The Hunt for Lost Pirate Gold

The amazing true story of a famous pirate shipwreck and the modern-day treasure hunter determined to find it.

By Lauren Tarshis

The year 1717 began very well for a pirate named Sam Bellamy. He and his men had been prowling the waters of the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. They had preyed on ships traveling between the Caribbean islands and England—ships laden with gold and silver and silk and spices. (Paragraph 1)

Bellamy had a crew of 145 men and a fleet of five stolen ships. His best ship was the Whydah, which he and his crew had taken from English slave traders. The ship was big, fast, and sturdy. Captains surrendered quickly when they saw the Whydah on their tails, her black flag raised, her cannons ready to fire. They thought Bellamy and his men would steal their ships and kill them all. (Paragraph 2)

Bellamy was no murderer. He was a thief, though, and a very successful one. In just one year, he and his men had looted more than 50 ships. By April 1717, the Whydah was filled with plundered treasures, including 180 bags of gold and silver coins. It was time for the men to head to their hideaway: an island off the coast of Maine. There, they would divide up the loot. (Paragraph 3)

As the fleet sailed north, Bellamy ordered the Whydah to make a stop on the shores of Cape Cod, Massachusetts. He had a girlfriend in Cape Cod, a farmer’s daughter named Maria Hallett. Some say Hallett and the pirate planned to marry, and that Bellamy ordered the stop so that he could show his new treasures to his future bride. (Paragraph 4)

Whatever lured Bellamy to the Cape, he never made it. On April 26, when the Whydah was just 500 feet from the shores of the Cape town of Wellfleet, there was a storm. Thirty-foot waves crashed over the ship’s decks. Howling, 70-mile-per-hour winds shredded the sails and toppled the men like toy soldiers. The crew tried to keep the ship under control and away from the rocky shore. Then a strong gust of wind slammed the ship into a sandbar. The ship splintered and began to break apart. Huge waves finished the job. Men tumbled into the sea as the ship’s cannons and masts crashed over them. One hundred and forty-four men drowned that day. Bellamy was one of them. Within days, the ship’s wreckage had slipped off the sandbar and settled at the bottom of the ocean. (Paragraph 5)

A Treasure Hunt

Growing up on Cape Cod in the 1950s and 1960s, Barry Clifford had heard all about the Whydah. His uncle Bill knew all about Bellamy and Hallett, the bags of gold, the cataclysmic storm. As young Barry Clifford built sand castles on the beach, he gazed at the water and thought of Uncle Bill’s stories. (Paragraph 6)

What happened to those treasures? he wondered. Some people said that the treasure was gone, that in the days after the storm, locals had swum out to the wreckage and stuffed their pockets with gold and silver. Uncle Bill disagreed. He felt sure that the treasure was still out there in the water. Clifford believed him. When he grew up, he decided to prove his uncle right. (Paragraph 7)

Clifford was 36 years old when he began his search for the Whydah. He was an experienced diver, and he knew the waters of Cape Cod well. But finding sunken treasure is not easy. Clifford would need money—hundreds of thousands of dollars—and special equipment. He would also need to get permission from the state of Massachusetts and then adhere to strict rules. A treasure hunter isn’t allowed to just jump into the water, search for an ancient wreck, and make off with priceless bounty. Shipwrecks are historical treasures with much to tell us about the past—underwater museums, really. The state of Massachusetts said that if Clifford were to find the Whydah, he would have to send the artifacts to a lab where they could be studied. (Paragraph 8)
Clifford’s first step was research. He needed to find out exactly where the Whydah had sunk. He searched local libraries for historical records and maps. He learned that a man named Captain Cyprian Southack was on Cape Cod soon after the Whydah sank. After the storm, Southack had tried to salvage the treasure himself. He failed but left behind detailed maps of the coastline. (Paragraph 9)

Clifford covered the walls of his home with copies of Southack’s maps. There was no X marking the spot where the Whydah lay, but Clifford believed that the maps could help him find the wreck. (Paragraph 10)

After months of lonely work, Clifford had gathered enough information to win permission to begin an underwater search. His exciting story attracted investors—that is, people to help pay the costs of his project. In May 1983, Clifford and his crew began exploring a small slice of ocean just 500 feet from shore. Using special metal-sensing equipment and detailed maps, they crept through the deep waters in a small boat. (Paragraph 11)

They found a lot of metal, but no sign of the Whydah. (Paragraph 12)

They searched until September, when Cape Cod’s cold weather and rough seas made it too dangerous to continue. By that time, the money was running out. The crew had grown grumpy and discouraged. Maybe Uncle Bill was wrong after all. (Paragraph 13)

The Truth About Pirates

As Clifford was searching for the Whydah and its treasure, he learned some surprising facts about the pirates of Bellamy’s time. Many, including Bellamy, were former English sailors fed up with the harsh life aboard military and trade ships. On those ships, the work was backbreaking, the food scarce, and the captains often cruel. Sailors could be beaten for making small mistakes. (Paragraph 14)

Pirates, however, followed a set of rules known as “the articles.” These rules guaranteed that all pirates got an equal say in ship matters, and that treasure was split equally among them. Pirate captains, like Bellamy, were elected by the crew. They could be fired if they treated their men badly. (Paragraph 15)

Sure, there were cruel and ruthless pirates. But many, including a large number of Africans who had been freed from slave ships, were decent men who just wanted an independent life. And, of course, pirate life offered the chance to become mighty rich. (Paragraph 16)

A Surprising Discovery

Clifford and his crew got back to work in May 1984. Day after day, divers searched the waters. All they found was junk. (Paragraph 17)

By July, spirits were low. Clifford had enough money to search for just one more week. On July 20, a TV reporter and camera crew joined them. The divers didn’t want to get into the water that day, but the reporter insisted. Clifford sent a diver down, just for the cameras. He didn’t expect to find anything.

The diver slipped into the dark water. Then he quickly resurfaced. He ripped off his mouthpiece and yelled, “Hey, you guys! There’s three cannons down there!” (Paragraph 18)

Clifford’s heart raced. Over the past year, there had been many moments of excitement followed by disappointment. Would these cannons turn out to be more sea junk? (Paragraph 19)

The crew brought up an object coated with hardened minerals. Clifford tapped the object to chip off the growth. (Paragraph 20)

Underneath was a silver coin. Clifford recognized the markings. It was a Spanish coin called a piece of eight. The date? 1688. Clifford smiled, wishing his uncle Bill were there too. “I think we’ve found a pirate ship,” he said. (Paragraph 21)
The boys spent the night in a cabin. The next day, they returned to their campsite. The grizzly was gone. But it had ripped apart their tent, smashed their lantern, and eaten all their food. Cans of spaghetti and chili were torn apart. The boys left the park with what little of their camping gear they could salvage. Two weeks later, they would realize that they’d been lucky to escape with their lives. \(\text{(paragraph 22)}\)

**A Dream Come True**

Since then, Clifford’s crew has salvaged more than 200,000 items from the Whydah. They’ve brought up thousands of gold and silver coins, gold jewelry from Africa, gold bars, pistols, plates, and pewter dishes, as well as shoes and stockings. They even found a bronze bell with the ship’s name on it. In 1998, they found the ship’s wooden hull. Clifford believes thousands of treasures are still waiting to be found. \(\text{(Paragraph 23)}\)

The Supreme Court of Massachusetts gave Clifford and his company what the state did not: complete control of the Whydah and its artifacts. This means Clifford legally owns all of the treasure. The treasure could be worth as much as $400 million. If he chose to, Clifford could sell the treasure and become a very rich man. \(\text{(Paragraph 24)}\)

Instead, Clifford has chosen to keep the collection together. Seeing it together will help people understand the Whydah’s history. Many of the artifacts are on display at the Whydah Pirate Museum on Cape Cod. \(\text{(Paragraph 25)}\)

Clifford says that his search for the Whydah was never about money. It was about living out a childhood dream. It was also about proving his uncle Bill right. And sometimes, when the ocean is calm and the sun is warm, Clifford says he can feel in his heart that Sam Bellamy would approve of his decision. \(\text{(Paragraph 26)}\)

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**Who Gets the Treasure?**

*Finders keepers? Not so much. BY MACKENZIE CARRO*

At this moment, millions of shipwrecks—many filled with treasures—sit on the ocean floor, waiting to be found. And with high-tech tools like underwater robots, it’s easier than ever to find them.

But finding a shipwreck doesn’t make it yours, even if you spent millions of dollars and years of your life looking for it. “When an airplane crashes,” says maritime lawyer Jim Goold, “no one says you can go grab the wallets of the passengers, right? Of course not.”

Yet figuring out who has rights to a wreck can be a herculean task. It may not be clear who originally owned the ship or the treasures it carried. What if the ship was stolen? What if it can’t be traced back to its original owner and his or her descendants?

In most cases, when a wreck is found in international waters and the owner is unknown, the finder gets the rights to the wreck. But to prevent the pilfering and destruction of these pieces of history, most nations abide by a treaty that requires sunken ships to be treated as archaeological sites. This means the wrecks must be protected and studied, and their contents preserved in places like museums for all to see.

The artifacts recovered from the Whydah are worth millions, but Barry Clifford (above) is more interested in their value as pieces of history. “The last human being to touch these was a pirate,” he says.