

# We Found Buried Pirate Treasure!

By Douglas Harrell

Pirate ships were once a dreaded and all-too-common sight off Cape Henlopen. What you and thousands of other visitors to the fabulous and storied beaches of Rehoboth and Lewes don't know, dear reader, is that they still are. The story of the intrepid treasure hunters who made this remarkable discovery, and who tracked down treasure chests loaded with booty, spans more than two decades and can only now be told.

Our story begins innocently enough on Lewes Beach in 1996. After a fun day in the water and a nice dinner, our unsuspecting little band crossed the dunes and returned to the water's edge for a relaxing, postprandial stroll. I was leading the way, followed by my wife, Carolyn, Grandpa George, Grandma Jo, and sisters-in-law, Ann and Beth, with their husbands, John and Bill. Bringing up the rear were my niece Amy, age seven, and my nephew Billy, age four (Beth's kids), and my nephew Jonathan (John's son), age sixteen and Amy and Billy's hero.

Before we had advanced ten yards, I spied something bobbing in the water. It appeared to be an old bottle that had been sealed with a cork.

"I see something in the water," I cried. Not loudly enough, apparently, as Amy and Billy were still occupied, looking for shells and throwing little clumps of dried seaweed at each other.

Thankfully, Grandma Jo came to the rescue at close to 90 decibels.

“Billy, look!” she exclaimed, while crouching slightly and pointing.

That did the trick. Now both Amy and Billy were eagerly waiting at the water’s edge as I lunged into the crashing surf to recover the object that had so aroused our curiosity (in point of fact, that’s a bit of an exaggeration, but it provides a better mental image for you, dear reader, than me wading up to my knees and plucking it off of a preternaturally calm Delaware Bay.)

It was indeed an old bottle, and Billy, looking closely, said, “There’s a message inside!”

After some effort and the assist of a small, scavenged stick, I was finally able to extract a stiff and delicate piece of paper (all the while making a mental note to remember to bring tweezers with me on any future walks during which it seemed likely we might find a bottle with a message in it).

I carefully unrolled the paper. It was brown and brittle, and burned around the edges, as if someone had held it over a candle to make it look really old. I began reading aloud:

*In the year of our Lord, 1664, I, Thomas Kitesprocket, was just fifteen years of age and already three years before the mast as a cabin boy aboard the H.M.S. Irritable, when the events I am about to recount came to pass. We were nearing the end of what had been a blessedly uneventful passage when our look out cried, "Ship ho!" Rushing to the rails, I spied a two-masted sloop flying His Majesty's colors, cleaving the waves and closing on us at full sail. Imagine my horror when I saw the beloved colors of our Royal Navy ensign lowered and replaced by a black flag with a white skull and crossbones—the Jolly Roger. We were being attacked by pirates!*

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Personally, I was riveted. Grandma Jo gently interrupted me, however, and pointed, “You seem to be losing your audience.”

Looking over, I could see that Amy and Billy were not paying the least attention and had become engaged in running around in circles, pretending to be airplanes. I was surprised and, if I am honest, a little disappointed that they had so little interest in the spine-tingling narrative that I so fortuitously held in my quaking hands. Oh well. I jumped to the end:

*. . . and so, you, whoever so findeth this, my humble missive, follow well my indications, and you will enjoy riches beyond your wildest imagination.*

“Look, Amy and Billy, there’s a treasure map.” That got their attention.

There was indeed a crude map drawn on the back of the letter, which I held out for inspection.

Billy began jumping up and down. “We have to find the x! We have to find the x!”

Although only four, he was onto something, as the map did, in fact, indicate that the object of our quest was marked by an “x.” Our first step was to locate a large board protruding vertically from the sand,

which, miraculously, after 332 years, was only yards from where benevolent providence had placed Thomas Kitesprocket's ancient epistle into our hands. From this starting point, we were instructed to count off paces, first in this direction, then in that, until, after two or three minutes of loud counting and vigorous pacing to and fro, we stood sweaty and panting where, indubitably, "x marks the spot." Two curious faces looked up at me, waiting expectantly.

I spelled it out for them, "We found the x, now start digging!"

In a flash, they were on their knees, scooping out sand with both hands. After they had dug without result to what I perceived to be the depth at which young Thomas would have buried his treasure, I took careful, measured stock of the various landmarks around us and suggested that they dig about two feet to the left.

Billy hit pay dirt first. A silvery blade came into view. As they both worked feverishly, two crossed swords emerged into the light.

Billy was ecstatic, "A sword!" he proclaimed proudly, leaping to his feet and raising it above his head. "A toy one," he added, no doubt to ensure that no hovering adult felt the need to yank it out of his jubilant little hand.

Amy jumped up. "Another sword!" she yelled, and soon a full-fledged sword fight was underway.

"Hey," I interrupted, "what about the rest of the treasure? I bet there's more." Resuming the dig, six inches deeper, our two eager excavators uncovered the treasure chest itself. Although over three hundred years old, the thing it most resembled was a plastic shoebox like you might find at Peebles or Target. It seems that our young British sailor of yore had carefully selected the container that would best keep moisture from seeping into the booty.

Ripping off the lid, Billy surveyed the splendiferous plethora of riches and began recounting aloud, "There's toys, and rings, and CANDY!"

Flush with victory, their cheeks bulging with Hershey's kisses, our intrepid treasure hunters began dancing and chanting, "We're rich! We're rich!" as the rays of the setting sun drew azure- and-magenta streaks across the sky reflected below on the still waters of the glass-smooth bay.

So ended the most exciting day of their young lives.

Now, you might think that finding buried pirate treasure is a rare thing—like winning the lottery or being struck by lightning—and that once done, it would be nigh on impossible that you should ever be so fortunate as to stumble onto a second hoard. And, for ordinary folks, you'd be spot on; but I seem to be blessed with the knack. The very next year, during our vacation together in our new condo on Lewes Beach, Amy and Billy found another treasure map. This map was not drawn by Thomas Kitesprocket. In fact, we don't know who drew it, as there was no wordy and boring prologue. It is worth noting that whoever made this map did not include a lot of precise pacing, which can be prone to error. No, this map was a proper map showing landmarks.

We started on the beach, proceeded to the trash barrel, then on to the pole. A few landmarks later, we ended by counting houses, and you'll never believe this, but the treasure was buried in the sand in the breezeway under our very house. While nothing would ever match the excitement of that first "Eureka!" it was still very exciting that we had found another cache of fabulous riches. A swashbuckling time was had by all.

The year of our Lord, 1998, was an exciting one. A blue-and-brown, three-masted ship appeared one day, sailing the bay in front of our condo. I recognized it immediately as an armed merchant vessel known as a Dutch Pinnace. Through my spyglass, I could just make out the name on the stern, "Kalmar Nyckel"—no doubt it had been seized by pirates who had abandoned their ship in favor of this much

newer one. Billy and I speculated that those pirates might row ashore any night to bury treasure. In fact, maybe they already had.

The next day, we formed a search party, and sure enough, we found a treasure map. Billy was just as excited as ever. Amy, however, now nine, did not seem as happy about the whole expedition. In fact, she stopped dead in her tracks, folded her arms, and said that she didn't think pirates had made the map at all.

As Billy trotted happily ahead, I gently pointed out to her that as a grown-up girl of nine, it was only reasonable that she might begin to question the existence of pirates. I confessed that I, myself, was a bit skeptical. "However," I said, "Billy is so happy thinking about the pirates. Is it more fun to believe that someone else made the map, or that pirates made the map?"

"Oh, it's a lot more fun to believe that pirates made the map," she said with a wide grin. Firm now in our shared belief in pirates, we resumed our quest and soon found a cache of freshly buried pirate treasure.

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As the dunes shift, so do our lives. My dear wife, Carolyn, died in 2001, and for a few years, it was just me manning the fort in Lewes against pirates. Amy and Billy had moved on to other pursuits, but Billy suspected we might find a treasure map one weekend when a work colleague and her four-year-old daughter were visiting, and sure enough, we did. My brother Dave's son Will found pirate treasure when he was only three years old, a new record. My friends Ray and Kati invited me to spend time with them during their beach vacation, and their kids, Bekka and Greg, found buried pirate treasure in Cape May.

My last encounter with pirates was ten years ago. Now happily remarried, I spent a week with wife Michelle and two of her friends and their families in Nags Head, North Carolina.

During the week, I entertained the children with tales of Blackbeard,

a pirate who famously prowled the Outer Banks. You're not going to believe this, but toward the end of the week, we found a treasure map written in Blackbeard's own hand, and this time, I really did have to lunge into crashing surf.

Blackbeard was even more straightforward than our anonymous Lewes pirate. He had made a detailed sketch of the entire beach and the road leading from it with the precise number of houses, each of the correct color. As we excitedly made our way from the beach in the direction indicated (the backyard of the house we were renting), I did not need to worry about the teenaged Jordan. I had explained to him about how I tended to find pirates wherever I went, and he was on board. I was a bit worried about ten-year-old Matt, but he was over the moon with excitement and even suggested that we call the local TV station so they could do a report on our search.

It was Christopher, a precocious boy of eight, who observed sardonically, "I don't think these houses were here hundreds of years ago, and I definitely don't think pirates used colored pencils." After a quick one-on-one pow-wow, he agreed that the kinds of pirates we were tracking did, in fact, use colored pencils. He also agreed that he didn't need to make any more insightful observations, as they might ruin the fun for the younger kids, and soon the little girls in the party had festooned themselves with the many rings, bracelets, necklaces, and tiaras that made up a significant portion of Blackbeard's treasure.

Tales of treasure have been recounted from time to time over the years by my adventurous, young companions, but that was the last of the great treasure hunts.

In my vast treasure hunting experience, I have learned three important lessons that, dear reader, I am now entrusting into your capable hands. First, it is important to know your different types of pirates. You must think carefully about what kind of treasure each is likely to bury so that you can find the map that will lead your young cohorts to the

untold riches they are going to be most excited to find. Second, your chances of finding a treasure map are greatly increased if you make one. My final piece of advice—and this is key—is that you will only find buried treasure if you pay close attention to where you bury it.

Alas, time marches on apace. Little Billy is twenty-five. Little Amy is a maid of twenty-eight and soon to be a bride. Michelle and I can still be found in Lewes. As we stroll the shore or recline serenely by the water, our thoughts off' harken back to those salad days when we marched in the ancient footsteps of pirates, young swashbucklers in tow, searching for buried treasure. Did I mention that Amy is getting married in October? I'm thinking that pirates will, once again, be beaching their skiffs on the sandy shores of Lewes and burying their swag by the light of the full moon in, shall we say, five or six years? In fact, my sources in the pirate underground tell me that planning has already begun.

I can hardly wait.

DOUG HARRELL IS ALMOST A NATIVE OF WILMINGTON, HAVING ARRIVED AT THE TENDER AGE OF FIVE. HE RECEIVED A BS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE, AND A PH.D. FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA, BOTH IN CHEMICAL ENGINEERING. HIS CAREER IN THE PLASTICS INDUSTRY COVERED MORE THAN THIRTY YEARS, MOSTLY IN WILMINGTON, A BIT IN NEW JERSEY, AND A NON-CHARACTERISTIC, FAR-FLUNG STINT IN FERRARA, ITALY. ALL ALONG, HE HAS BEEN AN ENTHUSIASTIC WRITER MANQUÉ. ALTHOUGH HE HAS PUT OUT A SHORT MEMOIR PIECE AT CHRISTMAS FOR FRIENDS AND FAMILY FOR MANY YEARS, HE HAS PRIMARILY BEEN OCCUPIED IN NOT WRITING NUMEROUS MYSTERY SHORT STORIES AND A CHILDREN'S TIME-TRAVEL NOVEL. HE IS CURRENTLY WRITING A HISTORICAL NOVEL ABOUT THE LINDBERGH BABY KIDNAPPING OF THE 1930S. HIS FAVORITE WRITING SPOT IS PILOT POINT ON LEWES BEACH. HE GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGES THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF HIS WIFE, MICHELLE, AND HER COUSIN, JEANIE BLAIR, TO FINALLY GET SERIOUS.