

McKee, Art's Wrecks Chronicles

Treasure Wrecks and their Discoverers

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McKee
: November 2, 1910. Died: 1979.

of the pioneer treasure hunters. Indeed, he is called the "Father of Modern Treasure Hunting." Using a diving helmet, he excavated first wreck in 1938.

McKee achieved great success, both with his treasure hunting and with a museum he founded to display many of his finds.



Discoveries/Projects

the *Capitana el Rui*
the *Maravilla*
the city of Port Royal
the *Genoves*.

Art McKee was born and bred in Bridgetown, New Jersey. He was an adventurous boy, but a reader as well, especially of books by treasure hunters and divers, such as *On the Bottom*, by Commander Ellsberg and *I Dive For Treasure*, by Lieutenant Harry E. Riesenberg.

Links

- Florida Memory: Art McKee's photograph collection

Books on Art McKee

Sunken Treasure: Six Who Found Fortunes, Robert F. Burgess, Dodd, Mead & Company, 1988

In 1934, when he was 24, a massive storm struck the town and destroyed the lake. In addition, the bridge that connected east Bridgetown to west Bridgetown was severely damaged.

A hard-hat diver was hired by the city to survey the damage, and he hired McKee to tend his lines. McKee continued to work for this diver on other projects along the Delaware River, and eventually learned how to do hard hat diving himself.

Around 1936, an injury to his left knee forced McKee to move to Florida, so that he could exercise the knee all year long by swimming in the warm Florida waters.

He got a job in the Florida Keys, as chief diver on the underwater pipeline that delivered drinking water from the mainland at Homestead (where McKee was based), through the hundreds of tiny islands that made up the Keys, to Key West.

McKee spent two years at this work, repairing

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Links

He graduated from high school, but did not go on to college, instead working at various jobs, including summers as a lifeguard at a lake in south Jersey.

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the 15-inch dia. underwater pipe as needed, perfecting his skills with the hard hat.

When not working, McKee spent his time exploring the reefs, and supplemented his income by supplying local gift shops with coral and marine specimens.

Then he started salvaging material off the many shipwrecks that dotted the coast.

The *Capitana*: The first treasure wreck -- 1938

McKee was 28 years old when he first began to search for treasure wrecks. A commercial fisherman, Reggie Roberts, told him that he'd seen cannon "sticking out of an old pile of ballast rocks down by Plantation Key."

McKee dove the site, and brought ashore various indecipherable artifactism which turned out to be silver coins. After research, he learned that the site was that of the *Capitana el Rui*, the flagship of the Spanish treasure fleet of 1733, sunk by a hurricane in the Florida Straits that year.

McKee, along with friends, excavated the wreck for some years. They excavated twenty different sizes of cannon, more than a thousand silver coins dated before 1733, silver statues, religious medals, candlesticks, pewter mugs and plates, jewelry, buttons and buckles, navigation instruments, daggers, swords, pistols, cannonballs and grapeshot, broken crockery, ship's blocks and bits of rope.

McKee wanted to place these artifacts in a museum, but didn't have the capital. He started various related sidelines - ferrying tourists out to the wreck site to watch divers working, and then, later, allowing tourists to go down to the site in a hard hat. In 1949, when McKee was 39, he had enough funds to build a museum called McKee's Museum of Sunken Treasure.

In addition to the *Capitana*, McKee and his associates found and excavated nine of the twenty-two ships lost in the 1733 hurricane. However, in 1960, McKee's claim to the wrecks in this area was challenged by rival treasure hunters, the River Rats consisting of Tim Watkins, Olin Frick, and other divers, operating aboard a ship named *The Buccaneer*..

McKee went to the state to attempt to enforce

his rights, as he'd leased the area from the state. He learned that the wrecks were 3-and-a-half miles offshore, and the state only had legal authority within 3 miles, so he could do nothing legally to keep rival treasure hunters from the wrecks in his "leased" area.

Port Royal

After stopping his excavations on the 1733 shipwrecks, McKee spent some time exploring this sunken city. Indeed, he and Ed Link had been on an expedition there in 1956. (Robert Marx would make his fame with this site.)

The *Genovès*

A 1730 Genoa-built 54-gun frigate, loaded with 3 million pesos of gold and silver that left Havana in August, and sank near the channel between Serranilla and Pedro Shoals, on Banner Reef. However, local inhabitants salvaged much of the treasure and other materials at the time.

However, treasure hunters continued to search for it in the hopes that there was more treasure to be found. And Art McKee also searched for it, launching an expedition in 1962. Ed Link was also part of the expedition. The expedition was not a success, however.

McKee would return with another expedition years later. Burt Webber was a part of this group. However, again, the ship wasn't found.

In 1979, just before he died, Art McKee did in fact find the *Genovès*.

Bibliography

Sunken Treasure: Six Who Found Fortunes, Robert F. Burgess, Dodd, Mead & Company, 1988