

Hidden Treasures

Ellen Rice's Colonial-style map reveals shipwrecks off the coast of Delmarva

It looks like a pirate map of old. The locations of where hoards of gold coins, buried treasure and the skeletons of famous shipwrecks of centuries ago may be found are noted.

The map, Treasure Beaches of the Mid-Atlantic, is new, the creation of artist Ellen Rice. And the best part is that this watercolor-and-ink map is both historically accurate and full of sites where just about anyone can search a beach for valuable artifacts.

By Brice Stump

Daily Times Staff Writer

Released in October of last year, the map is the product of almost four years work. Getting people to reveal the most coveted sites to find bits of treasure was the most difficult part.

“I visited dive shops, talked to divers and asked people on the beach where the best places were to find artifacts – nobody wanted to tell me anything,” said artist Ellen Rice. “I got pieces of information, but what I wanted was accurate information – I’m a bit of a perfectionist – and I wanted correct information. So I started talking to collectors and going to the library a lot – it was a journey back in time,” she said.

As months turned into years, Rice spent much of her time doing research and what she thought were just a few shipwrecks from the late 1500s to 1700s off the Maryland and Delaware coasts turned out to be an unbelievable number.

“There are more than 20,000 shipwrecks from Sandy Hook, N.J., to the North Carolina line. And about 1,800 documented wrecks in the Chesapeake Bay and close to that number in the Delaware Bay. A lot are of Spanish origin because in the 1500s the Spanish were in the Chesapeake Bay looking for gold and silver, until the precious metals

were found in Mexico. The Mid-Atlantic served as the northern trade route for Spanish ships heading home.”

“If you walk on the beach on the north side of the Indian River Inlet (officially called Coin Beach) after a storm, chances are you’ll find something from a shipwreck. There have been so many coins found on some beaches that they are called ‘coin or money beaches.’ Just walk slowly and really look and know what to look for – and you may find something,” Rice said.

It is the famous nor’easters – storms with high winds that cause significant beach erosion – that cover and uncover treasures and timbers of forgotten ships.

Locating “The Big One”

Among the first of her own finds was a piece of ironstone, once part of a charger, with a faint, hand-applied blue decoration around the edge, found during an outing to Coin Beach. She believes it may have come from the wreck of the Faithful Steward, lost off the coast in 1785 and believed to have a number of copper coins aboard.

“I can’t tell you the feeling I had when I first picked it up,” she said. From then on, Rice looked forward to her beach visits and the thrill of a discovery, whether it be a nail, piece of porcelain or, hopefully, a coin.

But, the artist said, it is against the law to do any treasure hunting on Assateague Island, one of the most desirable treasure hunting sites along the East Coast.

“There are two sides to the treasure-hunting issue. If you are destroying an archaeological site you’re in the wrong. I’d like to see the government working with the people to preserve history, because as it is now, there is little if any money available to do the kind of work that needs to be done,” she said.

The map notes areas that are open to the public, but not all secrets are divulged.

“There are some secrets that will remain secrets, but I have identified enough places to search and that may help educate people about history. That’s the most important thing about this project, to get people, especially kids, excited about all the history we have in this area; and this is a great way to discover it,” Rice said.

“I hope people will work cooperatively with each other and with government agencies – we don’t want people destroying plover nests and dune grass, for example, when they are combing the beach. People can be fined and put in jail if they get too carried away,” she said.

And there are hundreds if not thousands of collectors and artifact hunters waiting to find “the big one,” like the treasures said to have been buried all over Delmarva by famed pirates Blackbeard and Captain Kidd.

“ ‘Tetche’s Ile’ in Virginia (shown on the map off the coast of Accomack County) was also called Black Beard’s Island because he was known as Tetch, Tatch or Teach, and it is said there is treasure buried there. Another tale says a treasure chest with copper straps was dropped into a sinkhole off Wats Island in the Chesapeake Bay. They put ‘man-eating red herring’ in there and cursed it as well,” she laughed.

It is the quest for lost information on ships and their cargoes that excites treasure enthusiasts and calls them to be detectives in the best form of Sherlock Holmes. Oftentimes the “treasure” may be a handmade nail, a pebble-smooth copper penny or a fragment of glass, but the rush of spiritual excitement upon making a discovery outweighs its earthly value.

Crafting the Map

Rice interpreted the design from her porcelain find as the border for her map – which many simply call “The Treasure Map” – and it looks like it has always decorated a genuine antique map.

Largely based on a 1719 map (with borrowed details from eight maps and charts dating from 1683 to the mid-1800s), its appeal is enhanced by added sketches of ships and notations about the vessels and sites. The old spellings of villages and waterways add to the historic appeal of the map.

“I cut the shipwrecks off after 1830. As for the old shipwrecks, there’s hardly anything left when you dive down to see them, but quite a few have been popular with divers for years,” she said.

“It’s more than a map, it’s a piece of artwork and the hardest parts of doing it were the most rewarding. I consulted with Martha Seamans of Ocean View, who deals with old maps and matched the colors of my map with the colors in the old maps. Using old map formulas provided by Martha, I tried to match the color and content as closely to the old maps as I could,” she said.

Rice has been involved with the newspaper business for about eight years and has her own public relations and advertising firm, Rice Publishing and Advertising, but it is art she loves most.

Prints in her open stock map edition are signed but not numbered. They are 22 by 30 inches. There are 300 limited edition prints, signed, numbered and embossed under her signature, which come with a replica of a King George III rose gold guinea, plated in 24 karat gold. Each coin is also numbered to match the number on the print. Her signature on all the signed copies is over an embossed Ellen Rice Collection seal of authenticity.

She also has 15 other limited edition prints of historic scenes in Sussex County and several have nautical themes.

As for sales of her first cartography endeavor, Rice is pleased not only with the financial rewards of her task, but the gratification of combining art and history to help get Delmarva residents acquainted with their heritage.

For more information on the Treasure Beaches of the Mid-Atlantic, call (302) 539-3405 or visit www.ellenrice.com

Reprinted from the front page of the Sunday Style section of the Daily Times, January 9, 1994, and picked up nationally by the AP Wire Service and run in cities across the country throughout 1994.