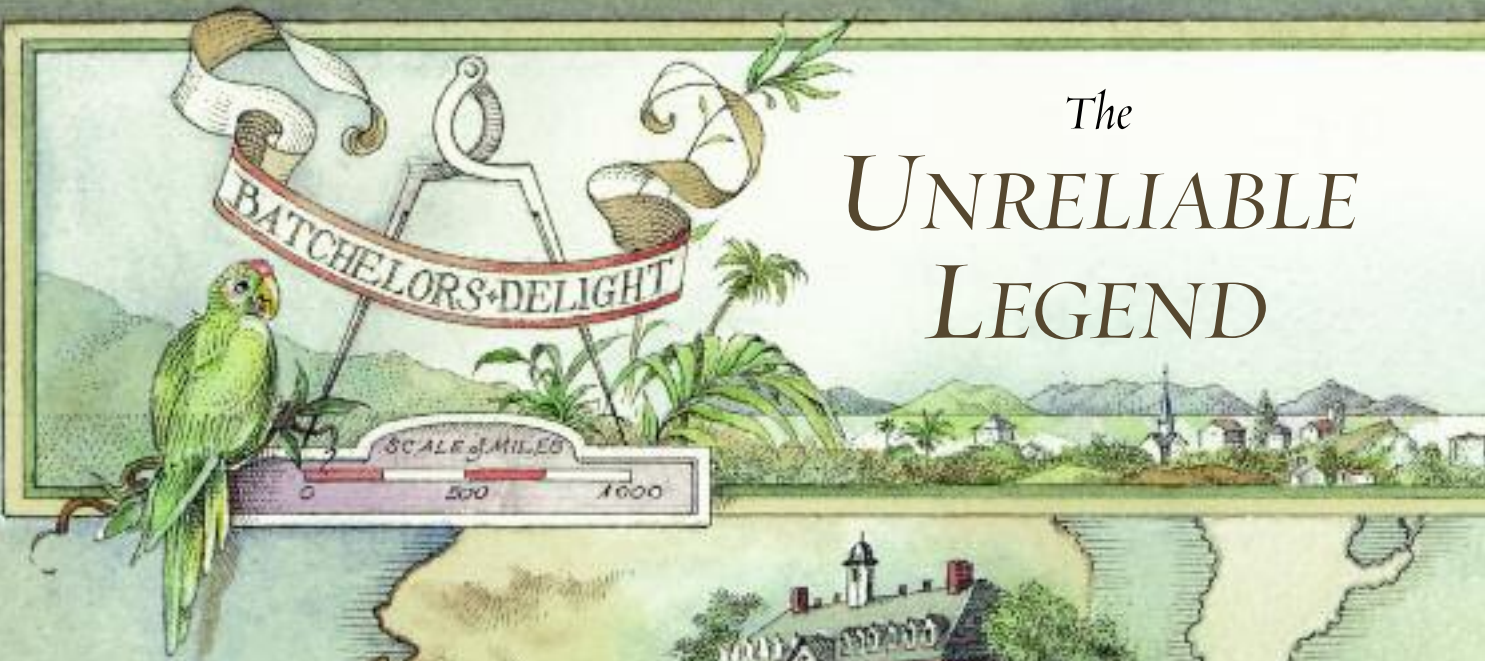


The
**UNRELIABLE
LEGEND**



PACIFIC OCEAN

NORTH AMERICA

Hampton, Va.

Jamaica

Panama

SOUTH AMERICA

Chile

Cape Horn



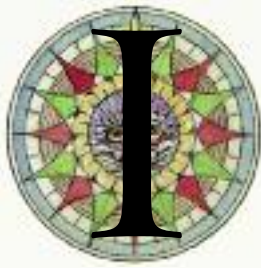
of the
**BATCHELORS
DELIGHT**

HOW THREE IMPRISONED
PIRATES HELPED FUND THE
WREN BUILDING

By Ben Kennedy '05 ✦ Illustration by Laszlo Kubinyi



L. Kubinyi



In 1691, the Rev. James Blair was sent back to England. If he and the other colonial leaders wanted to secure enough funding to build a college in Virginia, Blair was going to have to talk to the king and queen, and possibly some less savory characters as well. Little did he know how unsavory those characters would be — or how important a

contribution from seafaring scoundrels would become.

A few years earlier, pirate captain John Cook was determined to go back to Panama. Having just been hired to lead a small ship of aspiring privateers in 1682, he knew the key to a successful voyage was an experienced doctor. Cook traveled to Panama in search of an old colleague, the surgeon Lionel Wafer, who had been abandoned there by his last captain. Wafer's leg had been badly burned in a gunpowder accident and he had disappeared amongst the native Cuna for months.

When Cook arrived in Panama, he came across a white man dressed just as the Cuna were. He did not immediately recognize that man as Wafer, whose wound had been entirely healed by the Indians' herbal medicine. Armed with that additional expertise, Wafer and his companion John Hingson decided to join Cook's new ship — the seaworthy but unremarkable *Revenge* — and continue recruiting their former cohorts along the Atlantic coast. As privateers, they were licensed by the English government to attack enemy ships in wartime, but commonly, they were known as pirates.

What likely drove these men to piracy in the first place? "In a word, poverty," says Kris Lane, professor of history at William and Mary. Many famous pirates sought refuge in Virginia during the late 17th century because the numerous ships and increasing commercial activity in Chesapeake Bay made blending in easy — yet countless unsettled inlets and islands made for plenty of secret refuge as well, he says.

In Hampton, Va., the *Revenge* picked up William Dampier and Edward Davis, who had traveled with Cook and Wafer on previous adventures. Dampier, who would one day serve as inspiration for both *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver's Travels*, was an experienced sailor, writer and reluctant pirate who was hiding in Hampton from the unfriendly Caribbean authorities. He and the capable Davis joined the *Revenge* crew of around 70 men and sailed east across the Atlantic in August 1683.

UNSCRUPULOUS ACTIVITIES

The stories of these buccaneers are, as one might expect, less than fully truthful. Books written by pirates have always been embellished by their own quests for personal glory, and conflicting reports — and spellings — abound. The tale of Cook, Wafer, Dampier and Davis is outlined to varying degrees in Lane's book *Pillaging the Empire: Piracy in the Americas 1500-1750* and in many other publications, such as J.R. Morpurgo's *Their Majesties' Royall Colledge* and Dampier's *A New Voyage Around the World*. The pirates' personal writings and contemporary, sometimes official correspondence all provide different perspectives on what actually happened. John Fitzhugh Millar M.A. '81, a historian and colonial maritime enthusiast, has made it a particular mission to consolidate the finer points of a story that brushes so much history, but that so few are familiar with.

"I wanted to nail down all the details so that people couldn't dismiss it that easily," he says. "If it has legs in so many different places, it's definitely a real story."

The real story began when the *Revenge* left Virginia. In November 1683, the pirates sailed their decaying ship into the Sierra Leone River in West Africa. They found exactly what they were looking for. A newer, better-built ship with a Danish crew was anchored there, near what would later become Freetown, Sierra Leone. One version of the story claims Dampier challenged the Danes to a high-stakes card game with the ship as a wager — and won. Another version indicates that the crew stole the other ship and traded the larger *Revenge* for the Danes' cargo of female African slaves. The crew boarded the formerly Danish ship and christened it the *Batchelors Delight* — having taken at least some of the slaves as consorts.

The more experienced pirates among them knew that the Caribbean was crawling with Spanish military patrols, making it a less-than-profitable choice. Instead, the *Batchelors Delight* sailed west across the Atlantic, rounded the treacherous Cape Horn — most of the slaves died of hypothermia in the process — and arrived at the west coast of South America. Sea trading routes existed between the coastal towns at the foot of the Andes, as the mountainous terrain made road-building too difficult.

The Spanish felt Cape Horn was enough of a deterrent to pirates, so ships carrying precious metals from the South American interior traveled up and down the coast with little protection. *Batchelors Delight* plied the west coast of the Americas from Chile to California, raiding when they could and hiding amongst the numerous coastal islands. Dampier in particular made extensive notes of the Galápagos Islands wildlife that Charles Darwin would find valuable a century and a half later.

DISASTER AND DEBAUCHERY

Unfortunately, not all of the ship's voyages were unaccompanied. A coordinated attack on a Spanish treasure convoy went sour; allied French privateers did not support *Batchelors Delight* and the ship took heavy damage before being chased west by the Spanish government. Millar believes the crew became the first Westerners to see the east coast of New Zealand while in retreat.

By now, Cook had died, leaving the ship without a leader. Edward Davis was elected captain and was said to be one of the few leaders to keep a crew together for more than four years. Davis sailed the *Batchelors Delight* back to South America and resumed raiding its coastal towns. Towns



such as León and El Realejo in what is today Nicaragua, as well as Paita and Saña in today's Peru, were all victims of the adventuring pirates. Guayaquil in modern-day Ecuador was sacked. While the treasure from such activities was great, the pirate crew was always shifting. One raid resulted in the capture of a slave ship and the taking of the slaves aboard the *Batchelors Delight*. Even Dampier left to join a slightly more honorable cause: as navigator on the *Cygnets*, an occasional ally of the *Delight*, while attempting to complete his second circumnavigation of the world. He would eventually be marooned on an island 800 miles east of Sri Lanka, only to find his way back to civilization in a homemade canoe.

RETURN TO RESPECTABILITY?

By 1687, the *Batchelors Delight* crew had had enough. Since they had left England to flee the reign of King James II, the news that William and Mary were poised to ascend to the throne encouraged them to return home. Furthermore, King James had signed a proclamation granting amnesty to pirates that registered in England. Their enthusiasm for the two new monarchs would eventually mark their return home with some considerable irony.

At the outset, the men had not intended to remain buccaneers forever, but some had a change of heart while living a life of piracy.

"When they finished this voyage, some of them said, 'We're done,' but others had gotten piracy into their blood," says Millar, who has been leading efforts to build a replica of *Batchelors Delight* for sail training, along with 11 other historic ships. "They bought the ship and then took it out to India to continue being pirates. So that shows that human beings can be tempted."

The remaining, now former pirates thought they had a plan. They claimed to have buried some of their treasure on tiny Cocos Island off the Costa Rica shore and rounded Cape Horn that fall. On their way north along the Atlantic shore, Dr. Wafer explained to the crew that it looked too suspicious to arrive in England with a boatload of pirates. Instead, the *Batchelors Delight* would anchor in ports from Jamaica northward, dropping off crewmen with their shares of the loot before the last of them would sell the ship in Philadelphia. The men would then find their way back to England individually. In Port Royal, Jamaica, Capt. Davis obtained a pardon from the governor and revealed that the total remaining treasure was in excess of 50,000 Spanish dollars.

Davis and Wafer were deposited in Virginia along with seaman John Hingson and Peter Cloise, one of the former slaves who had joined the crew. Upon their arrival at Jamestown, however, their carefully constructed plan began to fall apart within hours. The pardon Davis got in Jamaica was useless in Virginia, and all four men were captured by the Royal Navy and imprisoned without charges. They all claimed to have been mere merchants, but Hingson slipped up and began to reveal inconsistencies in their story. Cloise sold them out entirely.

The legal system at that time was hardly rigid. The judge at Jamestown feared retribution from other pirates if he found the four men guilty in Virginia, never mind the confusion over whether they knew about King James' amnesty program. While the authorities ignored the English con-

stitution's guarantee to a speedy trial, Davis, Wafer, Hingson and Cloise remained at Jamestown for three years.

On a writ of *habeas corpus*, their lawyer managed to secure their release with the help of brand-new governor Francis Nicholson. Cloise died in the interim. The three men were extradited to London for their trial in 1690, despite a constitutional guarantee that trials must be held close to the location of the arrest.

"Constitutional law was not a prominent field at that time," says Millar.

DUELING STRUGGLES

Meanwhile, James Blair had arrived in London in late summer of 1691 with directives for a new college in Virginia on his mind. England and her allies had just engaged French king Louis XIV in the Nine Years' War; nearly all of the friends Blair was expecting to see were unavailable or away from London when he arrived. He was forced to seek funding and assistance from strange places. While he waited for the powerful to return, Blair passed the time by collecting donations from London merchants who were familiar with Virginia. By November, the monarchs were ready for him. While William and Mary endorsed the plan for a college in the Virginia colony by royal charter, the demands of the war meant any financial support would be much delayed. Blair continued to wait — and search.

Free on bail in the streets of London, the three ex-pirates were not tried until 1692. The British judge was no more grounded in law than his Virginian counterpart; while personally convinced that Wafer, Davis and Hingson were pirates, he lacked the appropriate evidence to convict them. Caught in between, he suggested a deal. If

the supposed pirates would donate a substantial portion of their treasure to a charitable purpose, they would be exonerated. The ex-pirates complied. As the pirates had been arrested in Virginia, it seemed only appropriate that some portion of their treasure be reappropriated to Blair's newly endorsed college. In 1692, Wafer, Davis and Hingson contributed £300 of loot to the College of William and Mary — over \$900,000 in 2010 dollars. Thanks to their coerced generosity, King William would eventually issue a royal proclamation restoring the remainder of their treasure to them and ensuring their freedom. Thereafter, Wafer was involved with the failed Scottish colony at Darién, Panama; Davis returned to piracy in Madagascar and was ultimately hanged.

In Virginia, the plan began to take shape in the years to come, forming the beginnings of the College of William and Mary. Not long after, Gov. Nicholson moved the colony's capital from swampy Jamestown to Middle Plantation, renaming it Williamsburg after his king. The foundations of the College's first building — now known as the Wren, after its supposed architect — were built in part with the proceeds from a life of piracy on the high seas.

But if the rest of the *Batchelors Delight* treasure is, in fact, still buried on Cocos Island, it has never been found. ■

For John Millar's extended take on the pirates' tale, visit us online at www.wmalumni.com/?summer10_pirates. For more on his efforts to build 12 replica colonial ships for sail training, visit www.colonialnavy.org.

