. heavy &quot;chain cable&quot; going out to sea</td>
<td>7. 6 inch link chain going eastnortheast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. cargo salvaged</td>
<td>8. no cargo found</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. beached in 1835</td>
<td>9. 1824 coin found</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. iron, lead ballast not positively left on site</td>
<td>10. very little ballast found at site; no iron or lead</td>
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is now called the Hillsboro Ridge.

The chain at the Hillsboro Beach site was discovered by MAAC member Jeff Pollard in the winter of 1982 while he was diving on the site. The sand had moved off to form a sandbar and more of the wreck was exposed than previously had been witnessed. The chain was photographed during the January 1983 field day when the area was magnetometer-surveyed and photographed. The piece of burned plank also was photographed that day.

Unanswered Questions

There are several unanswered questions concerning the circumstances that occasioned the Gil Blas to play such an important role in early Broward County history. Why did the captain sell the boat and the cargo, rather than commission Cooley to refloat her so he could complete his trans-Atlantic voyage? What were the names of the captain and the original owners? What was her official manifest? Perhaps future research will provide answers to these questions.

Perhaps an even more important question is: did the anchor chain break loose from the anchor and send the ship aground? Someday the buried chain will be excavated and examined. If a broken link is discovered, and if it appears to have broken in antiquity rather than in modern times, then it would be possible that the anchor found one half mile offshore in 1975 is the anchor lost from the Gil Blas. Efforts then would need to be made to recover it for the Broward County Maritime Museum, which is in the planning phase. Perhaps some day that anchor will be referred to as "the anchor that set the development of southeast Florida back half a century."

Finally, it remains to be determined whether or not the lead was still on board when the Gil Blas was burned or if it had been salvaged previously by wreckers. If both the lead and the iron had been salvaged in 1836, Baldwin's claim was not justified. We then would have a shipwreck that was supposed to have six tons of lead on it but did not. Without the lead it may be impossible to prove conclusively that the Hillsboro Beach site is the remains of the Gil Blas.

Future Investigations

It has been determined, with a reasonable degree of probability, that the Hillsboro Beach shipwreck site is the Gil Blas. Thus, further investigative marine archaeological surveys are warranted to map the site in detail and to inventory all recovered artifacts. These items and surveys may establish a positive identification.

Field surveys should include sand removal and photomapping; intense magnetometer and metal detector searches of the site and upland beach; and, perhaps, a coring survey of the coquina limestone bedrock. Core samples would determine the extent of the cementation that has resulted from the presence of the shipwreck. In addition to field surveys, research in Cuba and at the Spanish Archives in Seville, Spain, might locate records concerning the Gil Blas and her cargo.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The development and utilization of its marine resources have had and continue to have an inestimable effect upon Broward County. Historical marine artifacts and sites should be preserved and protected as a constant reminder of the importance of such resources.

It is the recommendation of the Marine Archaeology Advisory Council that the Gil Blas site be declared a Marine Historical Site by the Broward County Board of Commissioners; that funds be appropriated to conduct the field and office surveys described herein; and that, in the future, plans be made to protect the site from continued degradation by natural elements and by treasure hunters.

Effective, protective measures should encompass the legal and the physical. Legal protection might be in the form of an ordinance that prohibits the salvaging of the site; physical protection might be in the form of a sandtrapping, submerged groin which would keep the site buried in sand all year. As a last resort, it might become necessary to salvage and exhum the structure in order to preserve it for a local museum.

FOOTNOTES


2. Richard K. Murdock, "Documents Concerning a Voyage to the Miami Region in 1793," BROWARD LEGACY, Fall 1979, II, 3, note 10. ("/Lewis/. . . appears to have made an illegal entry in East Florida some time after 1783.") Very similar, quoted in Murdock's article, stated in 1793 that Joseph Robbins told him that "Mr. Lewis/ landed in that house (New River) for several years./Briorro 1793.


4. Bill Raymond, "The Coral Reefs of Broward County," BROWARD LEGACY, summer/fall 1981, IV, 3, and 4, 2. The Florida Reef, generally, is considered to begin at Fowey Rocks, south of Miami, and to continue southward to the City Tortugas. As far as ships are concerned, however, the reef extends eastward to Hillsboro Rocks, south of the Hillsboro Inlet, where a prominent breaker-cum-value extends in that ten foot barrier ridge during storms. Nearly all shipwrecks between the Hillsboro Inlet and Cape Florida broke up on this rock ridge which now is called Hillsboro Ridge.

5. George Aldersdale, deposition, R.G. 46, Gil Blas. Aldersdale, captain of a wrecking vessel off the coast of Florida, saw the Gil Blas wreck site after it was burned. He described the coast at that point as "sand bar beach without any woods in rear for an enemy to secret themselves.


7. Ibid., William Cooley and Rigby, deposition.

8. Ibid., Rigby, deposition.


10. Sometime between 1776 and 1793 New River Inlet closed at the mouth of New River and either shifted or re-opened five miles southward. Verazul describes how he sailed five miles north, between two bar spits and the mainland, before entering New River. It was necessary for Cooley to sail six miles south in order to enter the ocean at New River Inlet. By 1883 the inlet hadshifted northward, to a point four miles south of the axis of New River, where present-day Dania Beach Boulevard intersects.


12. "Key West Inquirer (Extra)," January 16, 1836.


15. Ibid., Aldersdale, George LeCoste, Wade Rigby, deposition.

16. Ibid., Cooley, notarized statement.

17. Ibid., Rigby, deposition.

18. Ibid., notarized statement.

19. Ibid., Judge J. Lorin, Opinion of the Court of Claims.

20. Prior to 1890 most Florida ships that were driven onto the Florida coast were destroyed on the offshore reef or broke up in the bay. Generally, the anchors from the vessels are found on the deeper, outer reefs where they had been dropped, stored under the anchor chain separated. Wrecked vessels near the beach have a common feature as they are on the coast where they are near the hull structure, but they do not include chains which lead offshore to former anchor positions.