

# Pearl Authority Calls Columbus-Era Pearl Collection 'A Landmark in America's History'

*Scientific studies date sampled pearls to 1455–1615 AD, revealing a forgotten chapter of America's early history as the nation nears its 250th anniversary.*

MIAMI, FL, UNITED STATES, June 24, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- As America prepares to commemorate its 250th anniversary, Antoinette Matlins, award-winning gemologist, author of *The Pearl Book*, and a leading authority on natural pearls, has described a collection of [natural saltwater pearls](#) linked to the early [Caribbean pearl trade](#) as "one of the most exciting historical discoveries ever made regarding America's early history and development."

After examining hundreds of pearls from the collection, Matlins concluded that they are historical American natural pearls from Caribbean waters dating to the time of Christopher Columbus, with some likely predating European arrival in the Americas. In her assessment, Matlins wrote that the discovery reflects the fierce competition among European powers seeking control of what was then one of the world's most valuable sources of natural pearls.

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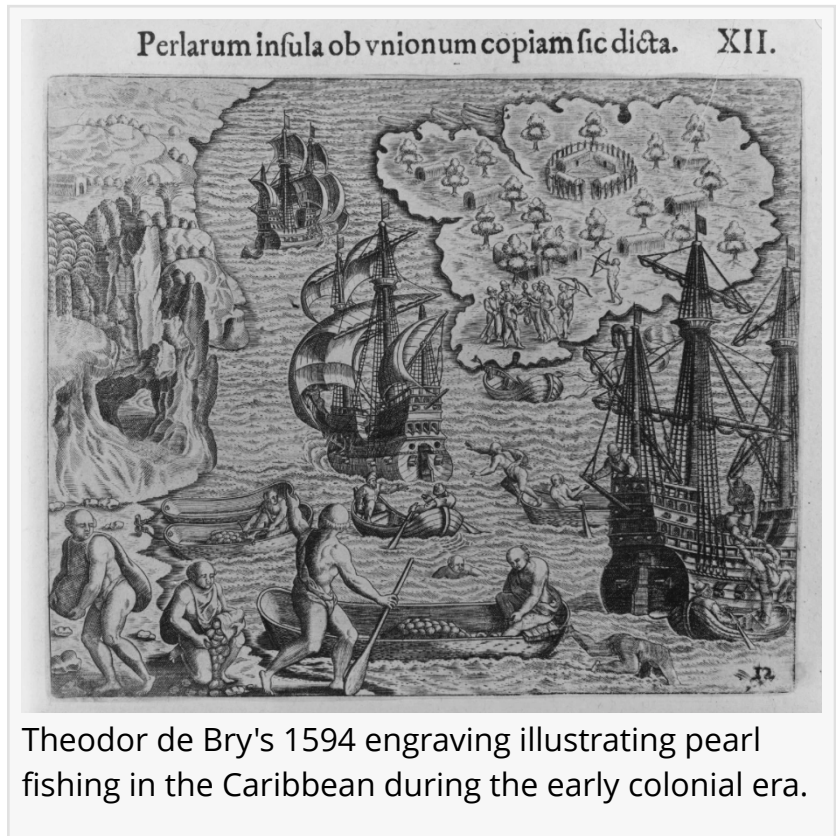
Before gold and silver transformed the Americas, pearls helped finance empire, drive exploration, and reshape lives across the Atlantic world.”

*The Columbus Pearls Project*

“There is no doubt in my mind that these pearls date to the time of Columbus and originated from Caribbean waters.”

Her observations form part of [the Columbus Pearls Codex](#), a documentary and research project examining the sixteenth-century Caribbean pearl trade and its role in shaping the Atlantic world.

At the center of the story lies Cubagua, a small island off



Theodor de Bry's 1594 engraving illustrating pearl fishing in the Caribbean during the early colonial era.

the coast of present-day Venezuela. Despite lacking rivers, forests, or permanent sources of fresh water, the waters surrounding Cubagua contained some of the richest natural pearl oyster beds encountered by Europeans in the Americas. During his third voyage in 1498, Christopher Columbus reported the extraordinary abundance of pearls found along the nearby Pearl Coast. Before gold and silver from Mexico and Peru transformed the colonial economy, pearls were among the most valuable commodities flowing from the Americas to Europe. Their extraction generated enormous wealth while contributing to environmental depletion and the destruction of Indigenous communities forced into labor. Modern scholars have identified the collapse of these oyster beds as one of the earliest documented examples of colonial resource exhaustion in the Americas.

"America's 250th anniversary is a celebration of what was built. The Columbus Pearls Codex is the story of what made the building possible."

— The Columbus Pearls Project

Among the figures connected to this history is Juan Ponce de León. During the formative years of pearl exploitation, he witnessed firsthand the wealth flowing from Cubagua and the neighboring Pearl Coast. After losing political favor and being replaced by Diego Colón, the son of Christopher Columbus, Ponce de León sought new opportunities to the north. In 1513, while leading the expedition that reached Florida, he charted the Gulf Stream, helping identify the ocean corridor that would become a principal route linking the Americas and Europe.

The pearl trade reveals the evolution of labor systems that later spread throughout the Atlantic world. Indigenous divers were first compelled to supply labor. As local populations declined, Spanish authorities transported skilled Lucayan divers from the Bahamas. When that source was exhausted, enslaved Africans from the Senegambia region, renowned for their excellent diving abilities, were brought to work the pearl beds beginning in 1526. The progression illustrates how demand for pearls drove successive waves of displacement, forced migration, and human exploitation.

The pearl beds also figured in some of the earliest moral debates of the colonial era. Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas witnessed conditions among the divers and left vivid descriptions of their suffering. His advocacy contributed to the New Laws of 1542 and helped shape the Valladolid Debate of 1550, one of the first formal public examinations of the morality of European imperial expansion.

In 2017, scientific examination of the collection involved multiple independent institutions. Portions were studied by DANAT, the Bahrain Institute for Pearls and Gemstones, under the supervision of Dr. Kenneth Scarratt. A separate study involving another sample was conducted by the Gemological Institute of America in collaboration with researchers from the University of Arizona, the University of Tokyo, and Gübelin Gem Lab. Published in the Fall 2017 edition of *Gems & Gemology*, the research included radiocarbon dating that placed the sampled pearls between approximately 1455 and 1615 AD.

## About The Columbus Pearls Codex

The Columbus Pearls Codex is a documentary and research project exploring the sixteenth-century Caribbean pearl trade and its role in the development of the Atlantic world through primary sources, archaeological evidence, scientific research, and documentary storytelling. Additional information is available at [www.thecolumbuspearls.com](http://www.thecolumbuspearls.com).

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