

History

With the Spanish conquests of Mexico and Peru in the early 16th century, increasing amounts of exotic New World commodities began to flow across the ocean to support Spain's colonial empire.

San Pedro, a 287-ton Dutch built ship, was one of eighteen merchant vessels in a convoy headed back to Spain carrying a cargo full of New World goods. This fleet was protected by three armed galleons but soldiers and cannon could not protect the vessels from what nature intended.

Shortly after the fleet left Havana, the winds began to pick up and the seas began to change. A hurricane struck the fleet and scattered the ships some 80 miles along the Florida Keys. *San Pedro* passed over the reef before sinking in Hawk Channel, off lower Matecumbe Key, 1.25 nautical miles south of Indian Key.

Only one of the 21 vessels survived the storm and safely returned to Havana to tell of the disaster. Meanwhile, survivors gathered in small groups on the low islands and built crude shelters from debris that washed ashore. Spanish admiralty officials in Havana received reports of the ships grounded near a place called "head of the martyrs" and sent nine rescue vessels laden with supplies, divers, soldiers, and salvage equipment to the scene of the disaster.

A thorough salvage of the ships was undertaken. Vessels that could not be refloated and towed back to Havana were burned to the waterline so that divers could descend into the cargo holds and also so that the wrecks would be concealed from freebooters after they were salvaged.

The work continued for years and locations of wrecks were charted on an official map. When a final calculation of salvaged materials was made, more gold and silver had been recovered than had been listed on the original manifests, a result of inevitable contraband.

In the 1960s *San Pedro* was salvaged by treasure hunters and her remaining cannon and anchor were removed.

In 1988, the wreck was chosen to become Florida's second Underwater Archaeological Preserve and her remains were carefully mapped by state archaeologists and students from Florida State University and Indiana University.

A bronze plaque, an anchor dating from the 1733 fleet disaster, and replica cement cannons were placed on the wreck site to provide visitors with an idea of what the site once looked like.

San Pedro is also part of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Shipwreck Trail, is a State Park managed by the Department of Environmental Protection, and in 2001 was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.