Joy Murphy:

Hello and welcome to the Stories We Tell podcast, a production of Collier County Museums. I am your host Joy Murphy, the curator of education, and today we are happy to welcome Thomas Lockyear, manager of the Museum of the Everglades. Welcome Thomas.

Thomas Lockyear:

Thank you.

Joy Murphy:

So down at Museum of the Everglades, you have a third Thursday talk and in September, your subject was pirates.

Thomas Lockyear:

It was the third Thursday's talk we try and choose a topic that's either a current exhibit, or maybe there's an anniversary or a holiday that it relates to. And this September, our third Thursday happened to fall on International Talk Like A Pirate Day, and I was like, well, I can't really resist that one.

Joy Murphy:

Well, and it was a wildly popular topic. Like you were at capacity, we had people still calling, wanting to come, and we couldn't really accommodate them.

Thomas Lockyear:

People love pirates.

Joy Murphy:

Yes, they do love pirates.

Thomas Lockyear:

It's continuing to be part of a popular, because I'm giving the same talk at the Naples Preserve in February. They said, "Well, can you do it again in season, come out and do it by us?" And then the Stranahan House in Fort Lauderdale actually booked me to give the pirate talk next October. So I'm booked way out at this point.

Joy Murphy:

You're popular.

Thomas Lockyear:

Pirates are popular. I don't know that it has anything to do with me.

Joy Murphy:

Well, because of that popularity, we thought we'd bring you on to our podcasts as well.

Thomas Lockyear:

See, the popularity is growing.

Joy Murphy:

So let's talk about pirates. It's a really fun topic, but also a little controversial, at least in this area, it can be a little controversial.

Thomas Lockyear:

Sure.

Joy Murphy:

So, but before we really dig into that, let's talk about what's a pirate and why are people so fascinated by them?

Thomas Lockyear:

Well, I think that if you reduce it to its most basic level, piracy are it's crimes committed at sea. Most specifically crimes committed at sea against or on another vessel. But not necessarily limited to that, but piracy has existed since the first guy built a raft and his neighbor tried to take it from him. So yeah, I mean, it's really that simple, and it has a lot of forms continues on today, but why is it so popular? Hollywood definitely did a number on the whole pirate thing. Romanticized it, but pirates were actually really popular at that time. What we call the golden age of piracy 1690 to 1730. It's weird to think of like all the pirates as we imagine them, it was only about a 40/50 year window of history. But during that time, people were writing about them and people were, pirates were writing their memoirs, and those were the best selling books of the day. And it's very much the same reason that people turn the crime channel on. They were the true crime stories of that time, and people were fascinated by that. And a lot of the accounts were very graphic, very lurid. So there was that attraction to it. And you could get away with that because, well it really happened and people need to know about it, but I think there's that aspect.

Thomas Lockyear:

But pirates, as we say, there's kind of a loose definition. And particularly during that time, there were people who were pirates and there were people who were privateers, and privateers are basically licensed pirates, but the licensed pirates, if you're licensed to attack Spanish ships by the British crown, the Spanish still consider you a pirate. But back in England, you're Robin Hood. You go back after capturing treasure from a Spanish galleon and the queen Knights you for it. So, one man's pirate, another man's privateer. So it's easy to get that whole Robin Hood thing going, romanticize the image of it, and they make great stories.

Joy Murphy:

Wow. Well, you mentioned Hollywood.

Thomas Lockyear:

Right.

Joy Murphy:

So a lot of things that we associate with pirates. The skull and crossbones, the buried treasure, even the way, shiver me timbers, and the parrots, and all of that. How much of that is reality? How much of that is Hollywood?

Thomas Lockyear:

It's an even mix. I mean, you take something like the Jolly Roger. Jolly Rogers existed. The very first pirate flags were just plain red. And a lot of people believe that the reason it's called the Jolly Roger is it's a corruption of the French Julie Rouge, which means the Beautiful Red, let's fl the Beautiful Red. There are other theories about that old Roger was the devil, but whatever it is, we know that they flew red flags, and that eventually these started to be covered with symbols. And then the black flag was eventually the standard pirate flags. Black flag with skull and crossbones, another one of the symbols that they used very often was an hourglass. These flags were meant as a message, and they were basically surrender or die.

Thomas Lockyear:

Pirates really didn't want to fight. You're talking about a day and age when even a minor sword cut could get infected and you'd die of sepsis. So if they could just terrorize people and the ship is coming up and there's a big skull and crossbones, the hour glass was you only have a limited amount of time to decide whether or not you're going to surrender, but some of them were more graphic. Black beard had one that had a pirate holding up a spear, stabbing into a heart, and there was blood dripping from it. There are a lot of different variations of the Jolly Roger and each pirate captain, a lot of them have a very unique pirate flag associated with them, but there are other things that Hollywood has done.

Thomas Lockyear:

The buried treasure, you mentioned. The likelihood that pirates were bearing treasure it's infinitesimal. I mean, these were guys that took a bunch of money when they captured a ship, and then they went into the nearest port. They bought clothes, they bought women, they bought booze, and they had no money left, and they went and attacked another ship to get some more money to do the same thing again.

Joy Murphy:

So there was really no benefit to burying treasure?

Thomas Lockyear:

No. And the other thing, one of the storylines that you always get with those pirate movies is they bury it and then they have to kill everybody that knows where it's buried, and only one guy walks away from it, and he can't sail the ship by himself. They're criminals. They're not going to keep a secret. David Cordingley, who's one of the foremost authorities on piracy in the world, he wrote this excellent book called Under the Black Flag. In his forward he really talks about, I don't understand why people are so fascinated. These were really horrible people. So yeah, the idea that they would bury treasure and come back and get it and split it up.

Thomas Lockyear:

Now, I will say that the pirate code that you hear about, they talk about it in the Pirates of the Caribbean movie, stick to the code. There was actually a pirate code and Bartholomew Roberts was one of the first pirates to create a code of conduct. And it's pretty fascinating because it assures that every pirate gets a vote. They get an even share of the treasure. Now, granted, the captain gets two shares, the first mate gets a share and a half, but at the same time, this is a day and age when the average man, if he's at sea, he's just a lowly sailor. He has absolutely no potential to become an officer, much less a captain. So on a pirate ship, everybody's equal. If they didn't like what the captain was doing, they would vote him out, and elect a new captain. So it was this tiny little democratic society floating around on the ocean, but there were other aspects, like they had insurance. Then if you lose a leg and you get X amount extra share, and that you would be cared for during this time. So it's very interesting in that way that it's a predecessor of a lot of things that we take for granted now, as part of civilized society, began on pirate ships.

Joy Murphy:

Interesting. Because when I think about pirate codes, you think about like mutiny. Things like that. I wouldn't even have thought about something like insurance.

Thomas Lockyear:

Right. Well, and again, getting back to Bartholomew Roberts' code, this is a guy that was probably the most successful pirate that ever lived in his short career, the about six years he captured over 400 ships. And the thing that was unique about him is that he did not drink. He was a teetotaler, and a lot of the rules that he created, you can see that in there that you can't drink after a certain time, if you do, it has to be here. It has to be up on the deck because they're obviously afraid these guys are going to knock their candles over and set the boat on fire. But if there was a fight, and you get a bunch of guys crammed together on a little ship, the fights are inevitable, but if there's a fight, it has to take place on land. You cannot fight each other on the boat. You have to wait until they get to land. It could be weeks before they get to land. So the idea is that these guys get in a drunken squabble, and eventually, over the two weeks when can't wait until we get to land. By the time they get there, they don't even have a fight anymore.

Joy Murphy:

Smart man.

Thomas Lockyear:

Yeah, absolutely.

Joy Murphy:

Okay. Well, let's bring it a little more local now.

Thomas Lockyear:

Okay.

Joy Murphy:

Southwest Florida.

Thomas Lockyear:

Southwest Florida, lots of pirate stories here. The pirate history of Florida is that there's some of it that's written, but it's not South Florida. I mean, the stuff that we know for sure happened, tends to be up North. St. Augustine has been attacked by pirates at least twice. Sir Francis Drake, one of those guys that captured Spanish treasure and got knighted for it, attacked the Spanish Fort at St. Augustine, in I want to say 1586. Another fellow named Robert Cyril about another a hundred years later, 1650s or something, attacked St. Augustine. My favorite pirate story happened, not right here, but over like the Sebastian inlet on the East Coast.

Thomas Lockyear:

And in 1715, there was a fleet of Spanish treasure ships that were making their way back. They were carrying all these crazy treasure items for a princess-to-be's dowery. So beautiful, beautiful jewelry, things like that, and they got caught in a hurricane and the ships wrecked along the coast, and the Spanish sent [salad 00:11:43] ships out, and they enslaved the local Indians to help them gather back all their treasurer and everything like that. So they've got this beach there, and there's basically hut guarded by like four guys that has all the treasure that they've salvaged there, because who's going to come steal it? Oh, some British privateers that sail their boats in. This fellow named Henry Jennings came in with two boatloads of privateers and stole the treasure off the beach.

Joy Murphy:

Wow.

Thomas Lockyear:

So didn't even really have to do any of the salvage work or anything like that, and I just think that that's a humorous story, but that era, the 1700s, the stories that we get. The Black Beard, Calico Jack, things like that. There are definitely a lot of stories. I mean, Black Beard, people will tell you that, "Oh yeah. Black Beard walked around and Key West. There's no question." Probably not very likely because there wasn't much there at the time. The pirates may have gone to Key West looking for fresh water, but there's no written evidence of it. There's no physical evidence of it. When we look for primary sources where people are saying, "Yes, this happened." Ships logs are a great way of telling whether it happened or not. They definitely kept a daily record of where they went and what they did. Not so much the pirates. So Black Beard may have walked on that land there, but my first museum job was actually at a pirate museum in Key West, and that was one of the greatest challenges is people saying, "So which pirates used to hang out around here," and we'd be like, "Maybe some."

Thomas Lockyear:

The stories are great, they're all over the place. When I speak about Black Beard, one of the stories associated with him was there was a pirate named Black Caesar, and Black Caesar was African American, but he was initially an African slave who escaped, and he escaped and made his way to an island and was robbing passing ships. And Elliott Key, just South of Key Biscayne, there's a place called Caesars Rock, and apparently there used to be an iron ring set into the rock. And they said, "Well, that iron ring was when he captured a ship, he'd tipped the the mast over so that passing ships couldn't see that he had a captured ship there." Other parts of the story say that, "Well, that was his ship, that he was hiding his ship that way," but whatever, there's an iron ring and people built a story around it.

Thomas Lockyear:

But Black Caesar is a character that pops up several different times. There had to be at least two of them to fit into the timeframe. So we have one in the 1700s, there was one in the 1800s. The one in the 1700 supposedly sailed with black beard, the one in the 1800s, supposedly sailed with José Gaspar and eventually left to Elliot's Key and made his way up to Sanibel Captiva, that area. But there's just not a written record. Still, we romanticize it.

Thomas Lockyear:

Speaking of romance, Lover's Key, which is just a little ways up the coast from us, people insist that it's called Lover's Key because of the famous pirate love triangle of Jack Rakim, and Anne Bonney, and Mary Reed. One of the things in the pirate code is that you can't have a woman on board, and probably another one of those things, because they'll fight over them. It'll cause that sort of conflict, but Jack Rakim did bring his girlfriend onboard, disguised as a man. And that's eventually found out and the crew is forced to accept that. And then he finds out that his girlfriend's having an affair with another crewman, who was also a woman disguised as a man. So that's the sort of love triangle, but supposedly, they honeymooned to at Lover's Key.

Joy Murphy:

Oh, okay.

Thomas Lockyear:

But again, is there a written history of it? Not that any of us have been able to find, but people will swear until their dying breath. There are a lot of municipalities that create statues and monuments to these Robin Hood characters that supposedly had a headquarters there. The Laffite brothers, Jean Laffite, all up and down the west coast of Florida down into the keys, people will say, "Well, the Laffite's had a headquarters here," and they may well have sailed over here, and operated here because they were just across the Gulf of Mexico working out of Galveston and those areas there. So it makes sense, but as far as there being graffiti that's dated that says that Jean Laffite was here, you don't find it.

Joy Murphy:

All right. So I don't know if we can say once and for all, or final, or whatever, but for Southwest Florida, there's really no record of pirates being in this area.

Thomas Lockyear:

Well, it depends on where and how we draw the line, because in 1821, the US government established what was known as the Anti-piracy Squadron in Key West. It was a branch of the US Navy, Commodore David Porter was in command of it. And you don't hear much about him, but his two sons, David Dixon Porter and David Farragut become the first two admirals in the United States Navy, so very strong tradition in that family, but the anti-piracy squadron in the Florida Keys was hunting the slave traders. So again, this is another definition of piracy, the Atlantic slave trade was outlawed long before we even considered the idea of outlawing slavery in the country. You could not import slaves, and it didn't keep people from trying to do it. And the fact that it was illegal, just like the drug running today, it makes it more lucrative. People are willing to pay more. So it was both the Americans and the British worked together in this anti-piracy squadron to wipe out the Atlantic slave trade.

Thomas Lockyear:

So piracy was going on. There are a variety of pirates that were plying the waters in the 1800s, but as far as what we consider the romantic pirate with the eye patch and the swashbuckling on the deck, golden age pirates, not really. No record of it.

Joy Murphy:

Well, you know what, I think that's an important point is that piracy isn't necessarily the stereotypes that we know pirate. I mean, there's modern day piracy, but piracy looks a variety of different ways.

Thomas Lockyear:

Absolutely.

Joy Murphy:

And so, we want to say that we might not say that there were traditional pirates, or as we think of stereotypical pirates, but that doesn't mean that piracy wasn't happening in some sort of way.

Thomas Lockyear:

Yeah. I mean, having worked at a pirate museum and that you find an illustration of a pirate and people would invariably say, "Well, that doesn't look like a pirate." We actually had one of, there are only two authenticated, Jolly Roger flags in the world, and we had one of them there, and it was much simpler than that. It just kind of had a round mouth, round eyes, and people would say, "That doesn't look like a pirate flag." And it's like, "Well, it's a real one. And it's one of only two in existence. So yes, it's a pirate flag. And therefore it looks like one."

Joy Murphy:

Okay. Now you did mention very briefly José Gaspar.

Thomas Lockyear:

Yes.

Joy Murphy:

And I do want to talk about him a little bit, because just north of us in Tampa, well, in St. Pete, is it? Well, the Tampa Bay area.

Thomas Lockyear:

Yeah.

Joy Murphy:

They have this huge festival, Gasparilla, and it's all about José Gaspar.

Thomas Lockyear:

Right.

Joy Murphy:

But not being a pirate expert myself, but I've heard on the one hand that he wasn't even a real person. The other hand I've heard he was a real person, but he wasn't a pirate. So who was this José Gaspar?

Thomas Lockyear:

Okay. So when we talk about there not being any record of pirates operating in South Florida, Southwest Florida, we do know there were pirates at that time. We find written records of them. There is absolutely zero written record of any pirate named José Gaspar until the year 1900. And in the year 1900, this elaborate story of he's the reason that Gasparilla Island, where there happened to be a hotel, was named that and where his name comes up with this elaborate story in 1900 is in a brochure for that hotel.

Joy Murphy:

Really?

Thomas Lockyear:

Yeah. And people argue back and forth, but it's a pretty fascinating story that's kind of shady in itself. That they create this whole mystique that attracts people. They've got their mascot pirate that makes people want to visit the area and stay at the hotel. And they start the festival. Now everybody's very excited about this festival. It's a popularity contest to be part of the royal court. At one point they rewrite José Gaspar as a sort of gentlemen pirate, because all the wealthier gentlemen in the Tampa area were like, "Well, I can't be dressing in rags and like some dirty guy." They want to dress in finery. So he's rewritten as a gentlemen pirate, and they get all sorts of people involved. I can't think of his first name, but I know that the last name is Lambright and he was editor of the Tampa Tribune. And in 1936, he's commissioned by the organization that puts on the festival to write a history of José Gaspar.

Thomas Lockyear:

So you've got the collaboration of the local media doing this stuff. And he's basing some of this on the fact that, well, if you look in this pirate book that was published in 1923, José Gaspar is in there. But in that book from 1923, it's a verbatim reprint of the hotel brochure from 1900. And it's one of the things that we as museum professionals, we have to be careful of with how we write history, because it immediately becomes a source that if you decide, "Well, I think that that's how this was." And you put it up on the wall in an exhibit. Somebody seemed to say that the museum of such and such says in quoted as a source and suddenly it becomes actual history. So that's how that stuff, to the best of the knowledge I have as a defacto pirate historian.

Thomas Lockyear:

I mean, it's a fascinating history and the fact that, I mean, people will fight you for it. It's people have very, very strong feelings about that. So I'm a safe distance from Tampa to be saying that, nope, sorry, there is no José Gaspar.

Thomas Lockyear:

One of the interesting things about it is that there is a great connection to this area, and right down between where Everglade City, and Marco Island are in the 10,000 islands, there's an area called Panther Key, and there was a hermit that lived out there named Juan Gomez, or John Gomez, or Pirate John, but he was a storyteller. He was a hermit who lived out, he loved to tell stories. And he was one of our first tourist attractions in the area, because yachting parties, and fishermen, and other sportsmen would come and they'd say, "Oh, you got to hear this guy's talk." And they'd visit the hermit on the Island and he would tell them stories, and his stories... If his chronology was to be correct, he was like 123 years old when he finally died, because he met Napoleon. And he had, at one point been sent by José Gaspar to kill the king, and then failed in that and then get sent back again.

Thomas Lockyear:

But he was the one that José Gaspar was the pirate that he sailed with. And so he had all these elaborate stories and he actually used to sell treasure maps to José Gaspar's treasure...

Joy Murphy:

And no one found this treasure, right?

Thomas Lockyear:

Not that they're telling. But there are different things about it because when he died, there are different versions of that. Some people say, "Well, he decided that he was old enough, and he tied a rope around his ankle, threw an anchor off his boat, and dragged himself down to the deep." Other people say that he was murdered that way. It is interesting that his story that he used to tell of José Gaspar, that's how Gaspar died. That when he thought that he was in his last battle and he was about to be captured, he wrapped himself in the anchor chain and jumped overboard. So little romantic poetic end there, but I've had local people tell me that, "Oh, absolutely. There was a treasure. And as soon as he died, the United States government came in and they stole it."

Joy Murphy:

Okay.

Thomas Lockyear:

But Juan Gomez is a great character in our local history, and I don't think that there's any coincidence that the year that Juan Gomez died was 1900. And suddenly somebody said, "Oh, we can use this story now that he's not around contradict it anymore."

Joy Murphy:

Okay. So we may get some phone calls from Tampa.

Thomas Lockyear:

Don't be giving out my email.

Joy Murphy:

Yeah. I'm going to pass them along to you. But that's interesting though. So there's possible, or it's a possibility that José Gaspar was just the story to life of Juan Gomez.

Thomas Lockyear:

Of Juan Gomez. And actually after I did the pirate talk, that's the stuff that makes people come out of the woodwork. I had somebody call me at the museum who claimed to be a descendant and was wondering what information I had about him, if I had any different photographs, there are only two known photographs of John Gomez. One of them that was sold as a picture postcard. So he was literally a tourist attraction, but this woman told me that as she grew up her great grandmother said that he made those stories, that they were his life story, and he told them in third person, because of all the crimes that he committed as a pirate. And of course, I said, "Well, why did he go off to live as a hermit?" And she didn't have a good answer for me, but I don't know maybe he that's how he mended his ways. But so there are definitely, there are people that are of that school that he did exist, and he was John or Juan Gomez.

Joy Murphy:

Maybe he had a buried treasure on that Island.

Thomas Lockyear:

Well, there are still people [crosstalk 00:27:28] out there looking. Believe me. There are definitely people still out there looking in the 10,000 islands.

Joy Murphy:

Well, this has been an eyeopening and interesting talk. Any last thoughts on pirates?

Thomas Lockyear:

Any last thoughts on pirates. I mean, everybody loves pirates. I mean, that's how you sum it up. And particularly in Florida, we have pirates as mascots, we have pirates as attractions, destinations, we have pirate dinner theater, of course Disney World has pirate stuff, but it's a fascinating thing how the worst criminals in the world are now associated with family fun and vacation. Welcome to Florida.

Joy Murphy:

I don't think anyone's ever really thought about it like that besides you. I've never heard it like that before, but that's hilarious. Well, I'll give you a moment to talk about your next third Thursday talk.

Thomas Lockyear:

Okay.

Joy Murphy:

You know what that is?

Thomas Lockyear:

Yes. The next third Thursday coming right up next week, it's entitled the Fierce People, and it's Rachel Kangas from the Florida Public Archeology Network. And she's going to be speaking about the Calusa. And right around the Everglade City area, and the next Island down is Chokoloskee is a shell mound Island that was inhabited by Calusa Indians. I mean, Marco Island is famous for the Calusa and habitation and the artifacts that are found there, but they definitely, they were very present in the 10,000 Islands Everglade City area. So she'll be talking a little bit about that.

Thomas Lockyear:

And they're a fascinating tribe, because they're the ones that killed Ponce de León. People, they literally were that fierce. They fought off the Spanish conquistadors for over a hundred years. So we've got that. December we're going to be talking about another controversial character, Deaconess Harriet Bedell . Lots of good stuff coming up. So stop and see us at Museum of the Everglades every third Thursday.

Joy Murphy:

At what time?

Thomas Lockyear:

It's at two in the afternoon. So it's a great opportunity to come to beautiful Everglade City, have some nice lunch on the water to sample some local seafood, and then after you have a delicious lunch, come to the museum and hear a talk.

Joy Murphy:

All right, and you can go to our website, colliermuseums.com and learn all about the upcoming Third Thursday Talks and other programming that we have.

Thomas Lockyear:

Yes.

Joy Murphy:

All right, well, thank you so much for your time today, Thomas.

Thomas Lockyear:

All right, thanks for having me.