

The Treasure Coast's Own Legendary Pirate

Captain Don Pedro Gilbert



"Dead Cats Don't Mew!"



Copyright December 2009 Florida Monthly Magazine.
Reprinted by Permission.

Gilbert, The Pirate

His Escapades Along Florida's Coast and Beyond

by Alice L. Luckhardt

Back in the early 1830s, the St. Lucie Inlet along Florida's East Coast in the region known as Hutchinson Island, in present-day Martin County, was once referred to as 'Gilbert's Pass' or 'Gilbert's Shoal' and the rocky limestone reefs and sandbars, located just off the coast, were also known as Gilbert's Bar. This portion of the Atlantic Ocean, where the Gulf Stream used to carry many heavy laden cargo sailing ships, was once the home base for a dreadful crew of true 19th century pirates.



Bernardo de Soto.

Don Pedro Gilbert.

The Pirate - Don Pedro Gilbert

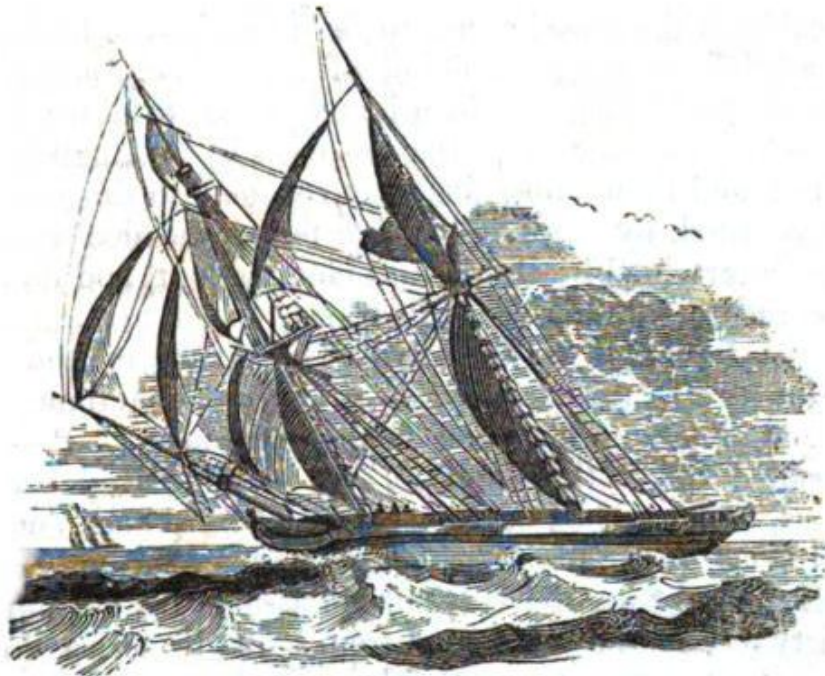
The name Gilbert's Bar (which means Gilbert's reef or shoal) is attributed to a man named Don Pedro Gilbert (also spelled Gibert). Born in the 1800s somewhere on the South American continent, Gilbert was a talented seaman and privateer for Colombia. He was a handsome man of thick black hair, a round face and jet black eyes. Quite popular with the ladies, he had an unlimited amount of personal drive and strength. Gilbert was fond of the name "Don" because he felt it implied a noble birth, which in fact was not the case.

In 1830, Don Pedro Gilbert, along with his first mate, Bernardo De Soto, sailed the seas on a black schooner named *Panda* (also referred to as *Pindar*), which had a shallow draft that gave it the ability to travel in any shallow inlet, protected rivers or waterways. Legend has that

Gilbert was fond of the inlet into the Indian River along Hutchinson Island, with its high sand dunes along the barrier island that offered some protection from being located by passing ships at sea.

The story was that Gilbert frequently positioned himself on high ground, specifically at Mount Pisgah, which is 57 feet and located at the northern end of Sewall's Point, today just south of the former Frances Langford-Evinrude estate. Another favorite outlook was Bleech Yards, some 61 feet high, located in the Jensen Beach area.

This high ground gave him the advantage of being able to spot merchant vessels as they traveled along the coast. He and his pirate crew would then assault the vessels and steal their goods. Gilbert's method involved using the limestone reefs off the shoreline for his own advantage. Many passing ships were lured to the coast by what they thought might be distress fires set on the beach by the *Panda's* crew. Instead, the vessels became lodged on the reefs and Gilbert, along with his Spanish and Portuguese men, very easily pilfered the cargo and harmed the opposing crew. For Gilbert, the black pirate flag truly did mean "rob, kill and burn". To this day, the shallow area off the Martin County coast is marked on nautical charts as Gilbert's Bar.



The Panda standing through the Bahama Channel.

Aside from plundering ships, Gilbert was also involved with smuggling liquor, cigars and tobacco from Cuba into the United States. With no form of a coast guard or protection in the early 1830s and Florida only a territory of the United States, he was safe, sometimes hiding out in the Indian River shores.

The Assault on the Mexican

The facts that are known took place September 2, 1832, when an American brigantine ship named *Mexican* came under the watchful eye of Captain Gilbert. The ship, en route from Massachusetts and destined for Argentina, was under the command of Captain John G. Butman. When the *Mexican* docked in Havana, Cuba, to take on additional supplies before it headed out to the Atlantic Ocean, the *Panda* was there, too. The two ships left together. On his ship, far from land and out in the middle of the Atlantic, Gilbert followed the *Mexican* at a safe distance, waiting for the right moment to strike.

Gilbert did not lure the American ship, but instead approached the *Mexican* in open waters, while bearing a Colombian flag. Captain Butman felt uncertain and steered his vessel away. Trying to outrun the *Panda* proved fruitless and the small mounted guns the *Mexican* carried unfortunately did not have the proper size ammunition making them useless. While trying to escape, Captain Butman hid the five boxes containing \$20,000 in silver he had on board to make purchases in Argentina, hoping the attacker wouldn't notice them. Meanwhile, Captain Gilbert pursued the merchant vessel in his faster and more heavily armed ship.

Escape for the *Mexican* became impossible when a shot was fired across the bow. The pirates quickly boarded the vessel and threatened the crew with knives. Gilbert and several of his crew brutally beat Captain Butman for hours until they eventually revealed the hiding place of the money. Once located, the pirates confiscated it, along with valuable cargo, crew members' personal property and supplies.

The Mate begging his Life.



The pirates, however, did not want to leave any witnesses behind, so they asked the captain what should be done. Before returning to the *Panda* Gilbert replied: "Dead cats don't mew. You know what to do." Instead of outright killing the crew of the *Mexican*, the pirates settled upon a gruesome alternative. The captured individuals were locked below the ship's deck with their legs and arms tied and the exit door bolted. The ship's sails were lowered, the rigging cut and the compass was smashed. The pirates set the ship ablaze using combustibles placed in the caboose house.

Swiftly the pirates returned to the *Panda* and sailed off, leaving the crew of the *Mexican* to suffer a horrible death. As fate would have it, the ropes were not tied securely and several managed to free themselves, along with others. One crewman then squeezed through a small unlocked hatch and released the others from their fiery tomb. The crew managed to extinguish the flames and save most of the ship.

Not to draw attention to themselves, Captain Butman made sure there was some smoke billowing in the air so the pirates on the *Panda* would assume the doomed ship was still burning. Once the pirate schooner was over the horizon, the burning decoy was snuffed out.

The reason the pirates did not linger to witness the *Mexican* go up in flames was because another ship was spotted to the southeast. The *Panda* began pursuing this vessel to pillage.

The crew of the assaulted *Mexican* erected a crude mast and set sail toward the northeast coast of the United States. Captain Butman brought the damaged vessel back on October 2, 1832, to Salem, Massachusetts and made his report of the ghastly crime to the Maritime Court. The United States government sent out numerous vessels in search of the pirates, including waters near the African coast, but to no avail.

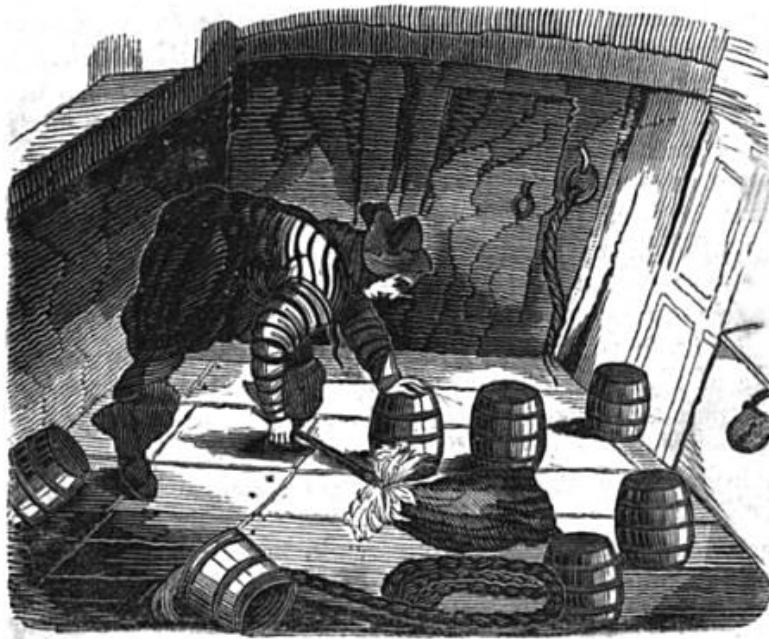
Off the West African Coast

Captain Gilbert and his crew on the *Panda* continued eastward towards the African continent. It was not known if Gilbert buried the large amount of confiscated money from the *Mexican* or if he proved his reputation to be true by spending it on liquor and women. For another year, he and his crew remained on the loose. By early 1834, the *Panda* was off the coast of West Africa, in the Gulf of Guinea working deals on the mainland to bring African natives to the West Indies to be sold as slaves. Through American and British cooperation to stamp out piracy, the pirate criminals would suffer consequences.



The Pirates carrying Rum on Shore to purchase Slaves.

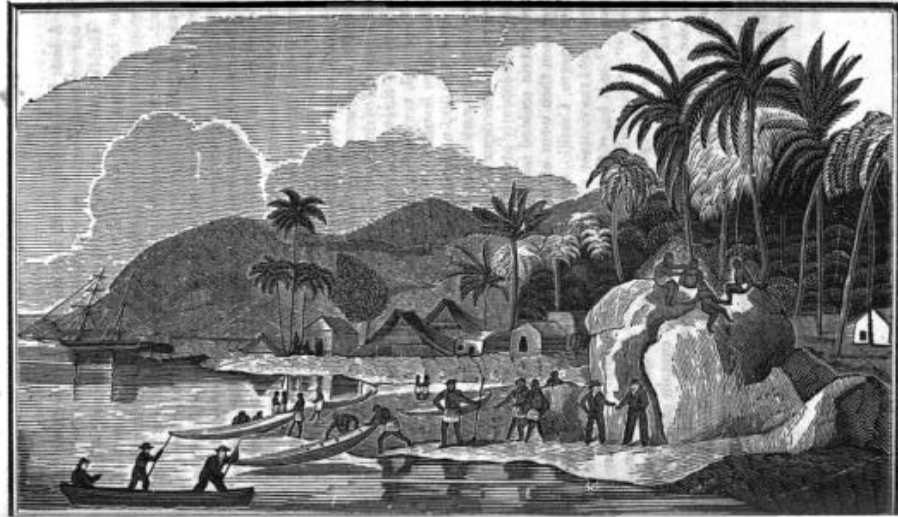
In May 1834, the British Royal Navy officer, Captain Henry Dundas Trotter, while stationed at Prince's Island off the West African coast, learned of the robbery of the American ship *Mexican* and the request by the United States for the *Panda* and its crew. Trotter saw a similar vessel fitting the description at the river Nazareth. He sailed his vessel, the *H. M. S. Curlew*, to that location, arriving on June 4, 1834. With three boats and 40 men, he sailed up the Nazareth River. As he approached the anchored *Panda*, Trotter displayed the British flag. The *Panda* crew immediately got into smaller boats and headed for the shore. Captain Trotter, also in a smaller boat, gave chase but did not catch up to them. Trotter returned to the *Panda*, but by then it was on fire. It appeared one pirate had remained behind just long enough to light some explosives in the ship's hole. The Royal Navy crew extinguished the fire then boarded the schooner.



The Carpenter applying the Match to a Bag of Powder in the Magazine.

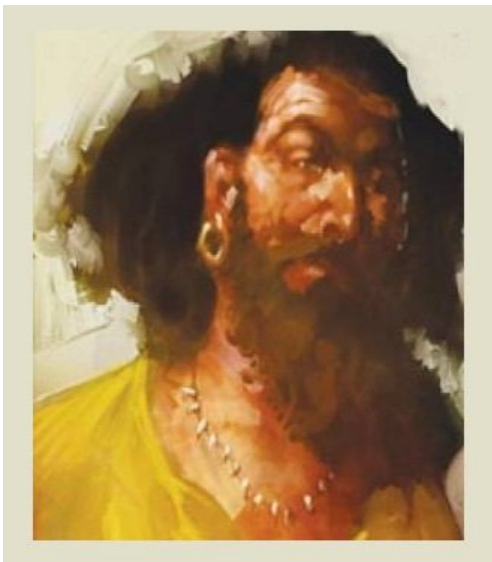
The crew could not locate the ship's logbook and papers, but did find a U. S. ensign and pennant, as well as Spanish and French ensigns. The crew sailed the double-masted schooner up the river. The Royal Navy had control of the vessel for about 12 days, until they sailed to Cape Lopez. Upon arriving, the *Panda* suddenly blew up, becoming a ball of fire. The cause was undetermined, however they assumed that there might have been additional gunpowder hidden below the deck. About 25 British sailors were aboard at the time. Captain Trotter was flung from the ship into the water by the explosion, but remained uninjured. Two naval officers and two sailors died in the blast.

The Town of Lopez on the River Nazareth. The Panda at Anchor.



The Royal Navy, slowly managed to round up the scattered crew members of the *Panda*, including Captain Gilbert and his first mate De Soto, in various locations, including Cape Lopez. Some of the looted money from the *Mexican* was confiscated from Captain Gilbert, but little of it was ever found. The prisoners were transported on the *H. M. S. Curlew* back to America. They were placed in shackles for security reasons. A few of the missing *Panda* crew were later located on St. Thomas Island off the coast of Africa. All the guarded prisoners traveled on the British gun-brigantine *Savage* and arrived in Salem, Massachusetts, by August 26, 1834, then moved to Boston.

The United States government was happy to extradite the 12 pirates, especially Captain Gilbert and bring them to trial on the charge of piracy. They were taken to the Leverett Street jail in Boston.



Pirate Trial in Boston

The trial began on November 11, 1834, in a spectator-filled Circuit Court of the United States in Boston. Trial case number 15,204 was U.S.A. vs. Gilbert and Associates and lasted 14 days. The 12-man jury heard Captain Butman describe the anguish of nearly being burned alive. Many witnesses were called, including crewman Thomas Fuller, of the *Mexican*, who testified against Gilbert.

Don Pedro Gilbert

The jury's verdict, announced on November 25, pronounced Captain Gilbert, De Soto (the first mate), Ruiz, (the carpenter), Boyga, Castillo, Garcia and Montenegro (crewmen) all guilty. The jury pronounced Costa (the cabin-boy), Ferrer (the African cook), Guzman, Portana and Velasquez (crewmen) as not guilty and had them released. One other crewman was sentenced to serve time in prison. The cabin boy, Nicola Costa and the *Panda's* cook, Antonio Ferrer, were found innocent due to the defense attorney's pleas that they were simply servants to Gilbert.

The jury stated that first-mate Bernardo de Soto was just as guilty, but on account of his generous, noble and self-sacrificing conduct in saving the lives of 70 to 72 Americans aboard the burning ship *Minerva* in the Bahamas Islands in 1831, they decided that his case should be presented to the merciful consideration of the government.

Captain Gilbert only made one statement in Spanish on hearing the verdict: "I am innocent of the crime - I am innocent." Along with the guilty verdict, the jury recommended death by hanging for Gilbert, Ruiz, Boyga, Castillo, Garcia and Montenegro.



Bernardo de Soto.

Date With the Hangman

One prisoner attempted suicide in an effort to cheat the hangman. He slit his throat with a piece of tin, but was rescued by the prison guards before he died. He did, however, lose a good deal of blood, which left him without enough energy to stand at the gallows. To solve the problem, the prisoner was provided a chair upon which he could sit while the trap door fell away, allowing the rope to tighten around his neck until death occurred.

Gilbert had been found with a piece of glass; it was confiscated by the guards before he had a chance to use it on himself.

While waiting for the execution day, Bernardo De Soto and Francisco Ruiz had many supporters working on reprieves for them. Reasons for the reprieves included De Soto's life-saving actions in 1831 and Ruiz's possibility of being insane or mad.

De Soto's wife, who was in Spain, was startled to learn that her husband was tried for this shocking crime. She came to America, where she was joined by the wife of De Soto's defense attorney and went to President Andrew Jackson to plead for her husband. Other private citizens wrote and spoke to Jackson on De Soto's behalf. President Jackson did issue an executive order on July 6, 1835 for the pardon of Bernardo De Soto.

Gilbert and four crew members were hung at the Leverett Street jail in Boston on June 11, 1835, before a crowd of over 20,000 people. Those hung were buried in a Catholic cemetery in Charlestown, outside of Boston.

As for Francisco Ruiz, his declaration of madness was deemed a hoax and he was sent to the gallows on September 11, 1835.

Gilbert's Legacy

With the expansion of stream-powered vessels in the 1840s, the old sailing pirates and their ships soon disappeared. By 1850, maps labeled the rocky reefs off the St. Lucie Inlet as Gilbert's Bar.

Don Pedro Gilbert and crew may have found the southeast coast of Florida, especially the waterways of the Indian and St. Lucie Rivers, the best hideaways. Their legacy lived on, as they were the last pirates to attack American vessels and the last to be executed for their crimes at sea.

Don Pedro Gilbert, as a convicted pirate in late 1834, penned two books before his death: *TRIAL OF THE TWELVE SPANISH PIRATES of the Schooner PANDA*, a Guinea Slaver consisting of Don Pedro Gibert, captain, Bernardo de Soto, mate, Francisco Ruiz, carpenter, Antonio Ferrer, the tattooed cook, Nicola Costa, Manuel Boyga, Domingo de Guzman, Juan Antonio Portana, Manuel Castillo, Angel Garcia, Jose Velazquez, and Juan Montenegro, seamen, for robbery and piracy, committed on board the brig *Mexican*, 20th Sept. 1832 and *REPORT OF THE TRIAL OF PEDRO GILBERT, BERNARDO DE SOTO AND OTHERS*.

The Boston trial of Gilbert and his crew was a highly publicized event in 1834 and there were citizens against as well as in support of the pirates. One most noteworthy was Junius Brutus Booth, father of the famed John Wilkes Booth, who assassinated President Abraham Lincoln in 1865. In a letter to President Andrew Jackson, dated July 4, 1835, Junius Booth demanded that Jackson pardon the two prisoners named Ruiz and De Soto. In the letter, Booth wrote: "You damn'd old Scoundrel if you don't sign the pardon of your fellow men now under sentence of death, De Ruiz and De Soto, I will cut your throat whilst you are sleeping." This was indeed a threat against a sitting president, but one not taken seriously, as Booth later admitted to making some rash statements.

In 1875, the newly formed United States Life Saving Service (USLSS) began construction of rescue stations for ships along the Florida East Coast. One was built in 1876 on Hutchinson Island, just north of the St. Lucie Inlet and was named for Gilbert's Bar (reefs) off the coast. The Gilbert's Bar House of Refuge is the last standing structure of its kind on the Florida coast, serving as a museum to the life-saving efforts of these houses of refuge.



Martin County's House of Refuge

Willard M. Kiplinger, journalist and publisher of Washington Kiplinger Letters, was a winter resident of Martin County. In 1955 he had a road built which allowed public access to an observation tower at Mount Pisgah, the lookout position for Captain Gilbert, some 125 years earlier. From the tower there was a clear view of the Indian and St. Lucie Rivers, as well as the Atlantic Ocean.



*Beware of
Pirates!*

About the Author



As a native Floridian and former teacher at Stuart Middle School, for the last 16 years Alice L. Luckhardt (email: allgel@bellsouth.net) has been a historical and genealogical researcher and writer with print articles in *Ancestry*, *Florida Monthly*, *Internet Genealogy*, *History*, *Discovering Family History*, *South Florida History*, *Family Chronicle*, *Fort Pierce*, *Jupiter*, *Genealogical Helper* and *Reminisce Magazines*. There are also historical e-magazine articles online with Suite 101 and Associated Content. Since 2006, three books have been published; “Legends ~ Family Stories and Myths”, “The Invincible Alice” and “O. B. Padgett ~ A Florida Son”.

In April 2010, Alice placed 3rd in the nation for writing an outstanding genealogical magazine article, sponsored by ISFHWE (International Society of Family History Writers & Editors). The article published in *Discovering Family History* was titled; “Evoking Family Stories.” It explained to the readers how to begin and develop a partial or complete written record on an ancestor’s or family member’s life story.

Over the years, she has done extensive research and writings on famous and non-famous individuals for several clients. Her historical articles have examined the more unusual characters and events throughout history including: Pvt. Wesley Wagoner at Belle Isle, RAF Cadets at Arcadia, Lewis T. Powell & the Lincoln Assassination, the Miami Aquarium, Rex Beach, Secret Service Agent Craig, German spy catcher - Ralph Rubin, inventor Sterling Elliott, Pirate Don Pedro Gilbert, Richard Pavlick & the JFK Assassination, Ashley Gang, Mary Shaw Leader at Gettysburg, Dr. George L. Porter & the Lincoln Conspirators, Lt. Frank B. Tyndall & Tyndall AFB and Capt. Thomas Mantell & a UFO.

In the monthly newsletter for the Stuart Heritage Museum, she provides an interesting historical vignette about the people or places in Stuart.