



Henry Jones and Tracy Newman are geared up for another day of diving for sunken treasure aboard the "Perfect Day."



Winged Victory

TREASURE HUNTERS HENRY JONES AND TRACY NEWMAN
RECOVER A MISSING PIECE OF A HISTORICAL PUZZLE

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WING AND PELICAN PHOTOS BY TRACY NEWMAN AND BONNIE AND JO SCHUBERT



When Captain Henry Jones found this golden wing in the sand, it was as shiny as when it was made 300 years ago.

In July of 1715, a fleet of 11 Spanish ships and one French frigate set sail for Spain, overloaded with passengers, goods, livestock – and tons of silver, gold, jewelry and other riches. Less than 400 miles out of the port of Havana, a raging hurricane hit the eastern coast of Florida, sending all but the French ship to the bottom.

More than 1,000 souls were lost. But others survived, and when word about the disaster was relayed to the Spanish strongholds in Havana and St. Augustine, a recovery operation was organized. A large amount of the treasure was brought up soon after, and more was discovered beginning in the 1960s, but there's still plenty that remains buried in the ocean bottom just off the beaches of Sebastian, Vero Beach and Fort Pierce.

That's what attracts people like Captain Henry Jones, First Mate Tracy Newman and the rest of their "Perfect Day" crew. They're one of a dozen or so crews that head out in their

boats each summer to search for sunken Spanish treasure. They all do it as subcontractors for 1715 Fleet-Queens Jewels LLC, which owns the exclusive salvage rights to the wrecks through the U.S. District Admiralty Court and under permanent contract with the State of Florida.

"The estimate is that, between all the wrecks, \$400-500 million is still missing in gold and silver and jewelry," Jones says. "There are four ships that have never been found." That optimistic appraisal is what keeps everyone motivated, although the reality is that many of the dives are uneventful. "We find a lot of beer cans," Newman says. "We bring up everything, and we usually have a trash can full by the end of the week – cans, fiberglass, rope, nets, plastic."

On better days, however, they'll find pottery shards, deck nails, musket balls, cannon balls, antique bottles, pieces of Chinese porcelain, ballast stones, an encrusted sword hilt or perhaps even a large shell to decorate the mantle. Silver coins

It's not all silver and gold. There are many other interesting artifacts to be discovered while treasure hunting. This spread displays some of the finds the "Perfect Day" crew has held on to, including the inevitable beer cans and seashells. The encrusted object at top center is a Spanish sword hilt.





The original pelican sculpture was found by Bonnie Schubert in 2010. A decade later, Henry Jones found its missing wing in the same general area.

“That wing has been on people’s minds for the last 10 years,”

— CAPTAIN HENRY JONES

are always an exciting find, but those are rare. Gold coins are even rarer since there were fewer of them to begin with.

But then, every once in a while, someone will have an unforgettable day like the one that Jones and Newman had on June 28, 2020. The two of them were in the water several hundred feet off Frederick Douglass Memorial Park in Fort Pierce, while Brian Fisher manned the boat topside. After clearing a hole in the ocean bottom, Jones spotted a glint of gold in the sand. “I saw the end of it,” he said, “and I knew what it was.”

Jones waited to pull his find out, wanting Newman to witness the moment. “I’m trying to get her over,” he says. “I didn’t want to leave it, so I’m waving and yelling, but she couldn’t hear me.” Finally, she noticed and swam over.

What he’d found was the missing wing from a dazzling, golden pelican sculpture discovered in the same area a decade earlier by Captain Bonnie Schubert. “I was really surprised it

had the chain on it,” Jones says. “I picked that up and pulled it out and, wow, that was pretty exciting. The gold was as shiny as can be. It’s crazy, after 300 years.”

“I actually thought it was a fake,” Newman says. “I thought he was pranking me. It’s just so surreal that you’re there and you’re seeing it.”

“That wing has been on people’s minds for the last 10 years,” Jones says. “And the day before we found it, we sat in my living room. I have a big chart I put on the floor all summer. So we’re looking at it, and Tracy says, ‘Why don’t we go look for the bird wing,’ because we’re always joking about it. And sure enough, we found it the next day.”

“We were very fortunate that day,” he adds, “because the visibility was fabulous. It’s never like that. There are times you literally can’t see a foot in front of you.” Newman adds with a laugh, “Braille diving.”

In accordance with their agreement, Jones turned the wing over to 1715 Fleet-Queen Jewels, which then reported it to the State of Florida. Based on a point system worked out in the early 1980s, the state can get up to 20% of the items recovered each season, of which they have few or no examples in their permanent collection. If an item is sold, 1715 Fleet-Queens Jewels splits the net proceeds 50/50 with the subcontracting crew that found it.

The “Perfect Day” crew members in turn have their own contracts to determine who gets how much. That includes Jones and his partner, Captain Phil Ratcliff, plus five others: Tracy Newman, Brian Fisher, Melissa Gruwell, Oliver Ackland-Snow and frequent guest diver William “Barnacle Bill” O’Connor. “We have percentages figured out,” Jones says. “It’s on paper.” And it doesn’t matter which member of the crew finds an item; everything is split according to the agreed-upon percentages.

Queen Elizabeth I wears a “pelican in her piety” pendant, circa 1573.



The bird in “pelican in her piety” imagery often looked nothing like a pelican, resembling more a cross between an eagle and a phoenix.

Of course, finding an item is sometimes only half the search. “There are so many layers to treasure hunting,” Captain Bonnie Schubert says. “It isn’t just digging in the sand. It’s the history and the whole background of the items, what we do with them after we find them and whether we learn anything from them.”

In the case of the golden wing, together with the “1715 Pelican” to which it belongs, many questions quickly arise. What is it? What was its purpose? What’s missing from the bird’s belly? Who owned it? Definitive answers are elusive, but one thing that’s fairly certain is what this particular bird represents: the “pelican in her piety.”

The image of a mother pelican drawing blood from her own breast to feed her babies began as an ancient legend. In some versions, the pelican gives her life to resurrect her young after they’ve been killed by snakes, by her mate or by both parents. Although the legend preceded Christianity, the parallels to Jesus were so fitting that early Christians adopted it to symbolize Christ sacrificing himself for humanity.

A golden ring holds two chains that attach to the wings and a third that attaches to a ring at the top of the bird's neck.



Pelican in her piety imagery can be found in stained glass windows, paintings, statues, illuminated manuscripts, mosaics, tapestries, pendants and church lecterns. A 16th-century painting of Elizabeth I of England shows the queen wearing a piece of jewelry with a pelican in her piety pendant at its center. The symbol has also been used in heraldry and on coats of arms. However, no piece has ever been found to match the 1715 Pelican. It's a unique find.

The 22K gold sculpture measures 5.5 inches tall and weighs 177 grams, about 6 ounces. Three vertical bars connect the bird's top and bottom. Two of them can be seen on the 1715 Pelican, while the third was found still attached to the "1715 Wing." The three bars are removable, with two pins holding each in place – presumably to allow for placing an

item in the pelican's belly. Finally, the sculpture is designed to hang from something. A golden ring holds three chains, two of which attach to the wings and the last to a small ring at the top of the bird's neck.

"From the best research," Schubert says, "I now firmly believe it was a reliquary and the center was designed to hold a crystal and some type of a devotional object." Reliquaries are vessels used to display holy relics, and there have been many of them throughout history. For example, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City owns a gilded reliquary with a hollow, oval-shaped piece of rock crystal that contains what's said to be one of Mary Magdalene's teeth.

The lozenge shape of the cavity in the 1715 Pelican seems designed to hold something like that, perhaps even a small

physical relic of Christ, given the symbolism of the sculpture itself. If that's the case, is a glass or rock-crystal receptacle still intact and lying buried somewhere in the sand? Or could that missing centerpiece have been waiting for the 1715 Pelican's arrival in Europe?

One curious feature is a single hole in each of the vertical bars. They look almost purposeful, rather than ornamental, as if something might pass through them, such as rods to secure a gemstone or other item in the cavity. It should be noted, however, that the wings would block anything from protruding out of two of the holes. In the end, there's not much to go on, so any explanation becomes speculation.

Others have suggested the 1715 Pelican might have been an incense or candle holder. But it seems ill-suited for that purpose, given that heat and smoke or soot would collect in the concave roof of the opening. Likewise, using it to hold holy oil or consecrated bread, as has also been suggested, doesn't mesh with the symbolism of the bird.



Left: A 16th-century reliquary with its central container missing
Right: a 16th-century enameled gold pendant with a three-chain hanging design similar to that of the 1715 Pelican sculpture

Henry Jones and Tracy Newman leave their dock in the Fort Pierce Inlet to head out for another day of treasure hunting in the Atlantic Ocean.





A map with marked with GPS coordinates of search locations is always kept on board. So is a bottle of rum in case of a big find on the ocean bottom.

Schubert suspects it was for private devotion, rather than a church piece. “It would be fantastic if you could ever link it to a family who was involved with the fleet at the time, or that it could turn up on a manifest,” she says. “That would take years and would be very difficult, probably unlikely, but it’s still a nice thought – that it had not just the religious symbolism, but maybe it had a personal connection to somebody.”

Of course, the big question after finding something like the 1715 Wing is: What will be done with it? The process for determining that is slow, usually taking about a year from the day of discovery to a final decision.

In May of this year, 1715 Fleet-Queens Jewels finally reported back to Jones and Newman that the 1715 Wing would be sold to the same private collector who bought the 1715 Pelican. It was also decided that the identity of the buyer and the price paid would not be made public. Everyone was happy with that outcome, knowing the bird and its wing would be reunited at last. “That’s where it belongs,” Jones says.

And so, it’s back to another year of treasure hunting for the “Perfect Day” crew. The season usually lasts only from June to August, maybe September, since the ocean gets too rough after that. Jones, who started diving for treasure with his son Robert in 2007, says, “It’s a hobby. You don’t count on making money, unless you hit something big. It’s the adventure, the thrill of finding something, no matter what it is. I would rather do that than golf or play tennis or whatever.”

Newman joined him for the first time in 2018. “We met and then were dating,” she says. “I went out on the boat with him one weekend, and that was it – I was hooked.” She adds, “We get to be pirates. I want to be a pirate!”

Both Jones and Newman have full-time jobs, so they go out only on weekends. During the week, Captain Phil Ratcliff will head out in the boat, with the rest of the crew joining either captain, depending on their schedules.

Thinking back on the Wing, Jones says, “So far, that’s the prize,” then adds, “until this year. See, that’s how it works.” ☘