

Context:

Spanish exploration, 1792

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Errors and omissions:

There is a serious and careless error in this paper concerning Figure 4. This is Bellingham Bay, not Boundary Bay. I am grateful to Tim Wahl for pointing this out to me (e-mail August 5, 2004).

Later references:

None.

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Fraudulent Bay

Spanish Explorations of Boundary Bay

by Nick Doe

ONCE lived in White Rock, in a house on the hillside overlooking the sea, and it was here that I first developed an interest in local history. Perhaps unlike most, I can pinpoint the time this happened very precisely; it was the afternoon of Saturday, 29 July 1989. That day, the local newspaper, *The Peace Arch News*, published an article by local writer and historian Bill Hastings.

Bill's article was about the Spanish explorations of Boundary Bay and was based on the work of Major J.S. Mathews, Vancouver's one-time "crusty but loveable archivist" (as Bill put it). The article included a brief description of the "Narvaez Chart of 1791", which is the first chart ever made of the Strait of Georgia. The chart is well known among local historians, and much has been written about it over the years, but I didn't know that at the time. What particularly caught my eye that Saturday afternoon was the annotation *Boca de Florida Blanca* (see Figure 1). This, Bill explained, was the Spanish name for the estuary of the Fraser River.

Now I didn't know much Spanish then, still don't, but I knew enough to know that, loosely translated, the annotation meant "inlet of white floweriness". Being interested in the natural history of the Fraser delta, I spent the next week walking the dykes, searching in libraries, quizzing local naturalists, trying to figure out what white flowers could possibly have impressed the Spanish so.

Had we had the Internet then, the mystery wouldn't have lasted long; and maybe I never would have become interested in historical puzzles; and maybe I would never have been writing this; but I didn't have the Internet then, so it wasn't until I looked up "Floridablanca" in the Encyclopedia that the mystery was solved. By then, I was, as the former editor of *BC Historical News* would say, a "local history buff".

It turns out, as most historians know, that "Floridablanca" was just an aristocratic title—nothing at all to do with the local flora. José Moñino, conde de Floridablanca, was prime minister in Spain from 1776 until he was summarily

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Left: Figure 1 —The Narvaez Chart annotated by Major J.S. Mathews showing Boundary Bay and the lower BC mainland. The "Semiahmoo Indian Village" is at the site of present-day White Rock. Points Roberts and Grey were perceived as islands.

Right:
Figure 2
A small segment of Galiano's copy of the Narvaez chart in his book of sketchmaps. Point Roberts (Y [Isla] Cepeda) is on the left shown as an island. The small dark rectangular "blob" to the right of the "d" in Cepeda indicates a major Indian village, almost certainly the ruined one at Lily Point.

¹ For those who love "interesting facts", Narváez was only 23 years old at the time. We have his chart, but not his journal.

² It was Puget incidentally who makes reference in his unpublished log to a "white bluff" while in Semiahmoo Bay, a reference some have taken as referring to "the hump" at White Rock. As for White Rockers, Puget's accompanying compass reading makes it plain that he was in fact referring to the cliffs at Point Roberts.

³ In Morag Maclachlan's editorial introduction to *The Fort Langley Journals, 1827-30*, p. 12, a further voyage by the HBC in 1826 is mentioned. After researching the whereabouts of McKenzie and of the vessels available to him for such a trip, I'm inclined to believe there was no such voyage, and that McLoughlin's "last fall" was a slip of the pen; he meant 1825.

⁴ Later the Alaska Packers Association Cannery. See *Point Roberts, USA: The History of a Canadian Enclave*, by Richard E. Clark.

⁵ Deserted villages were common after smallpox had killed an estimated two-thirds of the population in 1782-1783. Which peoples lived year-round on Point Roberts before European contact is not known for certain. The historical evidence is that the

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dismissed in February 1792, in part because of his intransigent opposition to the French Revolution. Most Spanish placenames were in fact, like Captain Vancouver's, the names of important people—saints, politicians, aristocrats, viceroys, naval bureaucrats, people like that—but there are a few examples of names that are descriptive—the Ballenas Islands (islands of whales); Patos Island (island of ducks); and *Rio de las Grullas* (river of cranes, now Englishman River). Although my immediate puzzlement over the name *Florida Blanca* had been resolved, there is, as it happens, a further puzzle with the name, but that required rather more than a week to resolve and I'll come back to it later.

Boundary Bay was visited several times by European explorers before settlement in the area, which began with the establishment of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) trading post at Fort Langley in the summer of 1827. The explorers who have left records of their visits include José Narváez, who came with the Eliza expedition of 1791;¹ Dionisio Alcalá Galiano who, along with Cayetano Valdés, circumnavigated Vancouver Island in the *Sutil* and *Mexicana* in 1792; Peter Puget who was with Captain Vancouver's expedition, also in 1792;² Francis Annance (of Annacis Island) and John Work, who were clerks on the HBC canoe expedition to the Fraser River in the winter of 1824; and furtrader Alexander McKenzie and ship's surgeon and amateur botanist Dr. John Scouler, who were aboard the HBC brig *William & Ann* when it visited Point Roberts in 1825.³

The Aboriginal people who lived around and frequented Boundary Bay for the most part spoke one of two languages, both with several dialects. The first is called nowadays Straits Salish, and the second Halq'eméylem. These languages are two of the five spoken by people belonging to the fairly loose cultural and linguistic grouping called Coast Salish. The year-round inhabitants of

Boundary Bay were the Semiahmoo, with villages at the mouth of the little Campbell River, Drayton Harbor, Birch Bay, and probably others elsewhere. They spoke Straits Salish. The immediate neighbours of the Semiahmoo to the south, were their Straits-Salish-speaking relatives, the

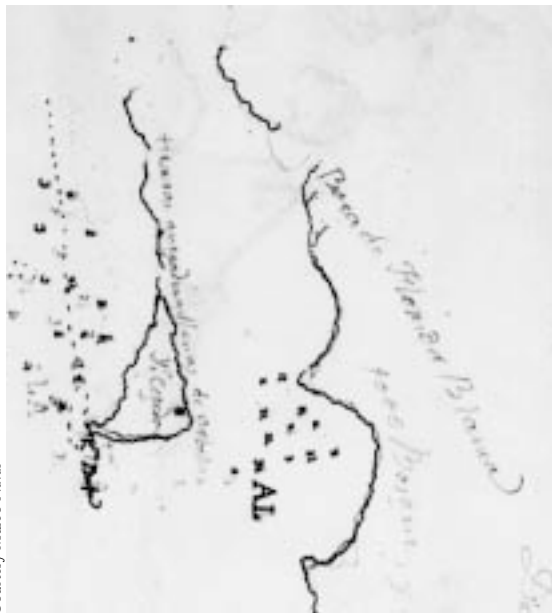
Lummi, and beyond them, on Samish and Guemes Islands, the Samish.

The Semiahmoo also had linguistic relatives immediately across from them on Vancouver Island, including the Sooke (*T'Sou-ke*), the Songhees in the Victoria area, the Saanich (*Wsanec*), and others. The people round the coast from the Semiahmoo were the Tsawwassen who spoke, not Straits, but the language of the people who live all

along the Fraser River, Halq'eméylem. According to tradition, the Nicomekl (*Snokomish*) people, who also spoke Halq'eméylem, formerly occupied a territory extending from Boundary Bay to the Fraser River, but they were almost completely wiped out by the devastating smallpox epidemic of 1782-1783.

There once was a very large Indian village on the shores of Boundary Bay. It stood on the southeast tip of Point Roberts, known today as Lily Point. This was the site of the Wadhams cannery,⁴ which was built in 1891, the same year as the Drysdale cannery on Semiahmoo Spit. The cannery has long since gone, and the site has reverted to its natural state. Attention was first drawn to the old village by Peter Puget, who records in his log that on the afternoon of 11 June 1792,

...we stopped to dine at a deserted village... [which] must, by its size, have formerly been the habitation of near four hundred people, but was now in perfect ruins and overrun with nettles and some bushes...⁵ The body of the village consists of three rows of houses, each row divided by a narrow lane and partitioned off into four or six square houses and every one large and capacious... This frame, the only remnant of the village, must have given



Courtesy Museo Naval

the Native inhabitants an infinite trouble in the construction, and it still remains a mystery to me by what powers of mechanism they have been able to lift up the heavy and long logs of timber which are placed on [top of the uprights].

One of those trivial curiosities that tend to intrigue local historians is that, conspicuous though the ruins of the village evidently were, nowhere in any of the records of the Spanish explorations of Boundary Bay has anyone managed to find any reference to it. Both Work and Annance mention it in their 1824 journals; and when McKenzie was there in 1825, the ruined village was being used by some Saanich Indians as a temporary shelter. Well, we can now put that right. Figure 2 from a previously unpublished sketch

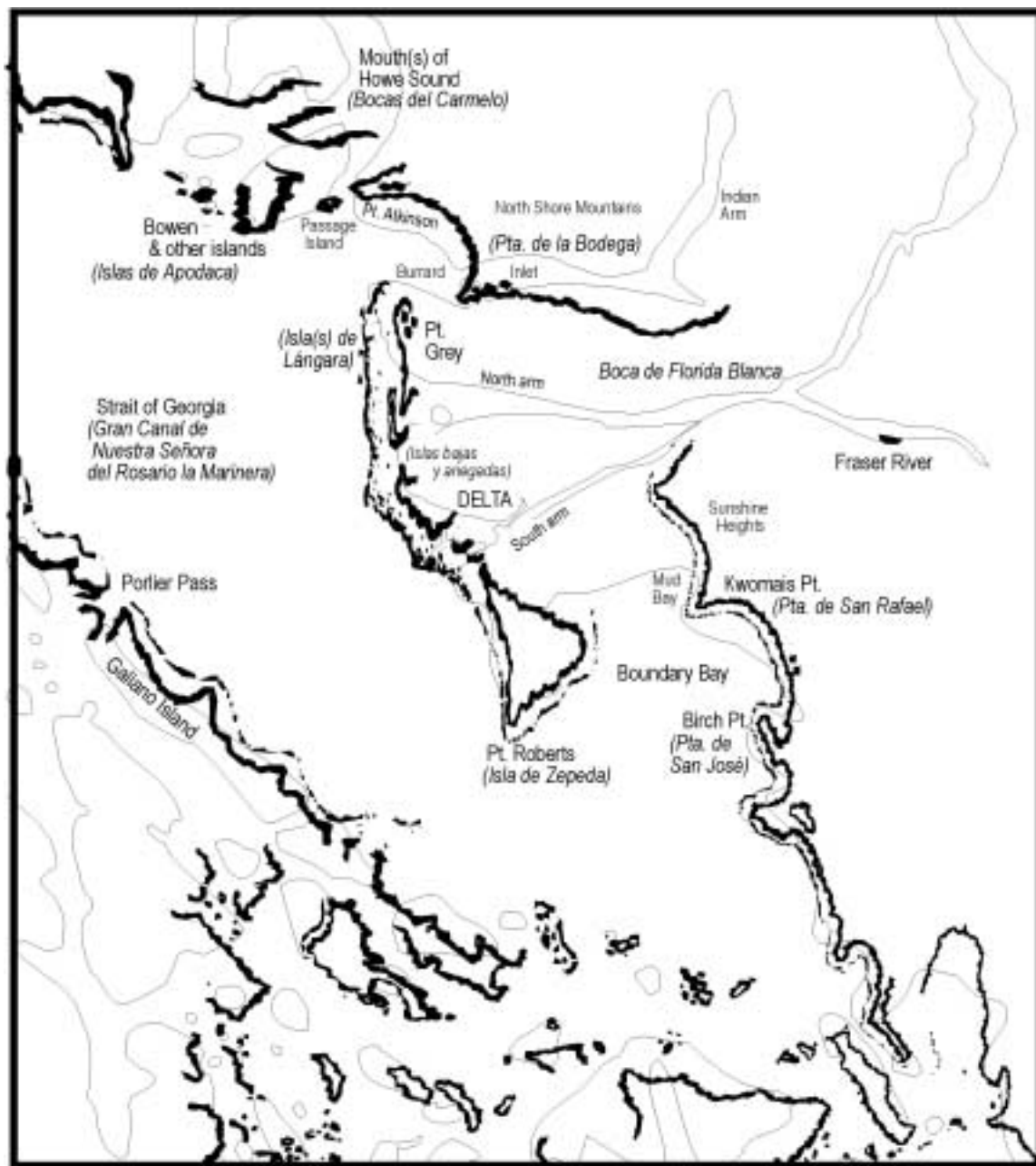
by Galiano supplies the long sought for reference. To be sure, it is a bit obscure to those not familiar with the Spanish charts of the time, but be assured that the small rectangle on the east side of the peninsula, close to the south-eastern tip, is Galiano's usual symbol for a sizeable Native habitation. It is certainly enough to satisfy me that Galiano did indeed note the presence of the village in 1792, even though he was too pre-occupied with other things to write about it.

Figure 1 is an often-reproduced segment of a larger chart (*Carta Que Comprehende...*), showing southern Vancouver Island and the adjacent mainland. The segment—here annotated by Major Matthews— appears to contain what must seem to anyone not familiar with the countryside around the Fraser estuary, an appalling error in

Below:
Figure 3A
Segment of "Carta Que Comprehende," Narváez's chart, showing the BC Lower Mainland and adjacent coast in Washington State.



Right:
Figure 3B
The chart computer corrected for elementary scaling and orientation errors superposed on a modern chart (lighter lines).



Nick Doe

salmon-fishing site at Lily Point, on the southeastern tip of the peninsula, was used seasonally as a traditional right by all the Straits-Salish speakers, particularly the Semiahmoo and Lummi, and from Vancouver Island, the Saanich. Less surely, we can add to the list of those who used Lily Point, the people who used the Fraser-River fishery, that is, the Halq'eméylem-and-dialects speakers: Tsawwassen, Kwantlen, Nicomekl, and from Vancouver Island, the Nanaimo, Cowichan, and Malahat.

⁶ Point Roberts itself is made up of sediments deposited in the cool wet period immediately before the last ice age.

⁷ Also not adequately explained is why Narváez would want to make such a trip and, if he did, why he couldn't tell the difference between flooded fields and the open ocean. Matthews' account is nevertheless very entertaining. See *Vancouver Historical Journal*, No. 4, 1961.

⁸ Nick Doe, "Some Anomalies in a Spanish Chart of Vancouver Island—1791," *Lighthouse, Journal of the Canadian Hydrographic Association*, 56, Fall 1997, 7-20.

that it shows a large, non-existent body of water stretching northwards from between Point Roberts (*Isla de Zepeda*) and Kwomais Point in Surrey (*Punta de San Rafael*) towards the Burrard Inlet. In fact, this is a perfectly understandable mistake by Narváez. The land between the north arm of the Fraser and Boundary Bay has been created since the end of the last ice age 10,000 years ago, and is still just a few feet above sea level. Now agricultural land, but formerly wet meadows and marshes, this land is difficult to see from any distance away from the shoreline in Boundary Bay. Explanations for Narváez's error include the lowland around Point Roberts being flooded by the Fraser, being below the horizon, being shrouded in low-lying mist, or being ob-

scured by refraction caused by the sun drying out and heating up the air above the mudflats at low tide. All of these phenomena, except flooding, which is prevented by modern dykes, often give the high ground at Point Roberts, quite strikingly, the appearance of an island, which undoubtedly it was just a few thousand years ago.⁶

The second feature of interest in Figure 1 is the apparent continuation of the shoreline from Boundary Bay almost all the way through to the Indian Arm of Burrard Inlet (about where it says *Boca de Florida Blanca*). This distortion led the incautious Major J.S. Mathews in his account of "incidents presumed to have occurred" to go as far as to assert that the Spanish made an overland expedition to the Fraser River. This assertion is

still occasionally repeated as fact in local history publications and pamphlets, but there is no hint that this might be true in any of the Spanish records.⁷

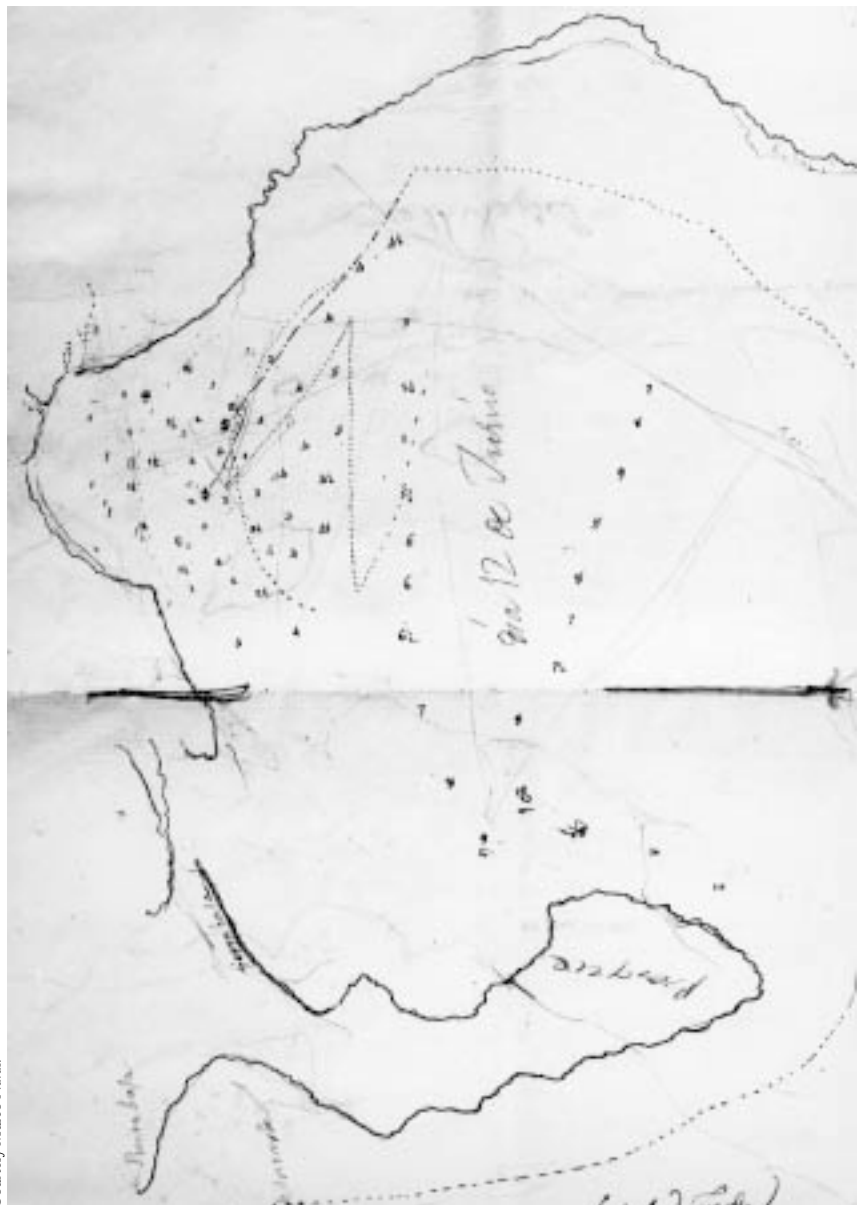
This segment of the *Carta Que Comprehende...* I find particularly interesting because it nicely demonstrates two fairly common types of cartographic error. These errors can sometimes be amusing because they cause endless controversy and speculation as to what the explorers were up to, when alas the simple truth is that some anonymous cartographer made a silly arithmetic mistake and misdrew the chart.

Charts and maps of large areas, such as Vancouver Island, had of course to be pieced together from collections of much smaller field maps. Each small map represented the work of one or two days' work by a small surveying crew. The complete chart *Carta Que Comprehende...* was made up of about eighteen segments which were rather hurriedly "pasted" together in the fall of 1791 at Nootka by Narváez, Pantoja, Verdía, and Elizabe before being sent down to the Spanish naval establishment at San Blas, where Juan Carrasco made a fair copy. Although most of the individual segments that went into the chart have long been lost, some years ago I discovered that they could still be identified in the final version of the chart by scanning the chart for cartographic errors, and noting that these errors tended to occur in small patches. Each "patch" had a characteristic set of errors that differed from those of adjacent patches; and there is little doubt in my mind that these "patches" actually correspond to the original constituent segments from which the chart was assembled.

The three types of error that occur are (i) scaling, (ii) orientation, and (iii) geographic location.⁸ I won't go into these in detail here, but briefly, these errors arise in the following ways. Each sketch map of a small part of the coast was likely originally drawn to its own scale; so the first task in incorporating the small sketches into a much larger map, was to redraw all the segments to the same scale. If this re-scaling was not done correctly, then we had the first type of error, a scaling error. Field maps were very often oriented to compass (or magnetic) north, which in this part of the world is about 20 degrees east of geographic (or true) north. Since it is conventional to use geographic north at the top of published charts, all the constituent segments with compass north at the top had to be twisted around

clockwise by twenty degrees. A mistake here was the second type of error, an orientation error. The third type of error occurred when it came to adding the latitude and longitude grid to the final version of the chart. It was quite impractical for the surveyors to measure their geographic positions as they worked (no GPS in those days!)—even a rough longitude determination required many careful celestial observations to be made. What was done therefore was to establish the latitude and longitude of just one place on the chart, and then use the distances, measured by dead reckoning, to construct the rest of the grid. The problem here was that sometimes the geographic coordinates of two points on the chart were known and because of errors in both distance measurements and coordinate determinations, the two did not agree. This was

Below:
Figure 4
A sketch from Galiano's book of sketchmaps showing the soundings made in the fruitless search for the Boca de Florida Blanca in Boundary and Mud Bays. Point Roberts is on the left. The annotations are references to low wooded country.



Courtesy Museo Naval.

⁹ Possibly the oversizing is related to the fact that one nautical mile is almost exactly 50 percent more than one minute of longitude at these latitudes. About a third of all the 18 segments of the chart exhibit this error.

¹⁰ Tomás Bartroli, *Genesis of Vancouver City: Explorations of its Site 1791, 1792 & 1808*, Vancouver, 161-163.

¹¹ John Kendrick, *The Voyage of Sutil and Mexicana: 1792*, Spokane 1991, 112.

¹² The Gabriola Island sketches are discussed in detail in Nick Doe, "Acalá [sic] Galiano's sketchmaps of Gabriola," *SHALE*, Journal of the Gabriola Historical & Museum Society, v. 1, November 2000, 12-21.

sometimes rectified by changing the scaling of the map in the east-west direction until it agreed with the longitudes; and similarly scaling in a north-south direction until it agreed with the latitudes. Such independent east-west and north-south scaling distorts the shape of the land if done incorrectly, as it often was because longitude and latitude were not easily measured with great accuracy, and such distortion constitutes the third type of cartographic error.

Figures 3A and 3B show the original chart together with the corrected version. The segment from Bellingham Bay up to Mud Bay has simply been drawn fifty percent too large, a common mistake.⁹ The segment representing the North Shore Mountains has simply been drawn with compass, not geographic north at the top—the second kind of error. The segment showing the land between Point Roberts and Point Grey has also been drawn with the incorrect orientation. This segment also shows an asymmetric scaling error, which might be a type-three error; or which might be a simple error in measuring the distance between the two points. That there was some confusion over orientation is suggested by the inscription inserted in Boundary Bay that reads *Declin.^{on} Observ.^a N.E. 12°30'*. This figure is quite wrong. Although the compass variation, or declination as it is called here (the difference between compass and true north), does vary by a few degrees over long periods, there is no evidence that in historical times it fell to as little as 12°30'E.

As Figure 3B shows, the extended coastline heading for Indian Arm actually represents the border between the 300-foot (90-m) high Sunshine Heights (or Hills) in the District of Delta and the adjacent Fraser lowland, a natural boundary to suppose that existed between the land and the sea when seen from a distance to the south in a small boat.

These simple errors evidently engendered some excitement when the 1791 expedition reported them to their superiors in Mexico,¹⁰ just as in a later century they were to do among the local historians in Vancouver. The *Boca de Florida Blanca* was evidently in reality no more than a very vague indication of the perceived presence of the Fraser Valley, yet in the uncorrected chart it looked like it might be a significant entrance to the interior of the continent. In all of the surviving reports and journals of the 1791 expedition there is little or no reference to this inlet. A

point at the entrance (probably Stanley Park) was given the name *Punta de la Bodega*, after Juan Francisco de la Bodega y Quadra, the then commandant of the naval station at San Blas, an important person without doubt, but nowhere near the rank of the prime minister of Spain. Somebody at the top clearly considered this *boca* to be of the utmost importance.

The rest of the story is really history—in 1792, the Galiano and Valdés expedition arrived in Boundary Bay and, with great anticipation headed northward between Point Roberts (*Punta de Cepeda*) and Kwomais Point (*Punta de San Rafael*). In no time at all, their boat found itself in shallower and shallower water. "In addition...", their report states, "...we did not see any opening at the end of the bay; only that it terminates in low land subject to flooding and covered with trees."

The soundings on Galiano's sketchmap (Figure 4) wonderfully illustrates Galiano's comment "...our imagination had been so coloured by the configuration on the map, and by the word we had received of the expedition of the previous year, that we could not shake off the belief that [the inlet] reached far into the continent..."¹¹ It was at this juncture no doubt that the disappointed Galiano gave Boundary Bay the name *Ensenada del Engaño*, "the bay of deceit," and, probably with much lessened optimism, directed that his ships look elsewhere for the hoped-for northwest passage.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Figures 2 and 4 are two of a series by Galiano contained in a hand-sewn book covering the passage of the *Sutil* and *Mexicana* (11-14 June 1792) from *Isla de San Vicente* (Cypress Island) to Entrance Island, Gabriola Island, immediately before *Cala del Descanso* (Pilot Bay, Gabriola). The sketches were originally in pencil, but someone, probably in the distant past, has gone over them in ink and in places the ink has bled through the page. The book is held by the Museo Naval in Madrid (Borradores, MS 2456) and is not currently catalogued. Local historians, including myself, are very grateful to John Crosse of Vancouver who first brought this delightful little book to our attention. A photographic copy, courtesy of John Crosse, is now held by the Malaspina Research Centre at Malaspina University-College in Nanaimo under the direction of Dr. John Black.¹² I would like to thank the Museo Naval in Madrid for their anticipated consent to further publish these sketchmaps here. ~