

Slavecatchers in the Land of Giants, Part 1

Written by Laura Von Harten



The other day I got to wondering why the Spanish were so keen on the Lowcountry in the early 16th century.

I know they liked to explore and everything, so that would explain the first visit: sightseeing.

But why did they keep coming back? We didn't have any resorts with fabulous amenities. And it's not as if we have vast gold mines buried under the pluff mud.

Turns out we had something that was almost as valuable: a bunch of big people.

Big, strong people.

The kind of people that the Spanish needed to work on their Caribbean sugar plantations.

So guess what? At the dawn of globalization, the first major export from the Lowcountry was

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slaves.

It's not exactly the most attractive story for luring history-loving visitors here. Or the kind of thing that causes civic pride to well up in the hearts of the populace. But it is part of our story nonetheless.

And it's somehow oddly appropriate, given how important slave labor was to our region's prosperity in later centuries.

So here is the cast of nefarious characters who roamed these shores in the early 1500s.

Lucas "Kingpin" Vasquez de Allyon

Luke was mayor of a small town on the island of Hispaniola. Nowadays that's the miserable plot of earth shared by Haitians and Dominicans. Back then it was a sweet place. Literally. Tons of sugar plantations, all worked by slaves. The problem was they kept dying off. Luke was desperate to find a fresh supply of human muscle and bone. So around 1516 he sent one of his men, Pete, on a mission.

Pedro "Scoutmaster" de Salazar

Pete was Luke's lackey (try saying that five times fast). He had the leadership skills required to mount a successful expedition into terra incognita. But in terms of social position he was disposable, so it was no big deal if he and his men didn't make it back. But make it back he did, and he brought good news. While the natives were not exactly friendly, they were strong and easy to trick. Pete also brought back proof positive that there was booty to be had -- a brace of big, hearty slaves. Pete is best remembered for giving the Lowcountry its first slogan: "The Land of Giants." Obviously it didn't stick.

Francisco "Roundup" Gordillo

Once it was determined that there were numerous humans to be had for the taking in the north, it was time to send in the big guns -- the expert slavecatchers. Frank's expertise was in the kidnapping of naive and unsuspecting natives, and he could also sail a ship without wrecking it. Luke recognized that this unique skill set made Frank the obvious choice to lead the second mission from Hispaniola to the Lowcountry.

Pedro "The Complainer" de Quejo

Also known as Pete 2. At times he was also called, in one of the world's most ancient and pernicious plays on words, "Re-Pete". It wasn't very funny back then either. Pete 2 was part of Pete 1's original expedition to the Lowcountry. Once the men returned to Hispaniola, Pete 1 and Pete 2 parted ways. History does not record why, but it could have had something to do with a woman. Pete 2, hungry for all that slave booty, decided to mount his own human-hunting expedition to the Lowcountry. On his way north he stopped in the Bahamas for a while. That's where he hooked up with Frank, who as you will recall was on his way to the Lowcountry on behalf of Luke. The two men figured out they were on a similar mission, so they joined forces. Together they made their way to the Lowcountry, kind of like a sixteenth century buddy movie. On June 30, 1521, they claimed the territory for Spain. Two weeks later Frank & Friends convinced 60 natives to get on their ship, perhaps with promises of candy. With their birds in hand, and the knowledge that there were many more waiting in the bush, the two slavecatchers returned to Hispaniola with their cargo of humans.

Francisco "The Liar" de Chicora

Frankie, or Chick, as he was often called, was a Lowcountry native. As in "Native American." He was understandably upset at being hauled away to Santo Domingo, but he kept his cool. When the spoils of the expedition were distributed, Chick ended up as Luke's slave. In no short time Chick intuited that his new master was a greedy SOB. So Chick started telling totally made up stories about the incredible riches of his native land, Chicora. He figured the Spaniards would high-tail it back to Chicora to gather up all the treasure their stubby sixteenth-century arms could carry. As Chick predicted, Luke made preparations to set sail. Chick got all excited about going home. But much to his chagrin, Chick found himself standing next to Luke on board a ship headed to Spain. It turns out that Luke was thinking strategically. He wasn't interested in short-term gains. With all the wealth to be had in the Land of Giants, Luke decided he'd better stake his claim in a formal way.

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Next: Luke confers with King Charles V ... The Dominicans (the religious order, not the citizens of the Dominican Republic) have their say in the matter ... Chick ponders the mess he's in and redoubles his efforts to get home to Chicora.

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