

Context:

Gabriola, name

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Research notes

This section of *SHALE* provides an opportunity for contributors to present the partial results of ongoing research, publish less-than-normal-length articles, and provide “interesting facts”.

Seagull Island? —by Nick Doe

Something that continues to puzzle me is the origin of the island’s name, “Gabriola”. That it derives from the Spanish “Gaviola”, which because the Spanish “v” is pronounced like a “b” is the same as “Gabiola”, there is no doubt. But what or who was Gaviola?

The conventional wisdom is that Gaviola, which first appears as *Punta de Gaviola* on a 1791 chart, is a misprint for “Gaviota”, which means “seagull”. I don’t buy that for one moment. Firstly, why only one seagull? Shouldn’t the Flat Top Islands, perceived as a point by the 1791 expedition, have been called *Punta de Gaviotas*, or perhaps *Punta de las Gaviotas*, with “Gaviota” plural? We have after all, named also in 1791:

- *Isla de Patos*, “Island of Ducks”, now Patos Island
- *Islas de Ballenas*, “Islands of Whales”, now the Ballenas Islands; and
- *Río de las Grullas*, “River of the Cranes”, now Englishman River.¹

Mind you, there is a precedent for a geographic feature being named after a single seagull. Santa Barbara County, California has a “Gaviota Peak” and a “Gaviota Beach Park”. There is also a “Gaviota Canyon” and the story goes that, in the 1760s, some Spanish soldiers shot a seagull for fun during a lunch break near an

¹ Probably great blue herons although sandhill cranes used to be common summer transients.

old Indian village. The nickname for the place subsequently became Gaviota. The village has long since gone, but the name survived in the name of a near-by canyon.

There is a second, but rarely used, meaning of the word “Gaviota”.² It is an old nautical term for the topsails of a schooner, and it is plural. I can almost accept the idea that this is the true meaning of “Gaviota”, and that the name is a reference to the Flat Top Islands as the “topsails” of the “schooner” Gabriola Island. Almost? Well yes, you still have to accept that *Gaviola* is a spelling mistake. I don’t because Galiano and Valdés didn’t. They used the name *Punta de Gaviola (Gabiola)* in their journal and on their charts without a hint that they or their editors thought the name was wrong.

So what then? My hunch is that *Gaviola* is a family name. It is not common, but a search of the genealogical pages on the Internet shows that there were families with that name³ in the 18th century in the province of Vizcaya, which is in the Basque Country. There is even a villa with the name in the province of Guipúzcoa. All we need do is find a VIP or high-ranking 18th-century Spanish naval officer called Gaviola.

Several people have tried hard to do this, and some like myself are still trying, but so far...*nada*. ◇

² *Velazquez Spanish & English Dictionary*

³ The family name “Gaviola” means *ferrería de martinetes*, “place where there are ironworks for making small hammers”. *Diccionario Onomástico y Heraldico Vasco*.