

Chapter 15

Maracaibo



AFTER THE DESTRUCTION OF his flagship *Oxford*, Harry Morgan transferred to the much smaller *Lilley*, a 14-gun frigate, and with great effort reorganized his much-reduced squadron. The loss of five captains and scores of his best men had taken its toll on the admiral. However, his fleet was still a formidable force, for it consisted of fifteen sail and nearly 1,000 seamen and soldiers, a tribute to the high regard in which the privateers held him. His ships were small, though, the largest being armed with only fourteen guns while many others were no more than large boats.

Once the Admiral had restored order and the feeling of loss for so many of their comrades had begun to fade,

Morgan proposed the company beat a course to Trinidad and then sail to leeward following the coast of the Main, picking up any Spanish prizes that happened to cross their path. His squadron having agreed on this as consolation for not being able to attempt Cartagena, for that target was much too strongly defended for his reduced force. Morgan chose *Isla Saona* near the eastern tip of Hispaniola as the new rendezvous and moved his vessels out to sea.

On the way to his new anchorage, Morgan bought a small supply of provisions from a ship coming out from England. And, from time to time, he landed men on Hispaniola to obtain food and fresh water. During one of these minor expeditions, soldiers sent out from the city of San Domingo attacked his foraging party while they were hunting cattle and horses, killing some before they could regain the safety of their boats. The Spaniards were finally driven off, however. When Harry Morgan learned what had happened to his hunting party, he became incensed. In retaliation, he landed on shore with a stronger force and retaliated by destroying several houses and plantations.

The tragedy that had befallen the crew of the *Oxford* must have had an intense effect on Morgan, for he seemed to lose his resolve and spent a month sailing aimlessly among the islands. Eventually, some of the ships that met him at *Isla Saona* sailed off in search of prizes. Captain Collier, in command of *Satisfaction*, and with surgeon Richard Browne aboard, returned to the Point.

There *Satisfaction* took on supplies before sailing off on an independent cruise supporting logwood cutters in the Bay of Campeche. At one point, Morgan dispatched a contingent of buccaneers to make an attempt on a nearby town, but his men returned empty-handed after they found the area's inhabitants were well prepared to defend themselves and their property.

However, somewhat more than half of the privateers and eight rather small ships remained with Morgan, including his lieutenant John Morris, Jeffery Pennant, Edward Dempster, Richard Norman, Richard Dobson and Adam Brewster. There were one or two others, but I have not seen their names.

Finally, at *Isla Saona*, the admiral summoned his captains and senior officers to another council of war. During this meeting, a French seaman told the captains he had accompanied the French privateer, Jean-David Nau, better known as François l'Olonnais, during his 1667 sack of the city of Maracaibo in present-day Venezuela. He told how l'Olonnais had sailed from Tortuga with a fleet of eight ships and a crew of six hundred men and took the city in just a few hours. The Frenchman claimed he knew all the entries, passages, forces, and other means of executing a similar raid.

The council soon arrived at a consensus: instead of beating all the way to Trinidad, they resolved to sail their eight ships manned by 500 sailors and soldiers to the island of Aruba. There they would purchase provisions from the friendly Indian inhabitants, then make for the Gulf of

Venezuela. The privateers-buccaneers bragged loudly how they would outmaneuver and outfight the Spanish defenders and take the city of Maracaibo much as François l’Olonnais had done. They also agreed to hire the Frenchman, who had proposed the venture, as their guide.

Morgan arrived with his fleet, as planned, in the Gulf of Venezuela on 9 Mar 1669. They had been careful to avoid giving away their destination by leaving Aruba under cover of darkness and now anchored out of sight of the watch-tower at Lake Maracaibo’s entrance (*Largo de Maracaibo*).



Lake Maracaibo is the largest natural lake in South America and, at more than 20-million years of age, the second most ancient lake on earth. It is connected to the Gulf of Venezuela and the Caribbean Sea by the narrow Tablazo Strait and Tablazo Bay in the north, making the lake water slightly saline—the water in the south is fresh

but tidal influences make the northern waters brackish. Lake Maracaibo, which has a surface area of 5,100 square miles, is about 16 percent larger than Jamaica's 4,400 square miles.

While still out of sight from land, Admiral Morgan and his fleet of small ships lay in wait until nightfall. Then he got underway again, timing his movements so his arrival would not be noticed until daybreak. The entrance to Tablazo Bay is barred by a chain of small islands. In the middle of these is *Isla de Zapara*, and to the west of it lies the island of *San Carlos*. The space between these two islands forms the shipping channel to Tablazo Bay and to the straights leading into Lake Maracaibo. The first change Morgan's French guide noticed was a castle on San Carlos Island that covered the channel so that no ships could pass without coming into range of its guns. According to the Frenchman, this fortress had not been there two years before when l'Olonnais raided the port.

This was *Fuerte de La Barra*, which had been built to guard the seaward approaches to Lake Maracaibo's entrance and thus the city within. At the time of l'Olonnais's raid, his flibustiers had, apparently, only to contend with a smaller fort located nearer the city. The guns of *Fuerte de La Barra* opened fire as soon as the privateers were sighted. "*The dispute continued very hot on both sides,*" Esquemeling wrote, "*being managed with huge valour from morning until dark night.*" The fort, though, was undermanned and hard-pressed to hold off the Jamaicans—only one officer and eight soldiers had been left to man the

small fortress. When Morgan's men did enter it, even those few defenders had fled.

Before abandoning their posts, however, the Spaniards had left a little surprise: a slow-burning fuse they had attached to a large quantity of gunpowder—enough powder to demolish the fortress and kill all within it. Fortunately for the admiral and his men, Morgan discovered the booby trap before it could do any damage.

Morgan, apparently, debated whether to garrison the fort before giving orders to disarm it by driving nails into the touchholes of the cannons, tipping them off the ramparts and burying them in the sand. Then the privateers loaded their ships with the large quantities of powder, shot and small arms they had found within the fortress. Next, Morgan led them with great care through the natural hazards guarding the way across Tablazo Bay and through the narrow strait of the same name.

On the western shore of the Tablazo Strait—about 20 miles from *Fuerte de La Barra*—lay Maracaibo, a small but prosperous and, except for a nearby battery, defenceless Spanish city. The city lay in a basin surrounded by the higher ground that blocked the steady, refreshing trade winds of the region; thus, suffering from high temperatures and stifling humidity. This combination made Maracaibo one of the hottest cities on the Main and arguably the unhealthiest. The local economy, though, was thriving from the abundance of sugarcane, cacao and livestock.

Harry Morgan understood François l'Olonnais had ravaged the area only two years earlier, but he was betting that the city had recovered enough to make his visit worthwhile. Morgan knew too that when l'Olonnais arrived at the city, it was deserted and l'Olonnais had to send out search parties to round up inhabitants so they could be tortured until they revealed where they were hiding their valuables. Morgan obviously hoped he would be luckier and take the town before too many residents had fled.

As the privateers moved towards the city, they found that only shallow-draft boats such as canoes could navigate through the sand bars and shallow water. Consequently, they divided the powder and muskets they had captured from the abandoned fort and continued in smaller craft. Admiral Morgan's luck did not hold, however.

Morgan soon learned that Maracaibo was already deserted, except for "*a few miserable poor folk, who had nothing to lose.*" [Esquemeling, *History of the Bucaniers* (1684)] The inhabitants and their slaves had fled to the mountains in the west carrying as much of their valuables as they could. Apparently, the memory of l'Olonnais's murderous raid was still fresh. Besides, Morgan's own reputation was well known along the Main, and no Spaniard expected him to be any less of a savage than the Frenchman had been.

Captain Sanchez, the Spanish garrison commander, had ordered a call to arms "*on pain of their lives as traitors to the kingdom.*" But, when only twelve men answered his call, not nearly enough to make a stand, he too fled with the

remnants of his militia. So when Morgan's men reached the fort that guarded the city, they found it too had been deserted.

The privateers immediately ransacked Maracaibo, and Morgan ordered that a search party of 100 men be sent into the countryside to look for plunder and captives. These orders the privateers followed "*with complete liberty and no resistance.*" Thirty residents who had remained too close to the city were captured and held for interrogation. Livestock were rounded up, and hidden plunder ferreted out.

At this point, the city of Maracaibo was *de facto* the property of the English King Charles II and would be so for as long as Admiral Henry Morgan decided to hold it. Morgan's privateers did what a typical 17th-Century army would: they looted every building of the town. Later they billeted in whichever house they chose and caroused throughout the nights. After three weeks of raiding the surrounding area for miles in every direction, Morgan gave the order for an attack on the more strongly fortified town of Gibraltar.





Frontispiece to 1st edition
De Americaensche Zee-Roovers

We'll pause here so we can take a closer look at John (Alexandre Olivier) Esquemeling (abt. 1645–1707) — also spelled Exquemeling or Oexmelin. Esquemeling was a French, Dutch, or Flemish author of a sourcebook of 17th-century piracy.

His book was published initially in Dutch as *De Americaensche Zee-Roovers*, in Amsterdam, by Jan ten Hoorn, in 1678, then in German in 1679, and in Spanish in 1681. His classic book was translated and published in London

by W. Cooke in 1684. Since then innumerable editions and reprints have appeared.

Born about 1645, Esquemeling was a native of Honfleur, France. In 1666, he went to Tortuga and served the *French West India Company* as an indentured servant for three years. While there, he became a buccaneer and claimed to have sailed with Henry Morgan as a barber-surgeon during his Caribbean campaigns and wrote first-hand accounts of his adventures with the buccaneers. He returned to Europe in 1674 and settled in Amsterdam, where his name appeared on the 1679 register of the Dutch Surgeons' Guild.

Note: Regarding John Esquemeling, aka Alexandre Olivier Exquemelin, biographer Brig.-Gen. Cruikshank wrote. "It is now almost certainly established that the real author was Hendrik Barentzoon Smeeks (1643–1721), a surgeon-apothecary, living at Zwolle in the province of Overysel, who was an industrious and talented writer of pseudo-historical works. He was born in that small town in 1643 or 1645 and educated in an asylum for orphans." [source: Brig.-Gen E.A. Cruikshank, *The Life of Sir Henry Morgan* (MacMillan, 1935)]

As anyone who has read Esquemeling's *The History of the Buccaneers* or any of its versions can attest, he disliked Henry Morgan and may have turned on him through spite. Esquemeling held a grudge because he, among others, believed Morgan had cheated him when sharing out the purchase from the attack on Panama.

We should also remember he wrote first for the French, Dutch, and Spanish markets—all bitter enemies of

England in those days and often at war with that country. Perhaps he hoped that portraying Morgan as a black-hearted English villain of humble origin would boost sales of his book. Notwithstanding the many inaccuracies of his accounts and the lurid tales they inspired, we are indebted to that Dutchman for much of the surviving details and rich descriptions of the buccaneers' daily lives and their daring exploits.

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