

Context:

Vancouver and the Galiano and Valdes expeditions' exploration of the BC coast in 1792.

Citation:

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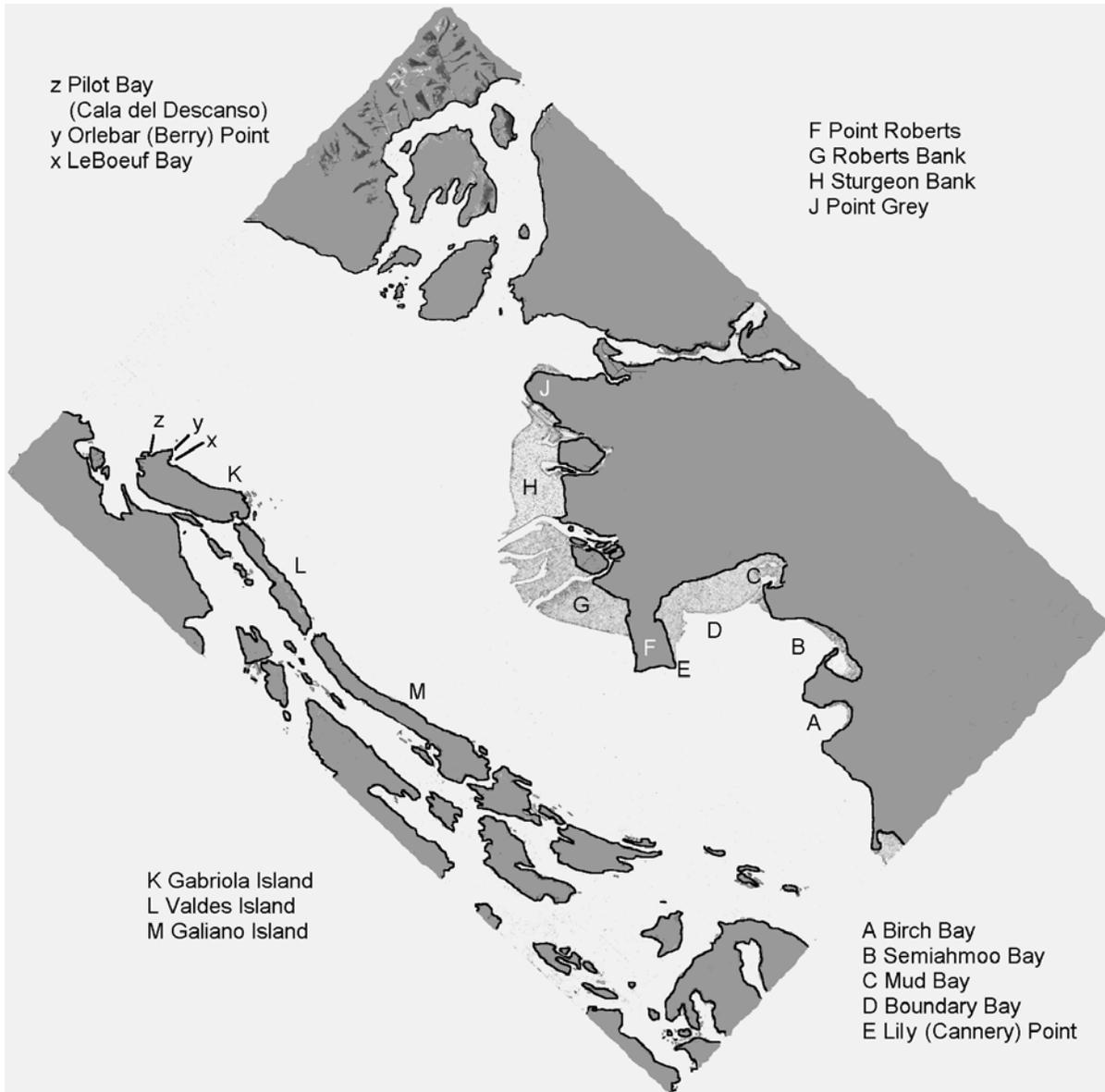
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Errors and omissions:

In the last sentence, I suggest a visit to the “submarine” rock by kayak. This turned out later to be a bad idea. The rock is home to many seabirds and mammals and should be treated as a nature reserve with minimal disturbance.

Date posted:

August 13, 2011.



A modern chart of the Strait of Georgia between the lower mainland on the right and the Gulf Islands on the left. Until the 1850s, the outer coasts of the islands were thought to be the east coast of Vancouver Island.

George Vancouver visits Gabriola

—being a true and accurate account of the events
presumed to have occurred
on the night of Monday the 11th of June, 1792,
compiled from official and other authentic sources

by Nick Doe

Most readers probably know that the Spanish explorers Don Alcalá Galiano and Don Cayetano Valdés visited Gabriola Island in 1792, but not everyone may be aware that Captain George Vancouver of the British Royal Navy (Rule Britannia!) did so too. The records are not very explicit as to what he did here, but it would be fair to surmise that having arrived late at night, he had a pee and a bite to eat, and then tried to get some sleep. He left at dawn the next morning, way before the Chamber of Commerce could swing into action. So, OK...maybe there wasn't a whole lot to it, but this is a small island not given to making headline news, and we have to make do with what little known, and little-known, history we've got.

Monday, June 11, 1792, was a busy day for Captain Vancouver. He actually thought it was Tuesday because he didn't know that in later years people were going to invent an International Dateline, but we'll leave that aside. The events of that day, whichever one it was, are well described in his book,¹ and several books based on his book,² and we also have the journals of those who

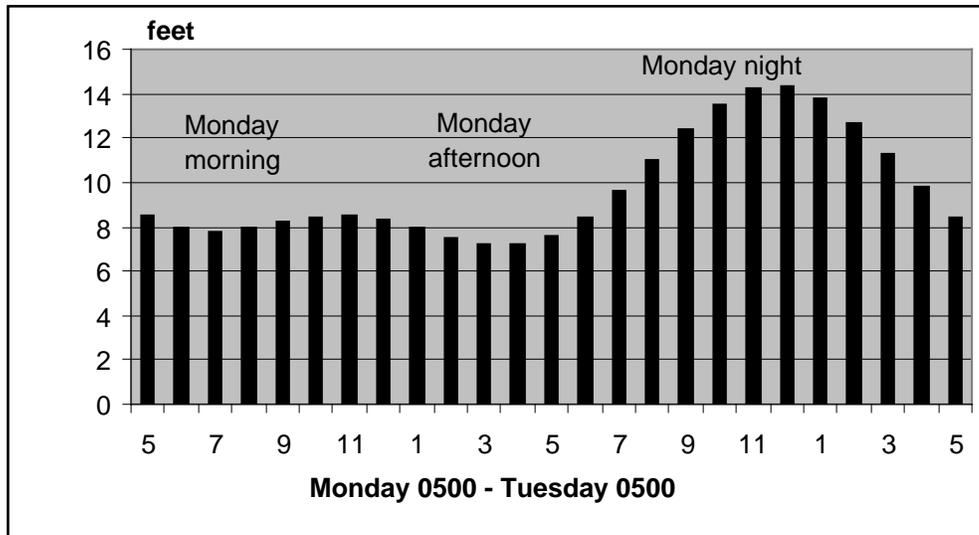
sailed with him, mostly still in manuscript form.³

Anyway, here we are down in Birch Bay, just south of the US border (not yet invented of course), where the two ships *Discovery* and *Chatham* are at anchor. It's five o'clock in the morning. A fine day. There is a slight threat of "rain from a strong southerly wind" (Puget), but this will later "totally subside". The expedition's botanist, Archibald Menzies, whose surname is pronounced by the Scots, "Ming-is", is up and about. He writes—apparently without word-count restrictions—that "the Blacksmiths, Brewers, & Carpenters were also on shore employed in their different occupations as the weather continued serene mild & pleasant & exceeding favourable for prosecuting every pursuit both on board & on shore". He wanders through the woods where he finds "white & trembling Poplars

¹ W. Kaye Lamb (ed.), *The Voyage of George Vancouver, 1791–5*, Hakluyt Edition, 1984.

² The ones on my desk at the moment are: John M. Naish, *The Interwoven Lives of George Vancouver, Archibald Menzies, Joseph Whidbey, and Peter Puget*, Edwin Mellen Press, 1996; Tomás Bartroli, *Genesis of Vancouver City*, np, 1997; and John E. Roberts, *A Discovery Journal*, Trafford, 2005.

³ The relevant ones are: Peter Puget: PRO Adm 55/27 (official log), BL Add. MS 17542–44 (rough log), BL Add. MS 17545 (notes), extracts from the official log are contained in W.K.Lamb, *The Voyage...*, op.cit., and Bern Anderson, *The Vancouver Expedition...*, Pacific Northwest Quarterly, XXX, 2, pp.177–217, April 1939; extracts from the rough log are in W.K. Lamb, *Vancouver Discovers Vancouver*, SFU, 1992; Thomas Manby: extracts are in *Journal of the Voyages of the H.M.S. Discovery and Chatham*, Ye Galleon Press, 1992; and Archibald Menzies: extracts are in C.F. Newcombe (ed.), *Menzies' Journal of Vancouver's Voyage—April–October 1792*, Victoria, 1923.



The tide at the mouth of the Fraser on Monday, June 11, 1792, was very flat (the moon was three-quarters full). Only at 5 o'clock in the evening did it begin to flood. By midnight, the tide was high.

and black Birch [*Betula occidentalis*]. Hence of course the name, Birch Bay.

Captain Vancouver meanwhile has set out on a small-boat expedition to the north in the *Discovery's* yawl and launch, accompanied by his junior officers, 2nd Lieutenant Peter Puget (aged 26), Master's Mate Thomas Manby (22), and two Midshipmen, George McKenzie (16) and John Stewart (17). A "yawl", for the benefit of everyone but people like Digby Jones, has one main mast and a smaller mizzen mast aft that carries a sail extending well out over the stern. Most other people on the Vancouver expedition just called it a "pinnacle".⁴

The little flotilla of two rounded Birch Point and proceeded to reconnoitre Semiahmoo Bay, finding "large quantities of tolerable flavoured strawberries and an abundance of wild onions" (Puget). They tried unsuccessfully to get into Mud Bay—it was

⁴ From the French *pinasse*, a ship's boat that could be rowed or sailed. The yawl would have been about 24 feet long, while the size of the "launch" was probably around 18 feet.

"quite shoal". And they rowed along the shores of Boundary Bay. They stopped for lunch at noon at Lily Point, which is at the south-east tip of Point Roberts. This beautiful place with a splendid view across the bay to the snows of the Cascade Mountains was the site of a large abandoned Indian village—Puget describes it in some detail.⁵ One senses that it was an enjoyable lunch—Thomas Manby comments in his journal that "it was a plan with us never to repine at our lot. Our fare, tho' often times scanty and coarse, was always received with contentment and jollity".

Suitably refreshed and replenished, the yawl and the launch and their crews moved on to the south-west tip of Point Roberts (Lighthouse Point), and then turned north toward the estuary of the "river of rivers", the *Stó:lō*; later to be known to Canada's

⁵ In 1891, the site became Wadhams Cannery, later purchased by the Alaska Packers Association (APA). The cannery closed in 1917. The village had likely lost most or all of its population to smallpox in the early 1780s.

great mapmaker, David Thompson, as [Simon] Fraser's River; and known to the Spanish as the *Río de Floridablanca*— a name Vancouver disapprovingly, disdainfully, and mistakenly records as "Rio Blanco".

All afternoon long, the boats traced out the edge of the massive alluvial sandbanks that stretch for twenty-two miles between Point Roberts and Point Grey. Ten fathoms—one fathom—sixteen fathoms—ten fathoms. Deeper and shallower. Vancouver, by "standing along its edge", was striking a delicate balance between the instructions requiring him:⁶

to acquire accurate information about any navigable route between the coast and the country on the opposite side of the continent [a north-west passage to Montréal];

and

to avoid unnecessary loss of time by pursuing inlets or rivers not suitable for sea-going vessels.

The tide that afternoon was unusually flat—neither high nor low—making it difficult for the expedition to spot the main channels of the river "which could only be navigable by canoes" (Vancouver). They were to have a much better view of the "swampy flat, very much inundated, with logs of wood and stumps of trees innumerable" the next day. "The land abreast to the eastward is low and about three leagues distant", writes Puget.⁷ "Two places in that direction bear much the

⁶ These paragraphs are summaries. See W.K. Lamb (ed.), *The Voyage...op.cit.* pp.283–4 or Bern Anderson, *Surveyor of the Sea...*, University of Washington, pp.234–9, 1960.

⁷ Three leagues is nine nautical miles, and Vancouver says similarly the shoal extended "seven or eight [nautical] miles from the shore". These numbers are about twice the width of the banks as shown on current charts. Curious.

appearance of large rivers, but the shoals hitherto have prevented any communication with them."⁸

Around six o'clock in the evening, the tide began to flood, and there was clearly a danger of them being swept northeastward onto the sandbank. "As the tide was now against us, it was thought best to keep to the western shore [of the Gulf] though farthest off for the stream was here so exceeding strong over the shoal that the boats could hardly stem it." (Puget). "The shoal having forced us into the middle of the Gulf, we stood over to its western side [the Gulf Islands], in order to land for the night" (Vancouver).

So it was that the two boats reached Gabriola Island late that night. Given the usual wordiness of 18th-century documents, we have to admit that the records of their stay are sparse. Vancouver himself says:

As we stood to the westward, our depth soon increased to 15 fathoms, after which we gained no bottom until we reached the western shore of the gulf, where, on our arrival about one o'clock in the morning, it was with much difficulty we were enabled to land on the steep rugged rocks that compose the coast, for the purpose of cooking only, and were compelled, by this unfavorable circumstance, to remain and sleep in the boats. At five in the morning...[we returned to Point Grey on the mainland side, reaching there at noon].

Puget is just as brief:⁹

⁸ I once had the experience of being out on the banks with a friend in a double-kayak on a slowly falling tide on a quiet overcast day and at one point I had to get out of the boat and tow it, the water was becoming so shallow. For miles, in every direction, there was nothing but mirror-smooth water dotted here and there by ocean-going freighters, yet, here I was, walking home with water barely up to my knees.

At ½ past 11 at night necessity obliged us after this laborious row to bring to {a grapnel} by the side of {a} barren and exposed rock, on which it was difficult to kindle a fire [to cook meals for the next day]. We here slept in the boats, as sufficient space could not be found even for the tents. The night was fine and temperate. {This disappointment was much regretted as} the people {had been incessantly} on their oars ten hours and an half from the last low point [Point Roberts]. We quitted our quarters early....

Manby was so unimpressed with Gabriola that he says nothing at all. Just at the point

in his journal where he would have commented on the visit to Gabriola, he makes the general comment:

The nocturnal breezes blowing over their frigid heights [the distant mountains around the Gulf] gave us many uncomfortable nights, as in hours of rest the side next to the fire would be roasting while its opposite would freeze.¹⁰

“Uncomfortable” seems to be the general theme here. Sorry about that Thomas.

Right. The northeast coast of Gabriola looking south from Berry (Orlebar) Point toward the north point of LeBoeuf Bay.

If Alcalá Galiano and George Vancouver swapped stories about their visits to Gabriola—we’ll never know if they did, but they had opportunities to do so—they would have contrasted Vancouver’s “cove of discomfort” (*Cala del Incomodidad*) to Galiano’s “cove of rest” (*Cala del Descanso*), just round the corner at the entrance to Pilot Bay.

Cliffs also run from the east end of Whalebone Beach to Law Point, but there are none on the northeast coast of Valdes Island.



⁹ The words in {} are in the field notes, British Library Add. MS 17545, but not in the official log.

¹⁰ Thomas Manby, *Journal...*, op.cit., p.172.

Now at this point, we have to address the question as to where exactly the party overnighted. Scholarly opinion is divided as to whether it was on Gabriola or on Valdes Island. Unfortunately, there is no Valdes Historical Society to debate this with, but even if there were, I'm sure we'd have little difficulty in dispassionately demolishing any weak case that they might be able to muster.

The best evidence for a Gabriola landing is provided by a collaboration between the two men in the world most likely to know—Joseph Baker, on whom Vancouver depended heavily for compiling his charts, and Alcalá Galiano, who charted our side of the strait, which the British never surveyed. There was no doubt in these gentlemen's minds that the Vancouver boat expedition had overnighted on Gabriola, just take a look at the charts on the next page. And that's the end of it.

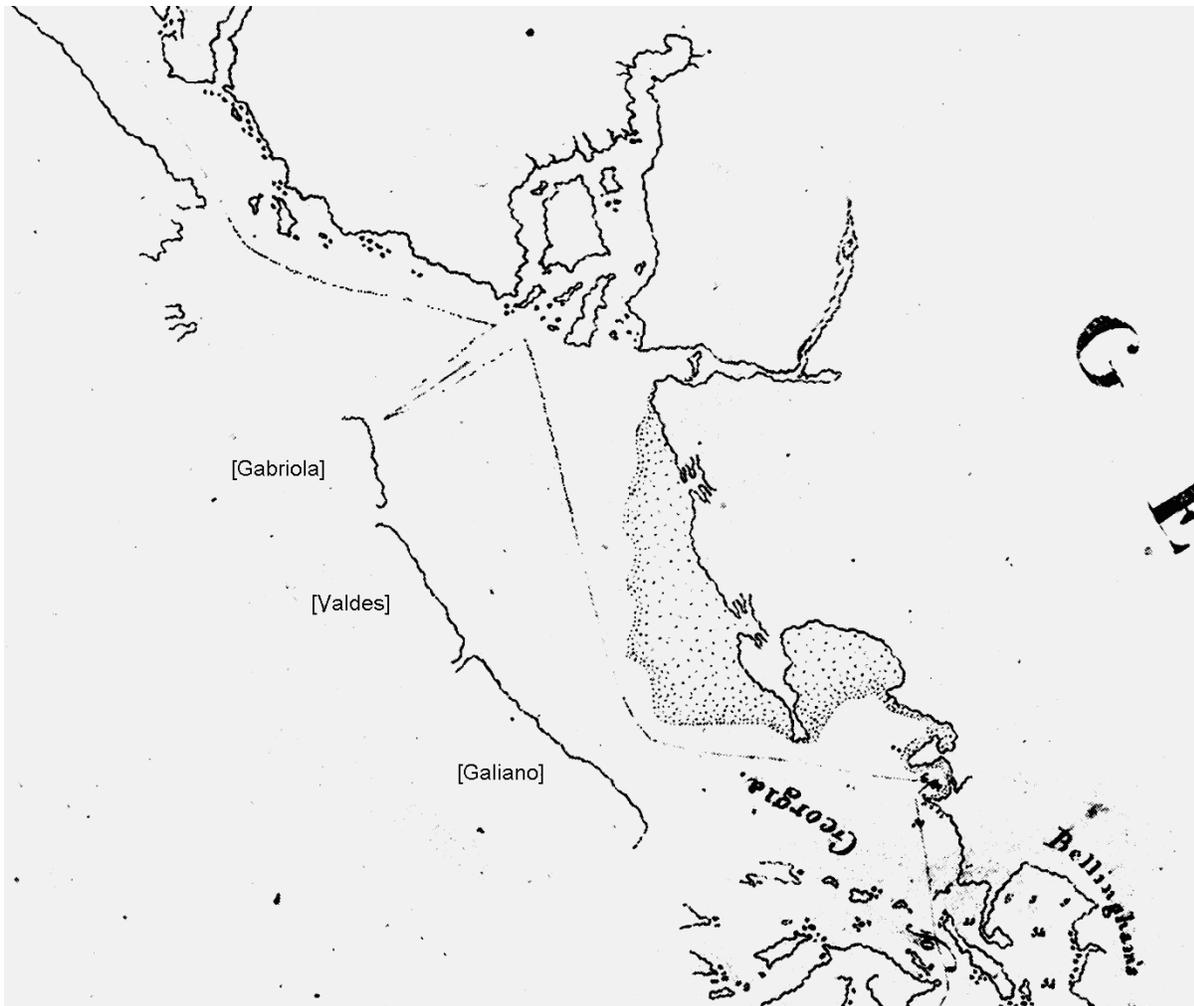
Except...Puget's rough notes say that they tied up to "a barren and exposed rock" [singular] with no room for the tent. Could it be that they were at the rock, seen below looking toward the distant Flat Tops, a couple of hundred metres offshore, about halfway between Berry Point and LeBoeuf Bay? This rock, known locally as "Submarine Island", is always above high tide; Galiano pointedly noted it on one of his charts; and a fire would have given a rosy tinge to the sandstone. Hmm...Anyone up to a little kayak trip? ◇



Charting problems

In the late-18th century, it was sometimes difficult to reconcile locations determined by survey (compass, sextant, distance measurement) and locations determined by astronomical observation (latitudes and longitudes). Relying on dead reckoning to determine latitudes and longitudes was prone to random error if carried on too far.

Conversely, choosing to make the coasts conform to incorrect latitudes and longitudes distorted the charts, making it look as if the surveyors couldn't read a compass, which was absolutely not the case. The trend of the axis of Vancouver Island in a Spanish chart dated 1791, for example, was rotated counterclockwise, but as Galiano quickly realized in 1792, this was because the chart had been scaled to conform to an incorrect longitude for Neah Bay (*Nuñez Gaona*) relative to Nootka (Wagner, *Spanish Explorations...*, p.236). Galiano attributed this to dead-reckoning errors, but in fact the error was the result of incorrect scaling of the field observations by the cartographers. The British fared rather better because they had the resources to make hundreds of astronomical observations, with the result that their measurements, once averaged, were for the most part free of the random type of error that could distort a coastline. However, the averaging did not eliminate systematic errors, and as a result of one of these, the British charts showed the whole coastline shifted 15 nautical miles to the east. This particular error was the result of inaccurate tables in the British Nautical Almanac. Galiano, who was a very talented navigator-surveyor, was aware of the problems with the tables, but when he told Vancouver about them at Nootka in 1792 (Kendrick, *The Voyage...*, p.215), Vancouver found the idea of them being inexact "strange". He consequently never acted on, what for him would have been unnerving information, nor did he report it, and tables in the British Nautical Almanac continued to be published uncorrected until *circa* 1820.



This interesting sketchmap of the Strait of Georgia is an extract from a preliminary chart that Captain Vancouver sent back from Nootka to England via China with Zachary Mudge in a small trading vessel in September 1792. The Gulf Islands were drawn by Charles Baker using information that could only have been supplied by Alcalá Galiano. The chart was revised before publication. There's a full copy in Derek Hayes, *Historical Atlas of British Columbia and the Pacific Northwest*, Map 141A, Cavendish Books, 1999.

The important thing to note in this draft is the lightly pencilled track from the entrance to Howe Sound across the strait to Gabriola Island. The track cannot be taken as an accurate representation of the course of the boats on the evening of June 11—there was a flood tide running northward and it was getting dark—but Baker and Galiano, who also visited Gabriola, were clearly of the opinion that the Vancouver boat expedition had overnighted close to the north-east point of Gabriola, Orlebar Point, known locally as Berry Point.

The Submarine-Island-theory fans will of course note that Baker's track doesn't actually touch Gabriola's main shore. In another chart (unpublished), Galiano clearly identifies the otherwise inconsequential exposed rock exactly at this location, a couple of hundred metres offshore.

PRO MPG557 (4) from dispatches received by the Colonial Office 5/187

