

Hidden Treasure-Historical Truth
Tortuga, Den of Pirates and Thieves
By Katherine Bone

Tortuga, known as *Ile de la Tortue*, was a bastion of debauchery in the 1600's. Discovered by the Spanish, the island was named *Tortuga*, Turtle Island, in honor of its turtle-like shape. Tortuga sits about 3 leagues off the northwestern shore of present-day Haiti, formerly known as Hispaniola. In its heyday, the island's strategic location attracted pirates of unsavory renown who intercepted weighted down Galleons heading through the Windward Passage toward the Spanish Main. Twenty miles long and four miles wide, Tortuga was *the* pirate capital of the Caribbean until Port Royal rose to fame as the 'Sodom of the New World'.

Ever since it's strategic discovery, Spain sought to control Tortuga. The French, having been ousted from the island many times, set a plan into motion in 1605 that forced Spanish residents to abandon their homes and livestock for the final time. As a result, terrified Spaniards fled Tortuga and settled on the northeastern coast of Hispaniola leaving hunters, former convicts, and indentured servants behind. Arawak Indians then taught these hunters how to cure the meat of pigs and cattle on wooden grates. This grate was called a *boucan* and the French later gave these hunters the name *boucanier* or buccaneer. As time passed, Tortuga's buccaneers earned a good living selling beef and pork jerky, and hides and tallow, a substance used to coat the hulls of ships as a precaution against teredo worms, which caused permanent damage to ship planks.

Buccaneers banded together in groups of six or eight agreeing to share all they had with one another. Some lived together as *couples*. This lifestyle was known as *matelotage*, a word taken from 'sailor' in French. Matelotes shared their property until one outlived the other. Tortuga's Governor brought in hundreds of prostitutes to entice buccaneers away from this practice and many prostitutes married buccaneers only to find themselves shared between two men.

Oh, woeful prostitute! Buccaneers were hardly fragrant lovers. Imagine a buccaneer's daily routine of slaughter, a process of rotting guts and cooked grease which created a miserable stench that never washed off. Imagine kissing a face smeared with tallow to fend off insects and having to touch or clean a shirt constantly splattered with blood. Most buccaneers' clothing, to include trousers, belts, boots, and even round brimless hats, were made of untanned hides which also contributed to their foul odor.

On a day to day basis, buccaneers were a fearsome sight to behold. They marched around the island with a six-foot matchlock and a cutlass or two stashed in their belts, matching powder horns and bullet sacks strapped to their waists, which swished to and fro with each step. They sucked warm marrow from the bones of freshly butchered animals, gambled, practiced sharpshooting and drank a mixture of rum and gunpowder to kill extra time, if not themselves. Having buried their pasts and assumed new identities, they asked no questions and expected no questions from those around them. They were a smelly, motley crew, but for a time, wealthy, strong, and efficient.

When hunting was poor, Tortuga's buccaneers turned to piracy, easily adapting to the sea. Operating canoes, hollowed out from tree-trunks or single-sailed barques, they roved the sea with muskets instead of cannon, attacking under cover of night. Single-masted sloops soon became the vessel of choice due to how easily they were maneuvered

in shallow water. And so, their attention was drawn to Bermuda where the fastest and best sloops of their kind, those which allowed for crews of close to 50 men and 11-14 guns, could be found. With sturdy hulls beneath their feet, buccaneer numbers increased and with that came success, until... Spain took notice.

Tortuga's impregnable harbor, fertile soil, fresh water, and sheltered anchorage attracted reprobates of every kind. The island's prime location at the head of the Windward Passage provided a vantage point from which to spy and strike loaded treasure ships heading back to Spain. As a result, Tortuga became the recruiting ground for French, Dutch, Danish, and English pirates, alike. It's success encouraged men like Jean Le Vasseur, an engineer and governor of Tortuga in 1642, to build a massive fort with which to defend the city and it's 'citizens', further giving rise to Tortuga's renown.

Outraged that their Galleons were being looted, the Spanish retaliated. Returning to the island, they slaughtered all the pigs and cattle they could find, hoping to forever cripple Tortuga's economy and teach the buccaneers not to trifle with Spain. Ironically, with all chance of livelihood gone, buccaneers were then forced to make a living the only other way they knew how. Spain, realizing its blunder too late, tried to reverse the damage but every effort was continually repulsed. By this time, the little island of Tortuga had taken on a life of its own. It had become the 'common place of refuge of all sorts of wickedness, the seminary... of pirates and thieves'.

In 1640, empowered by success, buccaneers began to call themselves the 'Brethren of the Coast' and proceeded to follow a strict code, the Custom of the Coast. This code allowed them to elect a Captain, agree on articles under which they sailed, and have ship-board meetings to determine where they were headed (for provisions like pigs on Spanish farms, manatees, seacows, and turtles). Lights and candles were to be put out at eight. Weapons were to be kept clean and fit for service. There would be no desertion. No quarreling. No stealing. The code also helped define division of booty (no prey, no pay). The Captain and owner of the ship got extra shares. The shipwright or carpenter had a fixed salary. Surgeon's salaries were also capped and the first pirate to locate or seize a prize won an extra share, whereas cabin boys received a half share.

Last but by no means least; maimed sailors received a share based on loss of physical ability. "For the loss of a right arm, 600 pieces of eight or six slaves; for the loss of a left arm, 500 pieces of eight or five slaves; for a right leg, 500 pieces of eight or five slaves; for the left leg, 400 pieces of eight or four slaves; for an eye, 100 pieces of eight or one slave; for a finger the same as for an eye. All is paid in common stock." So writes Alexander Exquemelin, former surgeon, in his book *Bucaniers of America*, first published in Amsterdam in 1678.

In it's prime, Tortuga gave birth to the best and the worst. The most successful pirate was Chevalier de Grammont, the son of a French nobleman who, at the age of fourteen, joined the French Royal Marines and rose quickly through the ranks commanding 2,000 men aboard 6 large and 13 small ships. In 1685, after years of successful privateering on land and sea, Grammont disappeared in high seas with a crew of 180 men and was never heard from again.

The most notorious pirate was Jean-David Nau, known as Francois L'Olonnois, one of Tortuga's original buccaneers. Notoriously cruel, he tortured captives with burning matches, pulled out tongues, performed woodling (tying a cord around the head and twisting until the eyes pop out), cut men into pieces, and even tore open a man's

chest, removed his heart and gnawed on it before throwing it back into a captive's face. In a fateful twist, L'Olonnois was captured by cannibalistic Indians in the Gulf of Darien, hacked limb from limb, and eaten along with members of his crew in 1667.

For a while, Tortuga's infamy attracted unsavory characters of every kind making the island heaven or hell on earth, depending upon perspective. Governorship was not ideal. Vasseur became a Buccaneer King, developed visions of grandeur and paranoia which lasted until he was murdered by two of his own henchmen in 1653. His replacement, Chevalier de Fontenay, allowed piracy to continue until he was routed in 1654. Elias Watts became governor in 1656 but was expelled in 1659. Shortly thereafter, Tortuga became *civilized* thereby ending one of the most notorious eras in Caribbean history.

Ah, but piracy was not doomed, me hearties! No, pirates were not meant to be land-lubbers. Plenty of brigands still roved the seas. These savvy men and women plied the waters of the Caribbean with an eye glass at hand, compass held aloft and a course plotted toward Port Royal.