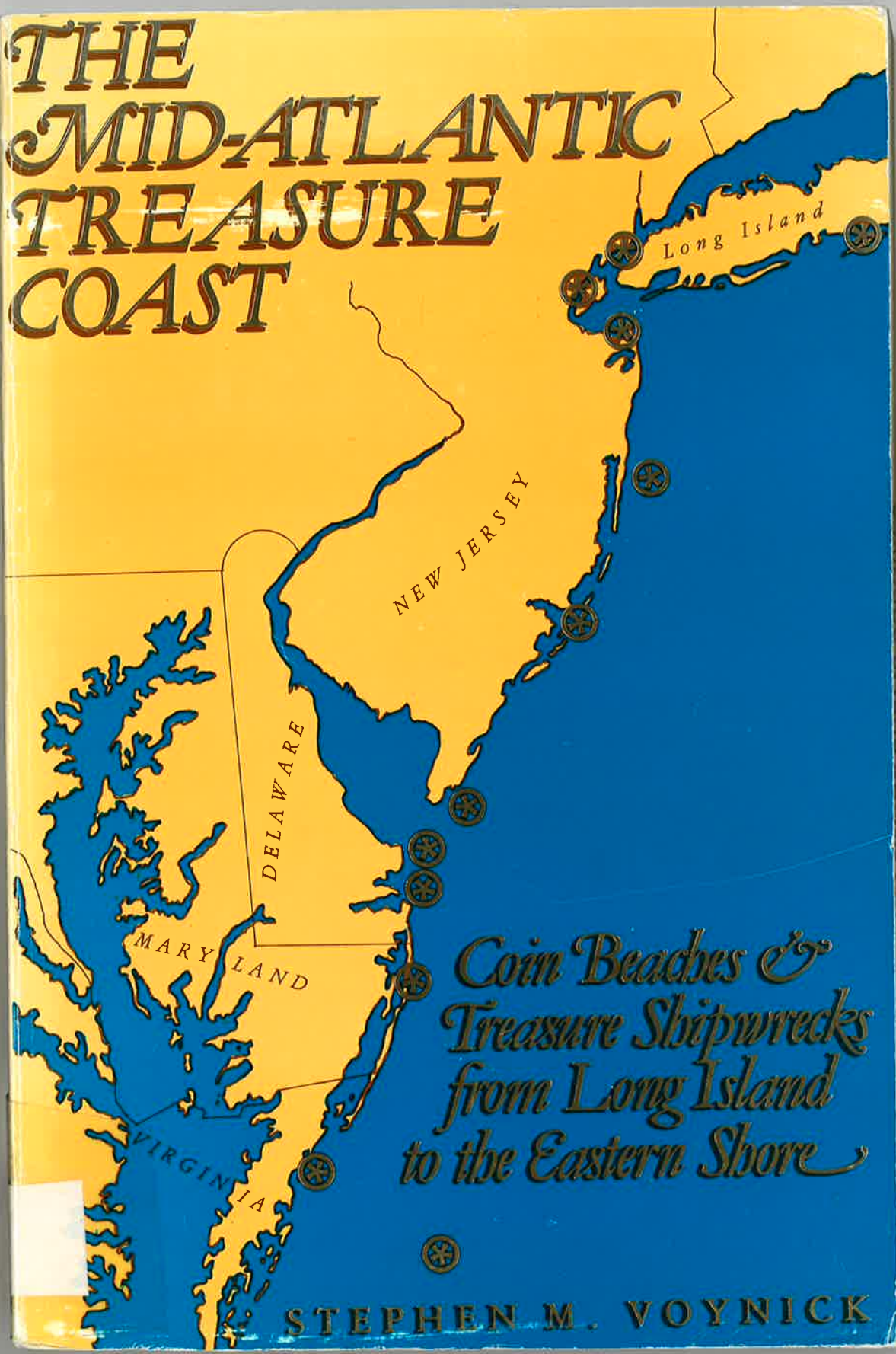
THE MID-ATLANTIC TREASURE COAST



Coin Beaches & Treasure Shipwrecks from Long Island to the Eastern Shore

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CHAPTER 16

The Wreck of the Faithful Steward

The welcome peace following the Revolution brought a sharp increase in the numbers of European immigrants eager to escape Old World social and economic depression. Most of those who sailed to the young United States were initially of English, Irish, or Scottish ancestry, people familiar with the culture and language and hoping to join friends and relatives who had immigrated earlier.

Most of the immigrants adopted the same personal pattern of financial preparation. Since neither trans-Atlantic banking channels nor acceptable, negotiable paper instruments existed, nor could the average man yet ship any quantity of material possessions, there remained but one way to transfer wealth. Immigrants converted their worldly belongings into gold and silver coinage, the nationality of which mattered little. For thousands of immigrants, the stake for the future was a small leather pouch of English guineas, Portuguese Johannas, or Spanish escudos.

In 1785, the *Faithful Steward* was typical of the ships in the growing fleet of merchantmen that carried the immigrants to their new home. Although documentation is not available, she was probably about 150 feet long with a three-masted ship rig. On what was to be her last voyage, she departed Londonderry, Ireland, in mid-July, bound for Philadelphia. Crowded into her dismal quarters were 249 passengers, one hundred of whom were women and children. In her holds was a miscellaneous cargo of general trade goods including a large consignment of copper coins.

The coins were English and Irish halfpennies, the mass circulation "coppers" that had an interesting numismatic background.

England minted prodigious quantities of the coins for use both at home and throughout its empire. When the English found themselves with an overproduction of coinage, they frequently pressured the Irish to accept them for circulation. If the Irish rejected the coins, the next stop for the kegs of coppers was most likely to be the American colonies which had always been plagued by a shortage of metallic coinage. Even after independence, the young United States suffered a similar plight for decades. The Irish sometimes found cause to reject the coinage for more than the usual political or economic reasons. On several occasions, the English minted coins for the Irish that were underweight and undersize. One such shipment, minted in 1722 but predated to 1700, was brought to public attention by a W. B. Drapier, the pseudonym for the prominent writer Jonathan Swift. Whatever the reason for the large consignment of coppers aboard the *Faithful Steward,* the ex-colonies were the place to get rid of them.

The *Faithful Steward* was about to complete her uneventful Atlantic crossing on September 1, 1785. Position sightings placed the ship very near the entrance to Delaware Bay but, by evening, land had not yet been sighted. Arrival on the coast was the most critical part of the voyage, and it was vital that land be sighted at the earliest possible time. A few hours after dark the Captain ordered soundings taken and was appalled to find the ship in only four fathoms—twenty-four feet—of water. All hands were called to help turn the ship, hoping to clear the shoals and sail to the east, then lay to until dawn. Despite every effort, the hull brushed the sand, then grounded. The wind and sea were rising, and the ship was finally lightened by cutting away the mainmast. But even after clearing the shoals, the *Faithful Steward* found it could not beat against the increasing wind.

At dawn on September 2nd, she was aground again, this time on the shoals directly off the Delaware beach about four leagues—ten miles—south of Cape Henlopen, and totally helpless before a major storm, probably a tropical hurricane. The beach meant safety, but it was 150 yards away, and swimming or rowing through thundering breakers was impossible. Word of "Ship ashore!" reached nearby Lewestown and residents gathered at the beach, unable to do anything but watch the developing catastrophe. With each crashing wave that exploded around the *Faithful Steward,* the keel settled deeper in the sand, placing

more and more stress upon the hull. From the beach, observers could plainly hear the screams from the 270 helpless souls who crowded the deck of the doomed ship.

Had this shoaling occurred a century later, it is probable that all would have been saved. The Life Saving Service would somehow have gotten a line aboard, perhaps even reached the ship in a surfboat. But the year was 1785 and the 270 aboard the *Faithful Steward* were on their own. Because of the list and position of the ship, the small boats on board were launched with great difficulty, and the turmoil of the sea prevented the passengers and crew from boarding them. Every boat capsized, drifting to shore empty. By evening, the storm peaked and the hull of the *Faithful Steward* could take no more. The ship began breaking up; within hours the sea completed its work.

The seas still ran very high at dawn on September 3rd, and all that remained of the *Faithful Steward* were the planks, timbers, rigging, and wreckage that littered the beach along with the bodies of the dead. Out of the one hundred women and children, ninety-three washed ashore drowned. Four out of every five persons aboard perished.

When the *Faithful Steward* broke up, she dropped her coins and other cargo atop another wreck, that of the *Three Brothers,* which was lost under identical circumstances ten years earlier. It was widely believed that the *Three Brothers* carried a military payroll of gold, silver, and copper coins destined for the British command at Philadelphia. The cargos of both ships were dropped to the sea bottom to become a part of the shifting sands, and nothing remained off the lonely Delaware beach to mark the site of the tragedies. But many decades later, the sea would begin to give back what it had claimed on that September day in 1785 and, once again, people would remember the *Faithful Steward.*

Others joined the CCC boys as they busily filled their pockets with the old halfpennies. Sometimes the sea even gave up more than coins.

Coins of 1749-1775 Tossed Up on Beach

More Old Coppers Are Found At Lewes, Del.

Ancient Sea Chest Is Buried In Sand

Lewes, Del., March 13.—The ocean tossed two copper coins, one minted during the reign of George II of England, at the feet of Major Lindsley D. Beach, U.S.A. retired, as he was walking along the beach front.

The George II coin, dated 1749, and believed to be the oldest of many discovered between Rehoboth and the Indian River Inlet ten miles south, during the past few years, and another, dated 1775, will be added to a collection of nearly 100 found this winter by the major.

Major Beach, whose discovery three weeks ago of an ancient copper-bound sea chest, heavily encrusted with barnacles and buried deep within the sand, has attracted hundreds of treasure seekers from nearby States, is awaiting a good, stiff northeast blow before making further salvage attempts.

The shifting sand has completely covered the chest, which is about three feet square, and weighs about 400 pounds. A third of the chest was exposed in the latest northeast storm, when the winds leveled tons of sand along the entire ocean front.

It is estimated by local residents that a severe northeaster alters the height of the sand as much as four feet, but the sand quickly builds up again, often reaching its normal level within two days.

Major Beach, whose attempts to remove the chest were halted by an incoming tide, is confident of its ultimate recovery. Even if the chest does not reveal any treasure when opened, it will be valuable because of its antiquity, he believes.

The chest never seems to have reappeared, but the Delaware coin beach continued to attract treasure hunters from afar, not only because of coppers and mysterious chests, but because some of the coins were gold and silver. Most of the silver coins were Spanish pillar dollars; the gold coins were English Rose guineas minted during the reigns of George II and George III.

For decades, the source of the coins was automatically assumed to be the wreck of the *deBraak* ten miles to the north. Now it is known the coppers were the cargo of the *Faithful Steward;* the gold and silver coins may also come from that wreck as well as that of the *Three Brothers*. Most of the treasure hunters who visit the beach are equipped with modern metal detectors and are successful. The copper halfpennies are bought and sold locally for five dollars to ten dollars, depending upon condition. The Spanish pillar dollars bring several hundred dollars each, and the gold Rose guineas as much as $5,000. Further inspiration for

treasure hunters may be found at the Zwaanandael Museum in Lewes, where an exhibit of beach coins is displayed in a glass case upon a beach-like scattering of sand. Included among the coppers is a gleaming English gold Rose guinea recovered from the same beach.

A gold English rose guinea on display in the Zwaanandael Museum, Lewes, DE. This coin, worth about $5,000, was recovered on the Delaware coin beach.

Recently at the Zwaanandael, the curator casually produced for a visitor a sack containing several hundred of the old copper halfpennies that had been donated by local beachcombers. The coins vary greatly in condition, but on each could be seen either the King's image and the English coat of arms or the distinctive Irish harp design. To touch those coins is to bridge the two centuries that have slipped away since the *Faithful Steward* broke up on a Delaware beach. Again, the sea had given back a little of its treasure. Perhaps, some day, it may even give back the Major's sea chest.

During the summer of 1981, mid-Atlantic treasure salvage made national news. In a portent of the future, a diving team used saturation diving techniques and subsea habitats to successfully enter the wreck of the *Andrea Doria,* recovering a safe which, as of this writing, has yet to be opened. If the *Andrea Doria* can be worked in 190 feet of water, so can the nearby *Republic,* lying only a bit deeper at 240 feet, with its fortune in gold coinage. And so can the *Merida* with its millions in silver bars and personal jewelry. For nearly eight decades, the seven tons of silver in the Arthur Kill was not worth going after. Now that it is worth well in excess of ten million dollars, at least three groups, each armed with the research and technology necessary, are fighting in the courts to win the right of being first salvor.

Not that long ago, the thought that Spanish treasure galleons might be wrecked on the mid-Atlantic coast was discounted as legend. Today, there is a half-million dollar expedition backed by European research and the best electronic technology seeking the wrecks of the 1750 Spanish treasure fleet off the Eastern Shore. In 1980, I was fortunate to see firsthand the recovery of English gold guineas from the wreck of the *Faithful Steward* off Delaware.

And what of those wrecks where the existence of real treasure might be argued? The H.M.S. *Hussar* and the H.M.S. *deBraak* have been the target of a legion of salvage attempts, yet solid proof does not exist confirming the belief that there is one bit of treasure aboard either of those celebrated wrecks. But—neither have any salvors confirmed there isn't, which seems to be the more important point. Simon Lake, in the middle of his four-year attempt on the *Hussar,* readily admitted his uncertainty as to the existence of the treasure, saying, "It is not the gold so much as the satisfaction of solving the riddle, 'though some gold would do no harm."

Lake was acknowledging the existence of a reward of a different sort, one of adventure, of challenge, and of the close association with history that is a major part of every quest for treasure. Adventure, by its definition, involves risk, and every serious quest for treasure will risk something, whether physical or financial. Rest assured there will be a challenge, for if a treasure were so easy to recover, it wouldn't be there today. The reward most difficult to explain to those who have not sought for sunken treasure is the association with history. When it is *your* hand that reaches out to touch treasures and artifacts lost by