

[Page 71 - Alex Storm: Treasure Ship Chameau](#)

ISSUE : [Issue 57](#)

Published by Ronald Caplan on 1991/6/1

eighteenth-century ship and its ill-fated voyage. Letters to the Marine Museum in Paris and the National Archives in Ottawa turned up the necessary information. The Chameau had been built in 1717 at Rochefort from plans drawn by Blaise Ollivier. A young naval architect, Ollivier had just completed a five-month tour of shipyards in England and Holland, studying local shipbuilding techniques. After returning to France, he designed an improved version of the naval transport, known as a flute. Combining French construction principles with those he had observed in the yards along the Thames and the Zuiderzee, Ollivier modified the ship's lines and redistributed shipboard batteries, making for a faster vessel with increased cargo capacity. A product of this new design, the Chameau was launched with a keel of 135 feet, a width of 31 feet, and a draft of 15 feet. Heavily armed, the ship displaced 650 tons, carried twenty 12-pounder cannons along the lower gun deck and two more in the stern. Twenty-two 6-pounders mounted on the upper deck completed a complement of 44 cannons. Flutes were cargo vessels built primarily for the transportation of merchandise. Due to the threat of war, however, large flutes like the Chameau were fitted to carry extra artillery so they could travel the seas without naval escort. In fact the Chameau often served as an escort for other vessels. The Chameau was only one of a number of storeships such as the Elephant, the Paon, the Dromedaire, and the Nereide which had maintained the vital sea link between France and New France. For six years, from 1719 to 1725, the Chameau ferried cargoes from Rochefort to Quebec consisting of passengers, munitions, foodstuffs and, most critical, funds for annual budgets. Return trips to Rochefort were made with fewer passengers, but the ship was usually loaded to capacity with oak timber, wood for masts, wood tar, and beaver pelts. The Chameau's sailing orders for 1725 were contained in a memorandum of the king dated 15 May.... Shortly before the Chameau's departure, the treasurer placed 176,000 livres in gold, silver, and copper coins aboard the ship. Sailing out of La Rochelle in July 1725, the ship's commander, Jean de Saint James, doubtless felt a sense of responsibility for the ship, its precious cargo, and the 316 souls aboard. Perhaps the most important person aboard, in the captain's eyes, was his pilot, Mr. Chaviteau. An experienced navigator, Chaviteau was familiar with the passage up the St. Lawrence River, having made the voyage on numerous occasions. One of the foremost navigational difficulties in the first half of the 18th century was the determination of longitude at sea. In spite of numerous attempts, there was still no solution to this problem. Ships simply sailed as best they could along meridians of latitude until land was sighted. The meridian of latitude situated between Rochefort and La Rochelle, 46 degrees North, runs across the Atlantic and