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Notes:

Most of this paper was completed in April 2007 with the intention of publishing it in the journal *SHALE*. It was however never published at that time, and further research was done in September 2007, but practically none after that. It was prepared for publication here in November 2016, with very little added to the old manuscripts. It may therefore be out-of-date in some respects.

It is 1 of a series of 10 articles and is the final version, previously posted as Draft 1.5.

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Into the labyrinth.... Two expeditions, one led by Captain Vancouver and the other led by *Comandante* Galiano, arrived at Kinghorn Island in Desolation Sound from the south on June 25, 1792. Their mission was to survey the mainland coast for a passage to the east—a northwest passage. At this stage of their work, they had no idea what lay before them as the insularity of Vancouver Island had yet to be established by Europeans. The following day, all four vessels moved up the Lewis Channel and found a better anchorage in the Teakeme Arm.

For seventeen days, small-boat expeditions set out from this safe anchorage to explore the Homfray Channel, Toba Inlet, Pryce Channel, Bute Inlet, and the narrow passages leading westward through which the sea flowed back and forth with astounding velocity. In the course of these explorations, two of the expeditions, one British and one Spanish, came across an extraordinary and apparently abandoned Indian village—called with reason, “Flea Village”. The location of this village was subsequently lost—it is not marked on any chart—and although several modern publications carry assertions that its whereabouts are known, these turned out upon investigation to be questionable. Even the archaeological records in Victoria fail to show where it is. This is the story—perhaps—of its re-discovery both in the field and in a drawing of the artist José Cardero.

Flea Village — introduction

by Nick Doe

On Sunday, December 16, 2001, I received out of the blue (actually down a telephone wire) an e-mail from Ralph Heading. Ralph was a fellow member of the BC Map Society (now the Historical Map Society of BC) and he had been looking at an old Spanish drawing in the records of the Alejandro Malaspina expedition of 1789–1794. The drawing is entitled, *Fortificación de los Indios del estrecho de Fuca*—“Indian fortification in the Fuca Strait”. Ralph was wondering if the fortified village depicted could have been in Boundary Bay.

This rather extraordinary drawing has always been a mystery because nobody has any idea where the village was, and the documentation in the Spanish Archives offers no clues other than that it was made on the Alcalá Galiano-Valdés expedition around Vancouver Island in the summer of 1792.

Now, having once lived in White Rock, I knew Semiahmoo and Boundary Bay pretty well, and I was convinced, and still am, that the village was never there. Ralph however did me the favour of not agreeing with me, the best stimulus for further research that one can have. There thus ensued lively e-mail exchanges, which eventually included Robin Inglis; John Crosse; Grant Keddie; Keith Carlson; Ted Roberts; Bruce Ward; and indirectly Donald Cutter and Wayne Suttles.

My conclusion was that the site was not in Boundary Bay nor in the San Juan Islands—the area had already been charted in 1791 and Galiano was in an understandable hurry to get to his suspected northwest passage; it was not in the *Boca de Floridablanca* (in reality the Fraser Valley), nor was it at Neah

Bay at the tip of the Olympic Peninsula—that was a Spanish establishment and didn’t need a small boat expedition to get there—but it was, and could only have been, a drawing of somewhere in Desolation Sound.

It was at this point that I stepped into a trap. What we had here was a drawing of an abandoned Indian village with no written description. What we also had from the British records of their exploration of Desolation Sound in 1792 was a description of an abandoned Indian village—Flea Village—with no accompanying surviving drawing.¹ What then if the two were one and the same?

So started a line of enquiry described in the accompanying articles that involved, apart from extensive archival research, three small-boat expeditions of my own to Desolation Sound in an attempt to prove my theory.

I didn’t succeed of course, the differences between the drawing, the archaeological evidence, and the surviving descriptions of Flea Village by members of the George Vancouver expedition of 1791–1795 are too great. However, what I am convinced of is that the drawing, *el Fortificación*, is a fanciful depiction of Flea Village made in San Fernando, Spain, by the Italian artist Fernando Brambila.² Brambila based his work on the field sketches and studies that José Cardero made in Desolation Sound.

¹ Since this was written in 2007, a watercolour by William Alexander has come to light. It is said to be based on a sketch by Midshipman John Sykes of an abandoned village in the Homfray Channel. *personal communication* Judith Williams. These articles have been updated to include it.

² Fernando Brambila” is the Spanish spelling of the Italian “Ferdinando Brambilla”.

He himself never visited the northwest coast, and his work on the Malaspina expedition's drawings was done without any assistance from José Cardero, who almost certainly did see Flea Village at the time the British were there.

The British and Spanish expeditions of 1792

We pick up the story, bright and early on Monday morning, June 25, 1792, after a dark and rainy (but not stormy) night.³ The scene is the entrance to Desolation Sound, on the north side of Kinghorn Island (*Isla de la Quema*—"the island with fire"). At anchor are four sailing ships.

The largest of these is a three-masted full-rigged British naval vessel (337 tons)—officially classified as a sloop of war—named *Discovery*.⁴ The *Discovery* is 96 feet long and 28 feet wide and carries a crew of about 100.⁵ The names of the officers of the *Discovery* have a familiar ring to our ears: George Vancouver (commander); Joseph Whidbey (master); Peter Puget, Joseph Baker, and Zachary Mudge (the three lieutenants).

³ W. Kaye Lambe (ed.), *The Voyage of George Vancouver, 1791–5*, p.599, Hakluyt Society, London 1984. Reckoned by Vancouver to be Tuesday the 26th. His exact words regarding the weather were: "the night was dark and rainy, and the winds so light and variable, that by the influence of the tides we were driven about as it were blindfolded in this labyrinth, until towards midnight, when we were happily conducted to the north side of an island in this supposed sound, where we anchored...".

⁴ To avoid trouble from the purists, I'm not using the prefix HMS. Although this was first introduced in 1789, it did not become common usage until later. The unit used to measure the capacity of a vessel, a *ton*, is not a weight but a volume, and is derived from the old word "tun", which is a wine cask.

⁵ Bern Anderson, *Surveyor of the Sea—The Life and Voyages of Captain George Vancouver*, pp.38, 44–5, 243–4, University of Washington Press, 1960.

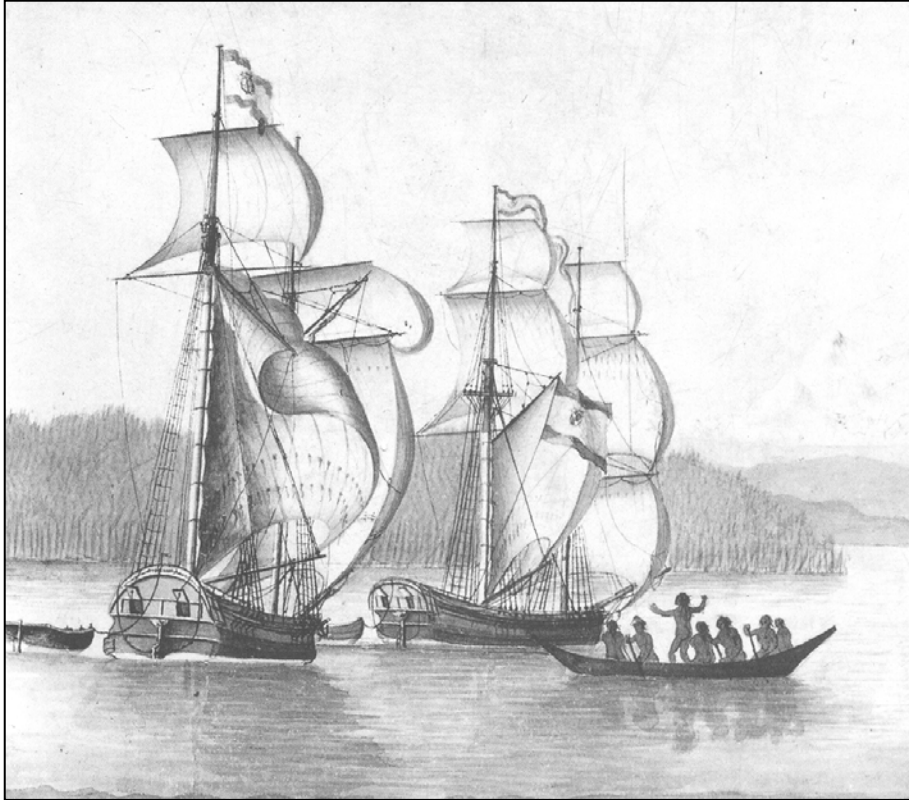
Close by is a second, smaller British naval vessel—a two-masted brig—named *Chatham* (131 tons). The *Chatham* is 53 feet long and 22 feet wide (it's tubby) and carries a crew of 45. William Broughton (lieutenant) is the *Chatham*'s captain. Also aboard are James Johnstone (master) and James Hanson (lieutenant).⁶

The other two vessels are identical in size (46 tons)—about 46 feet long and 12 feet wide—both with two masts, and both flying the red-and-gold flag of Spain. The *Sutil*, displays the cross-spars for the square sails of a brig, and the *Mexicana*, the spars for the mixed rig of a brigantine (brig-schooner). Each has a crew of 24, and the officers are, on the *Sutil*, Dionisio Alcalá Galiano (*comandante*) and Secundino Salamanca (*teniente*); and, on the *Mexicana*, Cayetano Valdés (*comandante*) and Juan Vernacci (*teniente*).⁷

Now having made all these introductions, I'll going to go on to say that, with one exception, none of these gentlemen, and none of these vessels are central to the story. Along with Lieutenant Peter Puget, the main characters are the supernumary on the *Discovery*—botanist, and surgeon Archibald Menzies—and servant-come-artist on the *Mexicana*, José Cardero. Through sheer bad luck, as you will see, a fourth gentleman, the 18-year-old Midshipman Henry Humphrys, will earn only an honourable mention.

⁶ Edmond Meany, *Vancouver's Discovery of Puget Sound*, pp.335–40, Binfords & Mort, Portland, 1957.

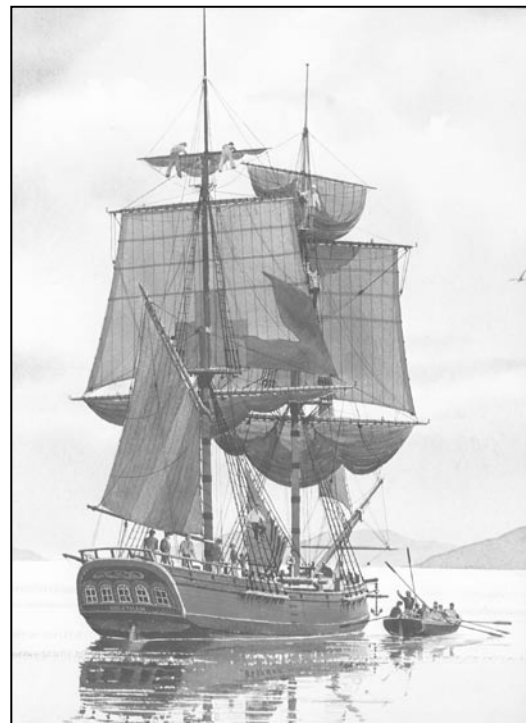
⁷ Details are from Michael Thurman, *The Naval Department of San Blas*, pp.340–2, Arthur Clark, Glendale CA, 1967, and Tomás Bartroli, *Genesis of Vancouver City*, pp.60–1, 1997. A *teniente de fragata* was equivalent in rank to a junior lieutenant.



Left: The *Sutil* (flying Galiano's pennant) leading the *Mexicana* on their 1792 voyage around Vancouver Island. Part of a drawing by José Cardero.

MUSEO NAVAL ms.1723-9

Below: The *Discovery* (left) and *Chatham* (right). Two of a number of beautiful and historically accurate paintings of the Vancouver 1791–5 expedition by Bellingham artist Steve Mayo.



This extraordinary assemblage of vessels belonging to two nations that were on the verge of war, (Galiano, a gentleman and a scholar, was later to have his head blown off by the British during the Battle of Trafalgar), marked the chance meeting of two expeditions, both of which had the prime purpose of finding a way to sail from the Pacific coast to the interior of the continent. Both commanders must have known full well, by the time they got to Desolation Sound that they were on a fool's errand—the Coast Mountains of British Columbia bear no resemblance to the coasts of Belgium and the Netherlands, the delta of the Fraser River notwithstanding—but in the late-18th century, if you were in charge of a major expedition and valued your naval career, you didn't sail home to say so.

Both commanders had also discovered that the large vessels they had were useless for exploring the intricate coast of British Columbia with its numerous islands, narrow passageways, strong tidal currents, and deep inlets. Both had adopted the strategy of establishing a base from which expeditions in small boats could fan out like rovers from a mothership on an alien planet to do the exploring.⁸ These small-boat expeditions

⁸ This isn't the place to describe all the expeditions, but my reckoning (the records are confusing) there were seven plus three minor ones.

1. Valdés (*Mexicana's* launch) to Homfray Channel, Pryce Channel, and Toba Inlet, June 25–27;
2. Broughton (boat) from Kinghorn Island to Teakerne Arm, June 25;
3. Spanish crew (*Sutil's* launch) back to Kinghorn Island to await the return of Valdés, June 25–27;
4. Johnstone (*Chatham's* cutter) and Swaine (*Chatham's* launch) to Bute Inlet, June 25–July 1;
5. Whidbey (*Discovery's* cutter) and Puget (*Discovery's* launch) to Toba Inlet, June 25–29;
6. Vancouver (*Discovery's* yawl) back to Kinghorn Island (expedition abandoned), June 29;
7. Whidbey (*Discovery's* cutter) and Puget (*Discovery's* launch) to Discovery Passage, July 1–5;

typically carried provisions for a week, but it wasn't unusual for them to last longer, with the result that the crews came back hungry, or had, while away, traded nails and trinkets with Aboriginal people for fish, collected clams and other shellfish, or, as Puget records, made do with a broth of “bread, nettle tops & gooseberry shoots”.

And so it was that on this fine morning, small boats were being prepared to go out and do their thing. The Spanish for their part got an early start and Cayetano Valdés, unaccompanied by a lieutenant, headed out with the *Mexicana's* launch. Later that day, Lieutenant Puget (one of our heroes) and Mr. Whidbey were to take the *Discovery's* launch and cutter and explore to the east, whence they were to travel up the Homfray Channel and to the end of Toba Inlet. Captain Vancouver had also assigned Mr. Johnstone and Mr. Swaine to take the *Chatham's* cutter and launch⁹ in a northwest

8. Johnstone (*Chatham's* cutter) and Swaine (*Chatham's* launch) to Johnstone Strait, July 2–11;

9. Galiano (*Mexicana's* launch) to Homfray Channel, July 2–5;

10. Vernacci (*Mexicana's* launch) and Salamanca (boat) to Bute Inlet, July 6–11.

Some of these dates vary by a day according to sources. Vancouver's journal dates are one day advanced. The best day-to-day account of these expeditions is John E. Roberts, *A Discovery Journal, George Vancouver's First Survey Season, 1792*, pp.132–170, Trafford Publishing, 2005.

It isn't clear to me if Vernacci [10] or Valdés [1] first explored the Lewis Channel (*Canal de la Separación*), Sutil Channel entrance, Calm Channel, Ramsay Arm (*Brazo de Espinosa*), and Raza Passage (*Ensenada Cevallos*). It could have been Valdés [1] if he returned that way from Pryce Channel (*Canal de Concha*) and Toba Inlet (*Canal de la Tabla*) but he may have returned instead either down the Homfray Channel (*Canal de Arco*) or via the Waddington Channel including Pendrell Sound.

⁹ The boats usually travelled in pairs for safety reasons. Although the reception they received from the Aboriginal people into whose territories they

direction up the Lewis Channel. They subsequently were to turn into Deer Passage and Pryce Channel where they met up with Valdés.

The British expedition of Puget and Whidbey was likely the first to encounter Flea Village on June 26, which is situated on the eastern shore of the Homfray Channel not far from Prideaux Haven (*Islas de Sarmiento*). It is possible that Valdés had seen it the previous day, but it is more likely I think that it was Galiano who saw it first in early July when he "...scrupulously recorded all the shoreline from the *Punta de Sarmiento* (Sarah Point at the tip of the Malaspina Peninsula below Kinghorn Island) to the *Canal de la Tabla* (Toba Inlet), closely following the mainland shore without omitting an exhaustive exploration of even the smallest entrance".¹⁰

Although nowhere in the historical records does it say that the artist José Cardero accompanied Valdés or Galiano on either boat trip, it is a reasonable assumption that he did.¹¹ Several of his drawings show both vessels and so could only have been observed from a boat and it was he who almost certainly drew the plank (*tabla*) adorned with mysterious hieroglyphics found in Toba Inlet.^{12 13}

were intruding was most often friendly, there were exceptions, and there had been occasions when the sheer number of canoes confronting a boat had been daunting. The Europeans had firearms of course, but they were under strict orders not to use them unless they felt it absolutely necessary.

¹⁰ John Kendrick, *The Voyage of Sutil and Mexicana 1792*, p.145, Arthur H. Clark, Spokane 1991.

¹¹ Kendrick, *The Voyage...* (ibid), p.237.

¹² Nick Doe, [The tabla of Toba Inlet](#), *SHALE* 11, pp.22–36, May 2005.

¹³ The story of the naming of Toba Inlet in standard references is not entirely accurate. Wagner, *The Cartography of the Northwest coast of America to the year 1800*, pp.418–9, University of California Press,

It had been always the idea of the Spanish since the two expeditions had met that they should co-operate in the task of exploring the coast, and, over dinner and a glass or three of wine, this had no doubt seemed not such an outrageous idea to the British. But upon reflection in the bright light of morning, Captain Vancouver, if he hadn't long since, came to the conclusion that for him to have to rely on the word of a Don that this or that inlet did not lead to Montréal, might not be such a good message to be taking back to the arm-chair geographers and admiralty big-wigs in London. And so, despite the exasperation of the Spanish and probably the genuine trust at a personal level on the part of Vancouver,

1937 says (paraphrasing): "The inlet was named *Tabla* in 1792 because Valdes found a board in it containing hieroglyphics, but it was changed to *Toba* in maps of 1795 in honor of Antonio Tova [Toba] Arredondo, one of Malaspina's officers." Walbran, *British Columbia Coast Names—1592–1906*, p.490, Douglas & McIntyre, 1971, less plausibly, says: "By a Spanish chart engraver's error *Tabla* became *Toba*, and this error has been perpetuated on the charts."

What isn't recognized is that Galiano intended to use both *Canal de Toba* and *Canal de la Tabla* as names, but applied to different inlets. The evidence for this is contained in MUSEO NAVAL ms 144 {*Noticias y borradores...*} f. 584v. where Galiano writes: *Junio 27: Llego Valdes de su reconocim[ien]to a las 10 de la noche, hav[b]ía examinado el Canal de Toba, ~~parte del~~ el de Concha, y el de la tabla.* [June 27: Valdes arrived at 10 o'clock in the evening from his exploration of the Inlet of Toba, ~~part of~~ Concha, and that of the Tabla].

So where were the *Canal de Concha* and *Canal de Toba*? Galiano's tables of latitudes and longitudes, MUSEO NAVAL ms 288 {*Patrón...*} f. 80r. and f. 94v., provide clues. The *Canal de Concha* (after Juan Gutiérrez de la Concha y Mazón?) was Pryce Channel; but there's no mention of the *Canal de Toba*. Two channels left unnamed, but visited, were Waddington Channel (*una Ensenadilla* between the Redonda Islands) and Calm Channel (*Canal X* in the notes). My guess is that Galiano at one point intended to use *Toba* for one or other of these.

boat expeditions of the two nations set out to explore the area independently.

[...continued in [File FV-562](#)]

Articles:

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[FV-563 Spanish expedition accounts](#)
[FV-564 Historical accounts](#)
[FV-565 Archaeological reports](#)
[FV-566 Initial remarks on Cardero's drawing](#)
[FV-567 Field trip #1, September 2003](#)
[FV-568 Field trip #2, September 2005](#)
[FV-569 Field trip #3, September 2007](#)
[FV-570 A second look at Cardero's drawing](#) .