El Nuevo Constante is the name of a Spanish ship that wrecked near the Louisiana coast in 1766. In September of that year, a hurricane struck a fleet of Spanish merchant ships as they sailed from Mexico to Spain. One of the ships, El Nuevo Constante, nearly made it to shore before it sank in shallow water. The wreck of El Nuevo Constante lay submerged for 213 years. Then, in 1979, a shrimper caught some large copper ingots from the wreck in his nets. The ingots led to archaeological study of the shipwreck.

El Nuevo Constante carried some valuable cargo. In order to protect this cargo, the ship was armed with 22 iron cannons.
Time and Place

The wreck of El Nuevo Constante lies off the coast of Cameron Parish, Louisiana, in the Gulf of Mexico. The site is only a mile from the coast, in less than 20 feet of water. Nearby are lakes and bayous with the name “Constance,” the English form of Constante. These place names confirmed the name of the ship.

In the first week of September 1766, a hurricane blew the Spanish ship aground. It was in a group of ships that was sailing from Veracruz, Mexico, to Cadiz, Spain. El Nuevo Constante was a merchant ship that carried a load of products from Mexico. All of the people on the ship made it safely to land, but the cargo had to be rescued. The Spanish government in Louisiana began immediate salvage of the ship. This work to save and move cargo lasted for two months, but the effort was unable to recover everything from the wreck.

More than 200 years later, Curtis Blume found the ship when he caught several large ingots of copper in his shrimp nets. He and associates later dug on the wreck with a dredge. They removed ballast stones and many other artifacts. However, they soon realized the importance of the ship and contacted the state.

(Left) Some ballast stones from El Nuevo Constante. Thousands of ballast stones were often used to weigh down the bottom of a ship. Weight at the bottom helped prevent ships from tipping over during big storms.
*El Nuevo Constante* lay in Louisiana waters near the southwestern coast of Louisiana. The state developed an agreement with Mr. Blume and his associates. This contract provided for historical and archaeological study of the wreck. The archaeologists and finders worked together to record all of the wreck and its artifacts.

The lower part of *El Nuevo Constante* was nearly complete when archaeological research began in the early 1980s. Still at the site were pieces of cargo, weapons, food, and belongings of the crew or passengers. Tides had carried away parts of the ship and cargo. Mud and sand had buried the rest.

Through careful research, historians learned about the ship and the events leading to its loss. Underwater archaeologists excavated well-preserved artifacts, many of which are unique. These tell about the ship’s construction, its cargo, and life on board an 18th-century merchant vessel.

*Artifacts from the ship, like the anchor and the Mexican pottery, gave information about the ship’s fittings and cargo.*
Ship’s History

In 1764, a Spanish merchant family bought the ship for the New World trade. Before that, a British trading firm owned it and called it the *Duke of York*. Documents of March 1764 say *El Nuevo Constante* could carry 470 tons of cargo. It was 121 feet long, 30 feet wide, 19 feet deep, and had three masts. Records show the ship had four pumps and four large and two small anchors. It was armed with 18 eight-pounder and four four-pounder cannons. It also carried 36 muskets, 18 pairs of pistols, 24 war axes and ammunition. *El Nuevo Constante*, originally the *Duke of York*, probably was of British construction and carried British weapons.

The ship was one of several ships in the New Spain fleet. This was one of two main Spanish fleets that carried goods to and from the Americas. The New Spain fleet left for Spain from Veracruz, Mexico, on May 25, 1766. However, a lack of wind kept the ships from going very far. More delays put off the departure. At last, six merchant ships and a royal warship left for Spain on August 21, 1766. This was well into the dangerous hurricane season. At least 11 passengers and 60 crew members were aboard *El Nuevo Constante* when it finally left Veracruz. The ship was under the command of Don Julián Antonio de Urcullu.

*(Top right) North America, and the West Indies; a new map, wherein the British Empire and its limits, according to the definitive treaty of peace, in 1763, are accurately described, and the domain possessed by the Spaniards, the French, & other European States. The whole compiled from all the new surveys, and authentic memoirs that have hitherto appeared.*

*Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-74694268.*

*(Bottom right) Detail from map above showing the route of the New Spain fleet (called “galeons” here) from Veracruz to Havana on its way to Spain.*
On September 1, a storm scattered the fleet. The ships regrouped but spread apart again on September 4. The storm damaged six of the ships; however, all except two made it safely to harbor. One of those ships, *El Corazón de Jesús y Santa Bárbara*, wrecked somewhere off the coast of Texas. The other ship, *El Nuevo Constante*, sprang leaks and began taking on water. Afterward, the crew concluded that the pounding seas had worked the caulking out of the seams, or possibly had knocked knots from the planking.

Realizing that *El Nuevo Constante* was sinking, the officers decided to head for the nearest land. The ship struck the bottom on September 5, coming to rest in 10 feet of water and roughly 1,600 feet from shore. The force of the storm worked *El Nuevo Constante* into the muddy sea bottom.

Fortunately, no one on board died during the hurricane. Two days later, the seas calmed enough for the crew members to go to shore, where they built a temporary camp. Over the next few days, they saved as much cargo as they could from the stranded ship. The captain picked a few men to go by boat to report the wreck to the Spanish authorities. They made the journey to Balize, about 180 miles to the east, at the entrance to the Mississippi River.

Spain’s new Governor of Louisiana, Antonio de Ulloa, then sent six ships to help transport the cargo and people from *El Nuevo Constante*. The last of the ships left the camp in November 1766. It carried some cargo, as well as the captain and a few passengers and crew. Eventually, the goods arrived in Cadiz, Spain. The final value of the recovered cargo was only 11 percent of what it was originally in Veracruz.
Trade and Travel

During the colonial period, Spanish merchant ships sailed in groups as they carried goods to and from the Americas. One, known as the New Spain fleet, went between Cadiz, Spain, and Veracruz, Mexico. El Nuevo Constante was in that fleet. It began its final voyage from Spain on December 7, 1765. The main cargo was mercury, which was used in Mexico to remove silver from ore. The ship carried 1,334 boxes of mercury, and each one weighed 150 pounds. Also on board were wine, liquor, iron, nails, plow points, vinegar, and a “box of relics from the holy places in Jerusalem,” all bound for Mexico.

For the trip from Mexico, 47 individuals and the government of Spain shipped cargo on El Nuevo Constante. The ship carried almost the full range of goods exported from New Spain during this period. The cargo included cowhides, medicinal plants, ceramics, dyes, copper and silver. Archaeologists found many of these on the wreck. A shipping list is available for El Nuevo Constante’s voyage from Mexico. It notes the cargo, the person shipping it and the person receiving it in Spain. Sometimes, it describes in detail how the goods were packed.

At first, El Nuevo Constante was loaded with a large amount of precious metals. The cargo included gold and silver coins, silver bars and copper ingots. However, the gold coins, silver bars, and some of the silver coins and copper ingots were shifted to other ships between May and August. When it finally left Veracruz, El Nuevo Constante carried 22,000 pesos in silver coins for the crew’s salaries. These coins were the most valuable cargo on board. Records state that the Spanish recovered all of the silver coins after the shipwreck.

The map shows the route of the New Spain fleet and also shows part of the route of the Manila galleon, which traveled between Acapulco, Mexico, and Manila, Philippines. Some of the cargo from Asia was bound for Spain. It was carried by pack animals across Mexico and loaded on ships in Veracruz.
Register of what was being carried to Spain by the ship *El Nuevo Constante*, one of those which sailed with the fleet commanded by Don Augustín de Idiaquez.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Silver coin</td>
<td>23,750 pesos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gold coin</td>
<td>2,600 pesos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silver bar</td>
<td>79 marks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cochineal</td>
<td>425 arrobas 2 libras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigo</td>
<td>115 arrobas 21 libras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanilla beans</td>
<td>220,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cacao from Soconoso</td>
<td>97 arrobas 14 libras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cacao from Caracas</td>
<td>8 arrobas 20 libras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ipomea purga</td>
<td>2,419 arrobas 17 libras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annatto</td>
<td>217 arrobas 15 libras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balsam</td>
<td>7 arrobas 17 libras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powder of Oaxaca (snuff?)</td>
<td>2 arrobas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zebadilla</td>
<td>268 arrobas 9 libras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gifts</td>
<td>17 boxes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copper ingots</td>
<td>12,471 libras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanned hides</td>
<td>2,375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goat skins</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ceramic bowls</td>
<td>29 boxes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pictures</td>
<td>6 boxes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chocolate</td>
<td>1 box</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copal</td>
<td>5 arrobas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*English translation of original cargo list shown on right. 1 arroba= 25 pounds, 1 libra= 1 pound.*
The ship also carried flat, disk-shaped ingots of copper. In Spain, the copper would have been used to make cannons, bells and other items. At first, the ship was loaded with 2,058 ingots of copper. Then, before sailing, the 1,915 ingots for the royal treasury were moved to another ship. This left 143 ingots of copper weighing 12,471 pounds. There is no record of the Spanish retrieving these after the storm, and many were found at the wreck.

El Nuevo Constante transported a large quantity of New World plant and insect dyes. They included cochineal, annatto, indigo and dyewood. Archaeologists found pieces of all these, except cochineal.

Cochineal is a red dye made from the dried bodies of the female cochineal insects. They live only on the prickly pear cactus. The insects were both collected in the wild and grown on plantations. These insects also were native to the Old World, but the type in Mexico gave deeper and better color. People in Europe highly prized this dye. Through much of the colonial period, high-quality cochineal was one of Mexico’s most valuable export products. The Spanish salvaged some of the cochineal after the wreck, and the rest must have dissolved in the sea water.

The ship was loaded with 5,415 pounds of annatto. Annatto is an orange dye made from the seeds of a shrub. The annatto was packed in boxes and small barrels for shipment.

El Nuevo Constante also carried 2,896 pounds of indigo, which made a blue dye. The indigo on El Nuevo Constante was in pouches that each weighed 200 pounds. Archaeologists found only one small piece of indigo on the wreck.

Logwood was another source of blue dye, and also of red. The wood provides a blue color when treated with alkali and an impermanent red when treated with acid. This blue is more violet, and more likely to fade, than indigo. Logwood comes from a hard, compact tree grown in Central and South America.
El Nuevo Constante carried 1,032 short logs of logwood, weighing 40,000 pounds. The complete shipment was for the Casa de Contratación, the House of Trade. This was the Spanish government body that regulated trade with the New World.

The manifest listed 2,659 pounds of cacao (chocolate beans) on the ship. It also noted one box of processed chocolate. Impressions and molds of cacao beans are in concretions from the wreck. Also in the cargo were 253,600 vanilla beans, which were used to flavor chocolate. These vanilla beans weighed about 4,900 pounds. Because of the large amount, the vanilla beans were the second most valuable cargo item on board, next to the silver coins. The Spanish salvaged most of these after the hurricane. Archaeologists did not find any vanilla beans on the wreck.

El Nuevo Constante carried 60,520 pounds of Ipomea purga, a plant used as medicine. This was the largest amount of any cargo item. Also on board were 6,959 pounds of zebadilla, a plant from Central and South America. It had many uses in Europe. It was a laxative, an insecticide, a treatment for arthritic rheumatism, and snuff. No remains of either of these plants were found at the site of the wreck. The Spanish salvaged a small portion of them, and the rest probably decayed.

Four olive jars of balsam, which weighed a total of 192 pounds, were on El Nuevo Constante. Balsam was a tree resin used in medicines and perfumes. Copal, also a tree resin, was an ingredient of varnish and incense. One box of copal, weighing 125 pounds, was on the ship. The Spanish saved the copal, which had one-quarter of its original value when it finally reached Cadiz, Spain. Neither the Spanish nor the archaeologists recovered any of the balsam.

(Above) Logwood.

(lower right) Archaeologists did not find any actual chocolate beans in the wreck. Instead, they found the imprints of these beans in concretions, like the one to the right.
El Nuevo Constante carried ceramics made in Mexico for export. The cargo list called these Guadalajara wares. There were two boxes of ceramic gift items, 10 boxes of small bowls or pots, and seven boxes of large vases or bowls. They all may have been from the village of Tonala, near Guadalajara. People in that town had been making pottery for export since at least the early 1700s. Many of the fragile pieces of ceramics survived the wreck and more than 200 years under water.

Other cargo items were two pictures on canvas and two kimonos. The kimonos probably came from Asia on ships that traveled regularly between Mexico and the Philippines. Spanish records say that the two kimonos were recovered from the wreck, but not the two pictures. El Nuevo Constante also carried 900 pounds of gunpowder and 60 bundles of flour for troops posted in Havana, Cuba. These were not preserved on the wreck.

The ship carried four boxes of turtle shell for a merchant named Juan Antonio Gonzales Nandín. In Europe, artisans would have crafted the shell into snuff boxes, combs and other items. The Spanish rescued about half of the shipment, and archaeologists found other pieces.
Food

Historical documents said that the ship carried a cook for the crew, a first cook, a second cook, a pastry cook, a pastry cook’s boy and a bread cook. A “captain of chickens” and a butcher also were on the ship. This group of people must have been on board to prepare food for important passengers as well as the crew. Among these important passengers were Father Joseph Buenaventura Moraleda and Dr. Diego Sanchez Pareja, both of whom were prominent members of the clergy.

Archaeologists found animal bones on *El Nuevo Constante* that provided some idea of what people ate on the ship. Bones included those of cow, pig, sheep, fish, turtle and chicken. The bones of domesticated animals show that live animals were on board, as well as dried or preserved cuts of meat. Spanish ships of the period commonly carried live pigs, cows, sheep and hens on trips to and from the New World. The animals supplied fresh meat and eggs for the long trans-Atlantic voyage.

Pieces of hand grinding stones found on the wreck suggest that the ship carried corn or other grain. An olive pit found in a concretion shows that olives, familiar to Spanish sailors and citizens, were on board.

Records note that wine was a regular item on a sailor’s daily menu. Archaeologists found several fragments of wine bottles scattered throughout the ship. Some artifacts reveal how sailors stored food on the long trips to and from the New World. Broken wooden barrel fragments and pieces of iron barrel hoops came from the wreck. Divers also found more than 100 olive jar fragments. These large, ceramic, storage jars could have held olive oil, water, wine, honey, olives, beans, spices or lard.

*Goat or sheep horns and chicken bones.*

Olive jar fragments. Olive jars varied in size and shape. Unbroken, the globular form seen here would have measured nearly 10 inches across.
Underwater Archaeology

In September 1980, the archaeologists began work. A remote sensing survey was the first research on the wreck site. Its purpose was to find out all that they could about the ship before the excavation began. Archaeologists used a magnetometer, side-scan sonar and subbottom profiler. The side-scan sonar gave the most useful information. It produced a clear picture of the sea floor using sound rather than light. This image showed the ship’s outline, a cannon, and the holes where the finders used a dredge to dig at the site.

The side-scan record served as a map for planning excavations. Archaeologists marked a line down the center of the ship, and then laid 10-foot squares off this line. Spikes marked the corners of the squares. Two underwater archaeologists directed the excavation, and trained divers worked with them. They mapped and excavated what they found within these square units.

_El Nuevo Constante_ lay in about 18 feet of water. However, divers could not see the wreck because of mud. The liquid mud formed a thick soup extending 2 or 3 feet above the sea bottom. As a result, the archaeologists excavated and mapped by touch. Divers used surface-supplied air and had radio contact with the diving boat.
Mud covering the wreck had kept oxygen from reaching it. This reduced organic decay, helping preserve the ship and its contents. Oyster and barnacle growth and shipworm damage occurred only on the upper portions of the wreck, above the thick, liquid mud covering the sea floor.

After divers mapped and removed artifacts that they found by touch in each square, they used a hydraulic water lift. This piece of equipment sent a large volume of pressurized water through a pipe down to the bottom. It forced the water and bottom material through a pipe back up to the diving boat at the surface. On the boat, the material was collected in a wire basket. Archaeologists cataloged all artifacts according to their square. They left large artifacts in place until they mapped them near the end of the excavation. Excavations concluded on February 15, 1981.

Archaeologists also searched the shore for the shipwreck survivors’ camp. They found only a few historic artifacts. One of these, a small clay bowl, was identical to several from El Nuevo Constante. It appeared, however, that waves had washed it on shore. No other evidence of the survivors’ camp was found. Maps show that the shoreline in this area had eroded about 4,600 feet since 1766. It is likely that erosion destroyed the site of the camp.

*(Top)* Recording information about the wreck.

*(Bottom)* Silver disks recovered from El Nuevo Constante.