



# Pirate Hunters: Treasure, Obsession, and the Search for a Legendary Pirate Ship

By Robert Kurson

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**NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER • NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY CHICAGO TRIBUNE** • A thrilling adventure of danger and deep-sea diving, historic mystery and suspense, by the author of *Shadow Divers*

Finding and identifying a pirate ship is the hardest thing to do under the sea. But two men—John Chatterton and John Mattera—are willing to risk everything to find the *Golden Fleece*, the ship of the infamous pirate Joseph Bannister. At large during the Golden Age of Piracy in the seventeenth century, Bannister should have been immortalized in the lore of the sea—his exploits more notorious than Blackbeard’s, more daring than Kidd’s. But his story, and his ship, have been lost to time. If Chatterton and Mattera succeed, they will make history—it will be just the second time ever that a pirate ship has been discovered and positively identified. Soon, however, they realize that cutting-edge technology and a willingness to lose everything aren’t enough to track down Bannister’s ship. They must travel the globe in search of historic documents and accounts of the great pirate’s exploits, face down dangerous rivals, battle the tides of nations and governments and experts. But it’s only when they learn to think and act like pirates—like Bannister—that they become able to go where no pirate hunters have gone before.

Fast-paced and filled with suspense, fascinating characters, history, and adventure, *Pirate Hunters* is an unputdownable story that goes deep to discover truths and souls long believed lost.

### Praise for *Pirate Hunters*

“You won’t want to put [it] down.”—*Los Angeles Times*

“An exceptional adventure . . . Highly recommended to readers who delight in adventure, suspense, and the thrill of discovering history at their fingertips.”—*Library Journal* (starred review)

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*From the Hardcover edition.*

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

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“John Chatterton and John Mattera . . . come across as modern heroes, the kind of men the modern world often finds it hard to make a place for. An enjoyable read, especially if you’ve got a thing for pirates.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

“A great thriller full of tough guys and long odds . . . and: It’s all true.”—**Lee Child**

“Action and adventure on land and sea—you can’t ask for more. But Robert Kurson raises the ante in *Pirate Hunters* with an array of mystery and a fleet of colorful characters spanning four centuries. This is a great summer read!”—**Michael Connelly**

“*Pirate Hunters* is a fantastic book, an utterly engrossing and satisfying read. It tells the story of the hunt for the rare wreck of a pirate ship, which had been captained by one of the most remarkable pirates in history.

This is a real-life *Treasure Island*, complete with swashbuckling, half-crazy treasure hunters and vivid Caribbean settings—a story for the ages.”—**Douglas Preston**

“A terrific read. I was pulled in from page one. Kurson brings us face to face with some of the most swashbuckling pirates ever to sail the Caribbean, even as he takes us underwater on a high-tech quest to discover the relics they left behind.”—**Daniel James Brown**

“There’s nothing in the world like buried treasure—and people hungry and obsessed enough to risk their lives for it. *Pirate Hunters* isn’t just a good story—it’s a true one. Searching for the souls of its explorers, it takes you to the far tip of the plank and plunges you deep to the bottom of the ocean.”—**Brad Meltzer**

“*Pirate Hunters* is a gripping account of two courageous divers’ quest to uncover the shipwrecked vessel of Joseph Bannister, one of history’s most infamous pirates. Robert Kurson will keep you on the edge of your seat in this high-stakes journey around the globe that ultimately teaches these explorers about much more than an old ship.”—**Sen. John McCain**

*From the Hardcover edition.*

About the Author

**Robert Kurson** is the author of the runaway bestseller *Shadow Divers*, and *Crashing Through*.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

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By 1684, Bannister had been making the London–Jamaica run for at least four years, delivering his cargos and building his reputation. In June of that year, however, the lord president of the Council of Jamaica received a disturbing letter from the island’s governor, Thomas Lynch: “One Bannister ran away with a ship, the *Golden Fleece*, of thirty or forty guns, picked up over a hundred men from sloops and from lee-ward [at Port Royal], and has got a French commission.”

Bannister, in fact, had no commission, but he most certainly had stolen the *Golden Fleece*, and he’d done so with a single purpose—to turn pirate. His actions hardly could have been bolder. It was near unheard of for a transatlantic captain, especially one as well regarded and trusted as Bannister, to “go on the account,” as it was said of pirating. Even in Port Royal, where everything happened, few had seen anything like this.

Lynch didn’t sit around and wait for Bannister to return to his senses. Instead, he ordered the *Ruby*, the biggest and deadliest war-ship in the Jamaica fleet, to go after the *Golden Fleece*. A monster rated at 540 tons, with forty-eight cannons and a crew of 150, the *Ruby* was a pirate killer down to her timbers.

Bannister did not intend to make it easy for Lynch’s enforcers. Since stealing the *Golden Fleece*, he had picked up additional crew, robbed a Spanish vessel, and made his way to the Cayman Islands to take turtles and gather wood. But the *Ruby* surprised him there, and her captain, David Mitchell, and his crew captured Bannister and put an end to his six-week pirate career.

Lynch was delighted.

“Last night,” he wrote, “the *Ruby* brought in Bannister. He took him at Caymanos; he has about 115 men on board, most of the veriest rogues in these Indies. I have ordered the ship and the men to be delivered into the Admiralty and commanded the judge immediately to proceed against them, because we do not know how to secure or keep such a number. We conclude they’ll be found guilty of piracy.”

The case against Bannister was airtight. Not only had he stolen the *Golden Fleece*, he had taken two Spaniards captive after attacking their boat. The testimony of those two men alone would secure a conviction. By now, Bannister could only hope for leniency, but if he expected it, he'd chosen the wrong governor under which to become pirate.

"I intend if it proves so to make a terrible example of the captain, his lieutenant, officers, and all the men that have committed other crimes as many of them have," Lynch wrote, "and hope the severity may have some influence on the other rogues that swarm in these In- dies."

By that, Lynch meant Bannister would hang. His crew, if lucky, might be whipped, jailed, or put into irons or stockades. If unlucky, they might follow Bannister to the gallows.

The pirates were returned to Port Royal and held aboard the *Ruby* pending trial. One might have expected Bannister to use the time to pen letters of good-bye or to contemplate eternity; instead, he waited for a break in his captors' attention, then managed to get word to on- shore associates to bribe the two Spanish witnesses against him. It was an audacious plan and one that, even if the connections were made, seemed doomed given that the Spaniards had been rescued by the Royal Navy.

At trial, a strong case was made against the pirates. But when it came time for the Spaniards to testify, they swore "backward and forward" that they had sold their boat and cargo to Bannister, and that he had paid them to serve as crew aboard the *Golden Fleece*.

If that testimony shocked the prosecution, at least the governor could still rely on the jury, who were certain to see through the ruse. But this was Port Royal, where ordinary folk, remembering who'd made their town rich and had infused it with spirit, still counted pirates as neighbors and friends. They returned with a verdict: not guilty. Bannister had cheated the hangman.

Already a sick man, Lynch suffered "such disturbance of mind" from the verdict that, according to accounts, he died of it a week later. By all rights, his replacement should have set Bannister free. Instead, Hender Molesworth tried to convince the jury to reverse itself, but the jurors wouldn't budge. Worse, Bannister threatened to sue the captain of the *Ruby*, "as though [Bannister] were the honestest man in the world." That was more than Molesworth could take. Stretching the boundaries of the law—if not breaking them—he had Bannister re- arrested and charged. Bail was set at three hundred pounds, a staggering amount in an age when the annual wage for a seaman might be twenty pounds.

Somehow, Bannister raised the money and, at least for the moment, remained free. He was not, however, permitted to leave Port Royal, and in any case was likely too broke to do it. To make certain he entertained no thoughts of fleeing, officials cut down the sails of the *Golden Fleece*. By January 1685, five months after the original charges against him were thrown out, Bannister was still languishing in Port Royal, waiting to be retried.

He was still waiting when, on a dark night in late January, he began to make his way through the narrow streets of Port Royal. As he crept past taverns and brothels and sleeping families, fifty men were already at work aboard the *Golden Fleece*, moving furiously but making no sound. Before long, Bannister reached Thames Street, which ran along the wharf on the northern side of town. There, he rushed for the *Golden Fleece*, tied up at the docks, and stole aboard his former ship. Sails were hoisted and lines cut, and soon the vessel picked up the breeze and moved out into the harbor.

Landlocked to the east, the harbor offered only one way out, to the south, and that is where Bannister steered. To make it into the open Caribbean, he had to hope that no one in town noticed the *Golden Fleece* missing,

or sounded the alarm at the sight of a ship moving in the dead of night. Even then, he would have to pass the twenty-six cannons at Fort James and, in the unlikely event he were still living after that, turn south and get by the thirty-eight cannons, and hundreds of men, at Fort Charles. At any point along the way, he might be spotted by Royal Navy ships anchored just a mile to the west, or by men at work in nearby Chocolata Hole. If such a thing as a suicide mission existed in seventeenth-century Port Royal, Joseph Bannister had just embarked on it.

Generally, winds were calm at night in Port Royal, but on this evening Bannister picked up a fresh breeze off the land and began moving west along the town's docks, maybe as fast as five knots, or about six miles per hour. Before long, he reached Fort James. Perhaps because of the hour, or because the garrisons there never expected such an unlikely event, it seems no one fired on the *Golden Fleece*, or even took notice of her. For the moment, Bannister and his crew remained safe.

Now rounding Port Royal's western shore, Bannister headed south toward Fort Charles, about a half mile in the distance. By now, he might have been fifteen minutes into his rush toward freedom, but he had at least another fifteen minutes to go—critical moments that would determine whether he and his crew lived or died.

Soon, he could see the guns at Fort Charles, the most heavily fortified place in all of Jamaica. Staying within a few hundred yards of the shore, he ordered his men to ready their "plugs," chunks of mattress or wood they'd brought to fill holes in the ship they knew would be made when the cannons at Fort Charles began firing.

A moment later he was at the northern end of the fort and sailing the *Golden Fleece* for all she was worth, waiting for the explosion of cannons but hearing nothing more than the wind in his sails and the crashing of waves against his ship. He was perhaps ten minutes from freedom, but they would be the most dangerous minutes of his life.

Passing the first of the cannons, he braced for destruction. Any one of the guns at Fort Charles could be deadly from a half mile. Thirty-eight of them together, aimed at a single enemy just a few hundred yards away, couldn't miss.

Bannister kept sailing, passing more of the guns, waiting for explosions, drawing nearer to the open Caribbean. Now abreast of Fort Charles, he might have begun to have hope of slipping by undetected, but as he passed the fourteenth cannon, someone at Fort Charles caught sight of him and notified Major Beckford, the fort's commander. Moments later, Beckford sounded the alarm and ordered his cannoneers into action.

Never before fired in anger, the guns at Fort Charles rang furiously now, a series of concussions that shook all of Port Royal and must have caused townsfolk to think a foreign force was invading. At the sound, local militiamen would have been roused by their duty officer and run toward Fort Charles with their muskets. Now that the town was alert, Bannister's only hope was that darkness would conceal him.

He would not be so lucky.

Cannonballs slammed into the *Golden Fleece*, first one, then another, then a third, but Bannister's men stuffed the splintered holes with plugs, and the ship kept sailing, and even though the cannons continued to roar the rounds began to fall short, and in a few minutes the *Golden Fleece* had reached the open seas, and in another few she disappeared into the mist. By now, the navy ships would have been roused to action, but they were almost certainly anchored and could not hope to get going so suddenly, and soon the *Golden Fleece* and her captain were gone.

Bannister's escape blindsided Governor Molesworth. Still, he couldn't hide a grudging respect for the



captain. Writing to an English colonial official, he said of the getaway: “[It came as] a great surprise to me, for I thought Bannister’s want of credit would prevent him from ever getting the ship to sea again . . . yet now he has obtained credit from some persons underhand, and has his ship well fitted in every respect. It was done so artfully that no one suspected it, or I should have found some pretext for securing him.”

Impressed though he might be, Molesworth wasted little time in going after Bannister, sending Captain Edward Stanley in the four-gun sloop *Boneta* to hunt down the *Golden Fleece*. A light ship with a crew of perhaps ten, the ship was likely the smallest in the Jamaica fleet, but Bannister had surrendered to the navy with little struggle months earlier, and Molesworth surely expected more of the same.

For all she lacked in size, the *Boneta* was fast, and it didn’t take her long to catch up to the *Golden Fleece*. When she did, however, Captain Stanley thought better of engaging the more powerful ship and her thirty guns. Instead, he sent a note to Bannister warning that he would face new charges for piracy unless he returned to Port Royal with the *Golden Fleece*. Bannister denied being a pirate, telling Stanley he was simply headed to the bay of Honduras for logwood. Helpless to do more, Stanley sailed back to Port Royal empty-handed.

Bannister wasted little time adding to his pirate crew, recruiting tough guys looking for adventure and a fast path to riches—brave men who understood, with Bannister’s new reputation, that the Royal Navy was coming, and that they would be pursued by merciless hunters charged with bringing them down. By now, Molesworth must have realized that Bannister did not intend to go gently. He sent warships to chase every report of Bannister’s plunders, but when the frigates arrived they were always too late. This continued for months as Bannister took prizes across the Caribbean and Atlantic.

In April, however, Molesworth caught a break. The *Ruby* had tracked Bannister to the Île-à-Vache, a small island off the southwestern tip of Hispaniola (now Haiti), a notorious pirate hangout, and a place once used by Henry Morgan as an operating base. But as Captain Mitchell closed in, he found not one pirate ship but five, each nearly the size of his own. The *Golden Fleece* was among them, and Bannister was in the company of four French privateers, including the infamous Michel de Grammont.

Against any one of these pirates the *Ruby* held an advantage. Against them all, she couldn’t hope to survive. So Mitchell demanded of Grammont, likely by pulling up alongside his ship and shouting, that Bannister be arrested and turned over for serving under a foreign commission. It shouldn’t have surprised him that Grammont and the other French pirates refused to give over Bannister to the *Ruby*. That kind of flouting of English authority must have rankled an accomplished navy captain like Mitchell, but he deemed it prudent “not to insist further.”

Three months later, in July 1685, Grammont helped lead a historic pirate raid on the Mexican port city of Campeche, in which a landing force of seven hundred pirates sacked the town, took prisoners, and burned the city before leaving with their plunder. It is possible, perhaps even likely, that Bannister and his crew were among those invading pirates, as he was in Grammont’s company in the months leading up to the raid. But no one knows for sure.

Later that year, the *Golden Fleece* was spotted sailing alone off the western coast of Jamaica. This time, Molesworth sent two ships after Bannister, but neither could find him. Every month, Bannister took more prizes and, with quick footwork and deft escapes, continued to blacken the eyes of Molesworth, the Royal Navy, and England. By January 1686, Molesworth seemed to be losing hope. “Captain Mitchell will receive orders . . . for the arrest of Bannister,” he wrote to an official in London, “whom he is as likely to encounter on this voyage as on any other.” Meaning he was not likely to find him at all.

Still, Molesworth continued to plan for the day, however unlikely, that he would lay his hands on Bannister. Rather than allow him to bribe another witness or go free on bond, he would bring him to trial “very suddenly,” and not at Port Royal but at a court outside the town, with a jury “more sensible of the damage we suffer by privateering than are the generality of people in Port Royal.”

By May, Molesworth might have abandoned all hope of capturing Bannister, but it was in that month that two vessels arrived at Port Royal from Dublin with a report from their captains that Bannister had plundered their cargos. That news should have hardly surprised Molesworth, but a last bit of information stood him up in his seat. Bannister, the men said, was headed to Samaná Bay to careen—a process that could take weeks and would immobilize his ship. Molesworth issued an order to two of the navy’s powerful warships, the *Falcon* and the *Drake*. Their mission: find and destroy Bannister.

At Molesworth’s order, the two frigates sailed for Samaná Bay. The *Falcon*, commanded by Captain Charles Talbot, could carry up to forty-two guns; the *Drake*, helmed by Captain Thomas Spragge, sixteen.

They arrived several days later and found Bannister and the *Golden Fleece*, along with a smaller vessel, identity unknown, “fit to go on the careen.” Here was the chance Molesworth had been waiting for. A ship on the careen, even one as strong and well commanded as the *Golden Fleece*, remained highly vulnerable to attack. The warships began to close in.

For an ordinary pirate captain, this meant the end. But Bannister had taken precautions, having ordered several of his cannons onto land in two separate batteries, hidden in trees and aimed into the bay. Whether he would attempt to use them against two Royal Navy frigates, armed with as many as fifty-eight guns and manned by superior personnel, was another matter entirely.

By surrendering now, Bannister would have hope. He would have his day in court, where he could deny being a pirate, or claim he’d been forced into it by the French, or beg Molesworth for leniency, or bribe another witness or jury. If he chose to fight now, he could never know if his crew, outmanned, outclassed, and pinned down, would follow him into battle and engage a world-class force like the Royal Navy. Far better, it would have seemed to ordinary pirates, to suffer the lashes in Port Royal than go to their dooms like that.

The warships drew closer. It was now midafternoon, and the navy captains should have seen signs of surrender. Instead, they heard the sounds of a trumpet.

Bannister’s cannons roared to life from behind the trees, and after that the muskets rang out—a barrage by the pirates that rained down on the navy ships. The frigates returned fire, maneuvering into position and trading salvos into the evening, each side pounding the other, men dying and suffering, the *Golden Fleece* and the smaller vessel alongside her being torn into by navy cannonballs and musket fire. By all rights, the battle should have lasted an hour or two. Yet the next morning, it was still going strong.

And it continued, bloody and violent, into a second day, until both the *Falcon* and the *Drake* found themselves out of gunpowder and ammunition. By this time, the pirates had killed or wounded twenty-three navy crewmen, and stood poised to kill more. Unable to mount any further offensive, the frigates sailed away—a stunning, almost unbelievable victory for the pirates.

At least for the moment.

The navy ships, Bannister knew, would return as soon as they could be rearmed and refitted. That meant he and his remaining crew needed to leave Samaná Bay in a hurry. But the *Golden Fleece* had been badly damaged and lay nearly sunk. The smaller vessel, however, must have remained seaworthy, as Bannister and most of his men seemed to have made their escape on her.

## **Users Review**

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