

## Assateague ponies traced to 1820 ship sinking

*On a quiet evening one can stand on the Assateague Island beach and hear the ghostly thunder of hoofs, echoing from far out at sea. The galloping roar is said to be the spirits of those ancient Spanish mustangs who never made it ashore.*



The following story is by Donald Stewart, the president of the Atlantic Ship Historical Society, whose historic Coast Guard lightship "Five Fathom" is docked at West Ocean City harbor as a maritime museum.

The lightship, built in 1921, was the Queen of the lightship fleet. It served off Nantucket, Assateague, Fenwick Island and elsewhere along the Atlantic Coast.

The ship is open from noon to 8 p.m. daily and a tour of the ship and its maritime museum costs \$1 for adults and 50-cents for children.

For generations, the origin of the wild ponies on Assateague Island has been a source of myth and mystery. The most popular legend has it that they are offspring of horses carried on an old Spanish galleon called the "Greyhound," which was shipwrecked off the island's coast in the 1700s.

Now, newly uncovered information, based on the testimony of a Spanish seaman before a tribunal of *visitadores* in Spain in 1821 conducting an inquiry into the wreck of the heavily armed merchant ship "San Lorenzo," may once and for all settle the question of the ponies' origin.

The information indicates that the ponies are descendants of horses that were blinded so they could be used in the mines of South America. When insurrections threatened Spanish control of these mines, the horses were ordered by King Ferdinand VII shipped to Spain in the early part of the Nineteenth Century.

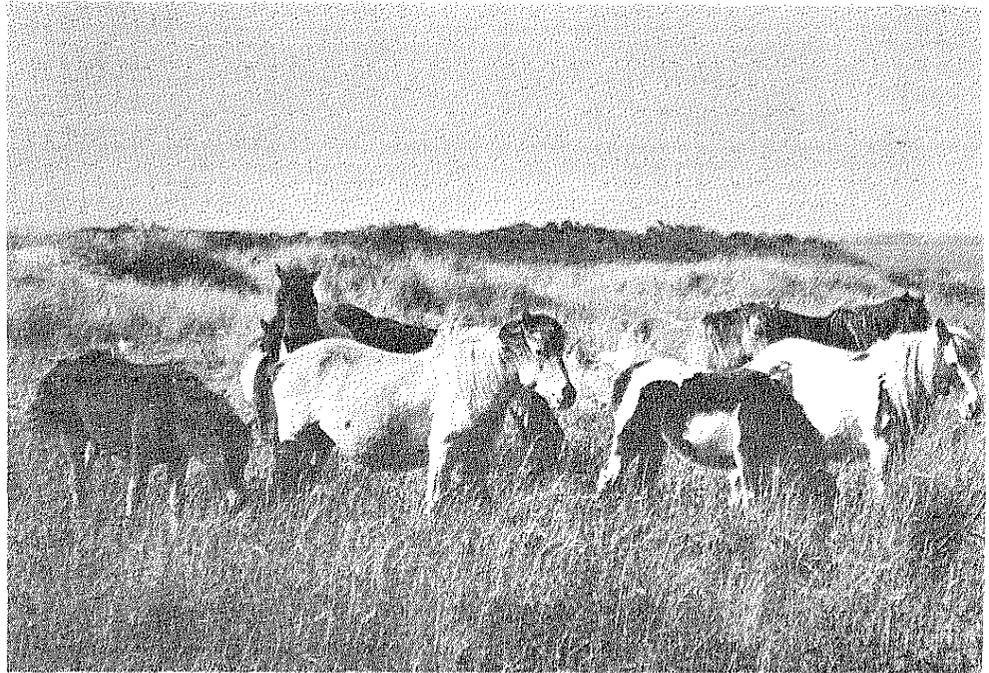
I first came across the "San Lorenzo" in the Archives of the Admiralty in London in 1974, but the research that led to my discovery of the origin of the ponies was done at the Archivo General de Indias in Spain. Some records still exist there from as far back as 1492, though many were destroyed or stolen by treasure hunters, many of whom were Americans serving as volunteers in the Spanish Civil War in 1937.

I spent a week in the archives, photographing hundreds of feet of microfilmed records with a special camera, then translating them with the aid of a Spanish dictionary and help from some local language specialists.

The full name of the ship, I found, was the "San Lorenzo de Escorial," constructed in Cuba in 1807-08. The ship had a keel length of 151 feet and her gross tonnage was 1,350—a large ship, constructed to carry heavy guns and a large cargo.

The years immediately after her launching saw the rise of such sons of liberty as Simon Bolivar and San Martin, who wrested control of Colombia, Venezuela, Argentina and Chile from the local royalist viceroys and governors.

By 1820, fresh troops were being conscripted and seamen were being pressed into the navy so Spain could reclaim her colonies. Spanish royalists urged the royal



viceroys in Panama and Peru to ship all the riches they could spare to Spain to aid King Ferdinand, who was facing insurrection at home.

The "San Lorenzo" was accordingly sent to a port on the Caribbean side of the Panamanian isthmus to pick up horses to be used in mines in Spain. The ship also picked up many royalists fleeing South America with their riches, including a solid gold statue of the Madonna and a gold baptistry.

Rather than attempt to tell the story of the voyage of the "San Lorenzo" from many documents, it is better to note the testimony of one Don Pedro Murphy before a tribunal of *visitadores*—commerce investigators—from January 13 through 17, 1821. Some 894 pages of questions and answers were recorded, but what follows is most important testimony of the Irish-Spaniard:

"The testimony I am about to give, I give freely and swear before Holy Mary, and as a member of Holy Mother Church is truthful and to the best of my recollections.

"I am a navigator and pilot of ships from Cuba. The "San Lorenzo" had docked at Havana and there had been swamp fever on the ship, which made most of the officers and crew sick. They were removed.

"I asked about the damage to the ship, for the stern was splintered and shattered and was told by the original navigator that they had a fight with a rebel corsair off Honduras and the large brig had crossed the unprotected stern twice, pouring in two broadsides. I said this was an unlucky ship. He replied it was a very lucky ship because the Virgin (the gold statue) was again with the animals in the hold of the ship.

"The new captain was Pedro Ceiza de Fernandez, an excellent seaman. He was unhappy about the condition of the "San Lorenzo" and asked that time be made to inspect her bottom. Everyone was repairing the damage to the stern and galleries when

an official came to the ship and ordered our captain to put to sea immediately.

"About the animals, I was told that the mines were being destroyed in Panama to prevent their capture by rebels and the animals were blind horses that were being sent to Spain to work in our mines. There was 95 of the little horses and they were quiet and content, until the storms.

"We sailed against the better judgement of our captain. We sailed along the straits of Florida and continued north by east. When it was found that the water taken aboard at Havana was bad, the captain ordered that wine be used instead of water. He did not wish to enter the port of Charleston, for his own reasons, and continued far out to sea, past the Carolinas and then toward the port of Norfolk in Virginia. He took a pilot aboard and arranged for fresh water and vegetables. We arrived on September 2, 1820, just after dawn, and sailed at 5 in the afternoon.

"We sailed north along the Virginia coast at no more than 3 knots of the log. I asked to be relieved, as I did not feel well and had been on my feet for many days. I was replaced and went off to my place, off the chart room.

"When I awoke the ship was pitching and I took to the deck. The sky was black as ink and the wind was high, sending a moan through the rigging. I was proceeding down the walk when a torrent of rain covered the ship and the seas rose.

"The captain ordered the sails shortened, and the men lashed and tied until only the jibes and main were set. I was forward when I heard a cracking sound and the helmsman reported that the ship would not answer to the wheel.

"It was soon after discovered that the rudder was gone, and two anchors were dropped as the carpenter and crew were ordered to construct a suitable timber to be used as a rudder. I walked forward to the head when the lookout in the foretop

THIS ENTIRE ARTICLE IS A HOAX  
First printed in the Baltimore Sun  
July 24, 1977

This article from the Resorter, Ocean City, MD,  
July 15-31, 1979

Omitted from this article was this account of treasure  
3,973 gold doubloons, 173,700 silver pieces of eight,  
255 bars of gold, 303 bars of silver, plus a statue  
of the Madonna and a baptistery, also of solid gold

screamed 'Breakers ahead!'

"I moved forward and held to the gammon but could see nothing, when the ship rose on a wave and crashed on a reef. I tumbled over the bow, injuring my leg as I fell. When I regained my senses, I looked up and saw the bow of my ship--just the bow--that is all.

"I dropped my feet from a swimming position and was standing on the bottom of what I thought was the cay. The surf rolled me and suddenly I was on a beach.

"An old man came ashore and I helped him. There were many of the blind horses, and I still wonder how they came out of the hold and found the beach.

"The beach was scattered with the effects of the ship and I retrieved a quadrant. I took a position that evening. I know we were off the coast of Maryland, for I know the latitude.

"The next afternoon we started to walk north. After six days, we came upon some fishermen. We were placed in a boat and taken to a town called Leuiz (probably Lewes, Delaware). Two days later, I was taken aboard a vessel, arriving in Philadelphia and placed aboard a packet for Cadiz."

The inventory in the Archivo General de Indias of the "San Lorenzo" includes a paid receipt for 470 pesos for transportation for 110 horses to Spain, additional good evidence that the wild ponies of Assateague are really the descendants of mine horses used to work the mines in South America.

Corroborating evidence comes from the journal of Henry Lloyd, who was commissioned by Governor Samuel Stevens, Jr. to explore the Maryland seacoast to settle a dispute over fishing rights between Worcester county and Accomack County, Virginia. Mr. Lloyd, who explored Assateague Island from June 27 through 30, 1826, reported:

"We have thus far in our travels made a count of 45 small horses no larger than a large hound, many appear to be blind and these have a sense which permits them to follow the herds even though they are without sight. Their origin is a mystery and Doctor Purnell, who frequented the island nine years ago, has no knowledge of them."

I did some research on the breeding of small horses in Spain. None were bred more than three feet in height and all were purposefully blinded so they could be lowered into the pit shafts of the mines with slings.

I also had an interesting discussion with Dr. Ted Roth, assistant director of the Baltimore Zoo. He informed me that the offspring of the horses which came ashore on Assateague in 1820 would not be blind, as their parents' blindness was not genetic.

The wild ponies today are larger than their South American ancestors. There is a ready explanation for this as well: They have been bred with larger animals, for after the turn of the last century until the 1920s the residents of Accomack County grazed their horses on the lower portion of the island.