

Collecting History – El Cazador Shipwreck Coins



King Carlos III of Spain was cousin to King Louis XV of France through their shared Bourbon bloodline and had at least a cordial relationship. In 1762, Louis ceded the Louisiana Territory to Carlos III with the *Treaty of Fontainebleau*. Louis XV sought to keep his precious *Louisiana Territory* out of British hands.

Spain exploited its control over the port and levied expensive tariffs for its use. As more people settled in the sprawling Louisiana Territory, it became ever more costly for Spain to manage and control it. As a result of Spain beginning to lose its colonial grip on not only Louisiana, but much of its holding in the Hemisphere all through the 1790's, France started eyeing its former territory in Louisiana once again.

The ship *El Cazador* (which translates as *The Hunter* in English) was about 90 feet long, with a shallow draft and two masts. She probably carried 18 high quality bronze cannons. The Spanish Brig of War set sail from Veracruz, Mexico on January 11, 1784, under the command of Captain Gabriel de Campos. She was loaded down with 17 metric tons of newly minted silver *reales*, the Spanish currency of the time. King Carlos III of Spain ordered the money to be transported from the mint in Mexico to New Orleans, which served as the capital of Spain's Louisiana colony. New Orleans was settled by a melting pot of immigrants from France, Spain, Africa and the West Indies; New Orleans had developed its own unique culture. With such a mix of peoples in one place, the city often lent itself to corruption; as it does now. King Carlos III needed to pay his soldiers and government officials in charge of the city; however, the paper money circulating in New Orleans had lost much of its value as it was widely counterfeited.

In January 1784, *El Cazador* left Mexican shores, headed for the Louisiana bayou. In June, the ship was declared missing after going down somewhere between Veracruz and New Orleans.

The more than 400,000 silver reales on board was sizeable amount of money for the Spanish government. That unlikely shipwreck gave King Carlos III pause about whether the Louisiana Territory that Spain acquired from France some 20 years earlier was still a worthwhile investment.

An unlikely sequence of events was sparked off by the sinking of the El Cazador which led Spain to relinquish Louisiana back to France, and an entrenched, effective, and successful slave rebellion in Haiti then prompted Napoleon to sell Louisiana to the United States to make some quick cash for his war machine; the sale of which massively expanded American territory and opened the flood gates to westward American expansion. Just over two centuries later a fishing trawler operating of only fifty miles from New Orleans would accidentally find the El Cazador, bringing the story and the treasure contained within her hull full circle. Had El Cazador reached its destination, Spain would have solved her fiscal issues in Louisiana and would have been far less likely to cede the region back to France, meaning the United States might never have acquired Louisiana, thus altering America's destiny.



Coins Available: ½ Reale, 1 Reale, 2Reale, 4 Reale & 8 Reale

