Abstract

In the early hours of July 8, 1772 the sounds of timber smashing, rigging falling and the shouts of men echoed on the desolate shore near the east end of Anguilla, a small island in the British West Indies. Two ships, the 70 gun man-of-war El Buen Consejo, and the 40 gun armed merchant vessel Prusiano, part of a larger Spanish supply fleet headed for Vera Cruz, made a terrible navigation error as they neared the end of a long trans-Atlantic voyage. While making for Anagada Passage to enter the Caribbean, they missed a course change that led to an abrupt collision with the island. Anchors were let go when a lookout heard the crashing surf but by then it was too late - they grounded on the rocky shore.

Fortunately for the crew and passengers, calm seas allowed everyone to escape without loss. But suddenly the small British island was overwhelmed by the unexpected influx of nearly one thousand Spaniards. El Buen Consejo also carried a contingent of Franciscan monks on their way to the Pacific. Among their belongings were many brass religious medallions for use in missionary activities. Anguilla is a small arid island and the additional people strained the inhabitant's meager resources. British troops were called in to keep the peace until the shipwreck survivors were moved off the island in November and taken to Puerto Rico.

The ships, however, did not survive. They settled after grounding in shallow water, allowing the Spaniards to salvage much of the cargo and armament. These supplies probably eased the living conditions of the survivors. Inevitably, as the hurricane season progressed, a storm approached the island and the vessels were pushed back into deeper water where they broke apart and sank.

The story of the shipwrecks is well known in Anguilla but the ships themselves were only discovered in recent years. In 1996 the Anguillian Government invited the Maritime Studies Program at East Carolina University (ECU) to examine the remains of the two vessels and offer suggestions for their future management as cultural resources. ECU completed archaeological documentation of El Buen Consejo and a reconnaissance of the Prusiano. This study discovered evidence of the unfolding drama of the crew trying to save the ships as they neared the island. The anchors failed to set on the rocky bottom and clusters of iron fasteners concreted on the rocky shore point to where one of the vessels struck. Other remains illustrate the destructive force of the hurricane that
broke the ships apart. A trail of eighteen cannon and mounds of concreted cargo packages show how the bottom was torn out of El Buena Consejo as it was pulled off the shore.

The legacy of the Spanish shipwrecks is found in the island's waters and is an important component of Anguilla's heritage. The well-known story and its archaeological record is the subject of this presentation.