



FAMOUS SHIPWRECKS:

El Populo, 1733—1966

by Bob “Frogfoot” Weller

Captain Imbernon must have felt jinxed. His ship *El Populo* had survived the first onslaught of the hurricane, and after being driven into shallow water, had managed to drop anchor inside the dragon’s teeth that rimmed the Florida Keys. He let out the full scope of anchor line to get a good grip on the sandy bottom. The seas still mounted 20-foot waves, but for the moment he was holding his own. Then the eye of the hurricane passed, and the wind rapidly shifted and now blew from the opposite direction. The *Populo* swung on the arc of her anchor line, striking first a coral head that ruptured her belly. Then as it spilled ballast across the seabed, the ship began to fill with water—striking hard on another reef several hundred yards to the east. Here, the *Populo* settled to the bottom in 29 feet of water at the base of the reef that became her resting place.

El Populo was a *guerra*, or war scout ship, belonging to the King [Philip V] of Spain. Because Captain Imbernon’s ship was a fast corvette type and not too large, it had stayed near the van of the twenty-one ships in the 1733 Plate Fleet. When the hurricane hit from the southeast, the *Populo* went through the coral rocks near the north end of Key Largo. Now she lay alongside the reef with water up to her poop deck, and her primary cargo of tobacco was a soggy bulge in her lower hold. The ship’s longboat was still intact, and Imbernon could see the fleet *aviso Delores* lying at a rakish angle on a reef nearby. The *aviso*’s longboat was also intact, and the two crews together rowed ashore to Key Largo, where they learned from the local Indians that “many masts were above the water to the south.”

Captain Huboni of *El Africa* had been at the van of the fleet as it sailed up the Bahama Channel, and when the hurricane struck he was able to keep his ship at anchor in forty *brazas* (200 feet) of water—clear of the Florida reefs. After the hurricane passed, he was able to sight the *aviso* on a reef inshore. He sent his longboat to see if he could rescue the crew and some of the cargo, and as the longboat drew near the ship, the *Populo* was also sighted nearby. No one was found on board either ship, but some movement was observed on shore. As the longboat threaded its way through the reefs close to shore, they located the survivors.

With everyone safe aboard his vessel, Captain Huboni sailed southward to view the carnage of his sister ships scattered over the reefs and to pick up other survivors. From there he sailed back to Havana to report the loss of the fleet. In the following months, salvage efforts were successful in refloating the *avisos*, and she was used to help recover treasure from the wrecks off the Matecumbes. The *Populo* was a total loss and slipped into oblivion.

Somehow, *El Populo* escaped the vigilant eyes of salvage divers during the rush of the 1950—1965 years when many of the 1733 Spanish fleet were located and salvaged. Finally, three divers: **Carl Ward**, Carl Frederick, and Lee Harding located the wreck quite by accident. It was one of those crisp, clear days with unlimited bottom visibility in the Upper Florida Keys, and the large cannon lying on top of the ballast pile was the first indication that they had discovered a virgin wreck site. During their initial search of the area they located, and later recovered, a small bronze mortar (type of cannon) with a foundry mark that has only recently been identified. The three divers thought that they had the *Populo*, but they were never sure of it until they recovered a “pillar dollar” dated 1732. This nailed it down as a 1733 ship, and what records were available indicated that this was the right area. Further recoveries included a *K’ung Hsi* porcelain cup, a silver plate, a small pair of scissors, a pair of brass dividers, a small bottle, an ivory string binder for a musical instrument, a silver and a pewter spoon, and finally ... a gold ring.

Keeping the wreck a secret was the problem. They kept the cannons covered with sand, and although it was often difficult to relocate, they never kept a marker float anywhere near the site. The wreck remained their own private domain for about a year while they worked the area with a hydraulic dredge only when no other boats were in sight. Then a marine conservation officer by the name of Sykes spotted them working the wreck one day, and somehow the word leaked out to the diving community. Within weeks, other divers began visiting the site and, during the winter months of 1967, Martin Meylach began removing the cannon from the ballast pile. By this time the three divers felt that they had found as much as the *Populo* had to offer and, although it never contained the treasure they had hoped for (because *El Populo* carried no registered treasure at all), it was an experience they would never forget.

Today, *El Populo* lies within the bounds of Pennekamp Park, directly east of Caesar’s Creek on a bearing of 112 degrees true—a distance of four miles. Turkey Point Power Plant smoke stacks bear 296 degrees, and the Pacific Reef Light bears 68 degrees—a distance of 1.2 miles. It’s a hard wreck to find unless you have excellent visibility on a flat calm day. If you can spot the coral head that rises ten feet above the bottom with a sandy patch at the base, then *El Populo* lies in the sandy patch. There is little treasure left to find, but the site remains as one of the famous 1733 shipwrecks that started the salvage rush to the Florida Keys.

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POPULO CANNON FOUNDRY MARK IDENTIFIED

Not being ones to leave a stone unturned (ballast or otherwise), we couldn’t let the business of the *Populo*’s cannon’s foundry mark go unsettled. When we had the piece in the CONQUISTADOR’S GOLD exhibit last year in West Palm Beach, James Levy of the State of Florida’s Conservation Laboratory told us that the mark was that of the Amsterdam (Holland) foundry. For further confirmation of this, we learned that since “Frogfoot” first took notes on his story of the *Populo*, the “Divers Three” — now the “Divers Four” — had received a letter from Holland with some good news in it.

J. B. Kist, of the Department of Dutch History, in a letter to Robert McKay (the latest diving partner) states that, “The cannon is a six-pounder stonepiece (*steenstuk* is the correct Dutch name, *pedrero* the Spanish).” And “Both the form of the Amsterdam proofmark and the touchhole point to the 18th century.” The *steenstuk*, *pedrero*, or stonepiece, as close as we can determine, shot stones and was used as an anti-mutiny cannon.

So, another piece of the shipwreck puzzle falls into place. But there remains an opening in the full picture: just how does a Dutch cannon come into service aboard a Spanish ship? (by Ernie Richards)

