

The Bandera PROPHEET

Sailing the Pacific

How the Manila galleon shaped international trade

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The Bandera Prophet

On Aug. 10, 1519, Portugese explorer Fernando de Magallanes (Ferdinand Magellan) said goodbye to his wife and son, none of them knowing they would never meet again. Magallanes embarked on a two-year voyage with a crew of 270 and a fleet of five ships, commanding the Trinidad. In March of 1521, he docked off the coast of Cebu in the Philippines, achieving the first European navigation from the Atlantic Ocean to Asia.

The same year, Spanish General Hernán Cortés and the conquistadors, under orders from the Spanish crown, claimed victory at the conclusion of a two-year battle with the Aztec empire. The conquest expanded the Spanish-owned territory from California to South America.

Divided by the Pacific Ocean, the Spaniards needed a way to commute between their newly-established sovereignty. Thus was the birth of the Manila galleon.

The Galleon

Although New Spain was established in 1521, it would take 44 additional years to discover a round-trip route between the Philippines and North America. Four ships sailed and failed before the San Pedro, commanded by Spanish Pilot Andrés de Urdaneta, successfully navigated the North Pacific trade winds on the Kuroshio Stream, and arrived in Acapulco on Oct. 5, 1565.

Crafted almost exclusively in the Philippines, 108 Manila galleons were built from 1565 to 1815. Of those, 26 were lost, including four that were captured by the British military.

The first sunken galleon was the San Pablo in 1568, while en route to Acapulco. Twenty more galleons were lost within the Philippine archipelago. One galleon is believed to have wrecked off the Oregon coast.

Each galleon weighed up to 2,000 tons, and could carry 300 to 500 passengers. By order of the King of Spain, the ships set sail from the port of Acapulco between January and March, in order to avoid the May-through-November typhoon season. On average, the one-way trip took three months.

The departure from Manila was decreed to take place no later than June. This journey lasted twice as long, averaging six months. The galleons would sail north to Japan's east coast, cross the Pacific to Monterey, California, and down the North American coastline to Acapulco. Divided into three parts, the first leg of the voyage was plagued by monsoons and huge waves. The second leg was subject to strong winds, but paled in comparison to the perils of the third leg. In addition to cyclonic whirlwinds, the galleons were hunted by pirates and privateers, seeking the valuable cargo onboard.

Trade begins

Legend has it that in 1571, a crew of Chinese sailors was shipwrecked off the shores of Manila, aided swiftly by the Spanish. The following year, a Chinese vessel returned, packed with gifts as a show of gratitude. A galleon departed almost immediately for Acapulco, loaded with the exotic and unique goods. From there, the items were carried across land to the eastern port of Veracruz and set sail for Spain, arriving in 1573. Impressed, the king ordered trade with China to begin, resulting in a figure-eight of international exchange, with New Spain as the hub for the next two-and-a-half centuries.

Some documented West-bound cargo, which was used as currency to trade, included silver; cacao; cochineal; oil and wines; produce including sweet potato, corn, tomato, tobacco, chickpea, chocolate, watermelon, vine and fig trees; Flemish laces; Spanish cloth; and European luxury goods.

East-bound cargo included gold; Chinese silks, velvets and brocades; Japanese screens, robes and kimonos; bed coverings, tapestries, table linens and handkerchiefs; gold and cotton from India; Persian rugs; ivory, jade and jasper; women's combs; sandalwood; earthenware and porcelain; Manila cigars; Chinese teas; clove, cinnamon, pepper and nutmeg; and exotic animals.

Although not their primary purpose, the galleons also transported Spanish deportees, prisoners and slaves.

The trade route included stops in Guam, Central and South America, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, North Africa and potentially Hawaii, as well as other Polynesian islands.

Typical of a Jack Sparrow-inspired voyage, crew provisions included plenty of wine; biscuits; oil and vinegar; salted meat and fish; beans and rice; fresh water; salt; cheese; olives; mercury; almonds; wax; soap; glassware; and weaponry.

The crew

Each galleon was manned by about 40 crew members, men who averaged between 28 and 50 years old. Ships pages - primarily orphans or poor children from the cities of Seville, Mexico and Manila - could enter the service at around 8 years old. Apprentices were generally teenagers, who could become certified sailors when they turned 20. Often crew members were convicted criminals, condemned to serve long sentences on the galleons. Mortality rates were high, particularly on longer voyages during which provisions were not sufficient.

Generating the economy

The galleons' much anticipated arrivals stimulated the economy by providing seasonal work for locals. Goods were loaded and unloaded by indigenous people and free black men. In Mexico, slavery was restricted in the late 1700s, and abolishment began after its independence from Spain was declared. Prior to that, freed men in Mexico were well paid for back-breaking labor.

Cargoes were transported by foot and mule across land to Mexico's eastern port of Veracruz, stopping in Mexico City. Along the way, porters were greeted by innkeepers, and food and supplies were distributed.

The end of an era

The New Spain galleon trade carried on for nearly 250 continuous years, interrupted by occasional political and social scuffles at each port. The king ordered its end in 1813, three years after the Mexican War of Independence was declared. Trade officially concluded in 1815, with the arrival of the San Fernando galleon in Acapulco - a poetic full circle serendipitously paying tribute to Fernando de Magallanes' pioneering efforts nearly 300 years prior. The end of New Spain was soon to follow in 1821.

A few decades later, the steam-powered ships replaced the galleon, reducing travel time from Spain to the Philippines to just 40 days.

Side note

The Museo de Galleon is under construction in Pasay, Metro Manila, Philippines. The museum will host a full-size replica of a Manila galleon, as well as feature the history of the Manila-Acapulco galleon trade. Development was delayed during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Museo Histórico de Acapulco, Fuerte de San Diego (the San Diego Fortress), was declared an historical national monument in 1933. The fort was built in 1616 on the Acapulco coastline as the first line of defense for the galleons as they arrived from Asia. The museum holds the archives of the port's history, and houses a collection of New Spain art.

See a 1:12 replica of a New Spain galleon, and some of the cargo she carried, at the Bandera Natural History Museum.