



Quelch's Gold: Piracy, Greed, and Betrayal in Colonial New England

Cilford Beal

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In May 1704 an eighty-ton brigantine, the *Charles*, quietly slipped into the cove at Marblehead, Massachusetts. Her sudden and unexpected appearance, some ten months after she had left Marblehead under mysterious circumstances, started tongues wagging down at the docks and in the town's dim, cramped, seafront taverns. During the following three weeks, a drama played out involving the crew of the *Charles*; her commander, John Quelch; and the colonial governments of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire. In the hold of the *Charles* lay large quantities of Brazilian sugar, hides, cloth, guns, and gold dust and coins worth more than 10,000 sterling—a huge fortune for the time. This booty and the circumstances of the ship's voyage led to Quelch's arrest on charges of piracy and murder against the subjects of Queen Anne's newest ally, the king of Portugal. One historian called Quelch's trial, the first admiralty trial ever held outside England, "the first case of judicial murder in America." Beyond the lure of the immediate charges, what drew folks to the Quelch case were the first stirrings of American rebellion against English rule, for the mob saw the high-handed treatment of Quelch as an attack on personal liberty and freedom. Whether pirate or privateer, Quelch suffered a travesty of justice, even by the legal standards of the time. His is a dramatic and tragic story about a man caught up in a political world he no longer understands. A legend persists that before they were captured, Quelch's crew buried some of their gold on Star Island off the New Hampshire coast. Every summer to this day the island has continued to attract treasure hunters searching for Quelch's gold. *Quelch's Gold* tells the story behind the legend.

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