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18th-century history, west coast of Canada

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NOTE: *Adjust the accessed date as needed.*

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 It may therefore be out-of-date in some respects.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 2 of a series of 10 articles and is the final version, previously posted as Draft 1.2.

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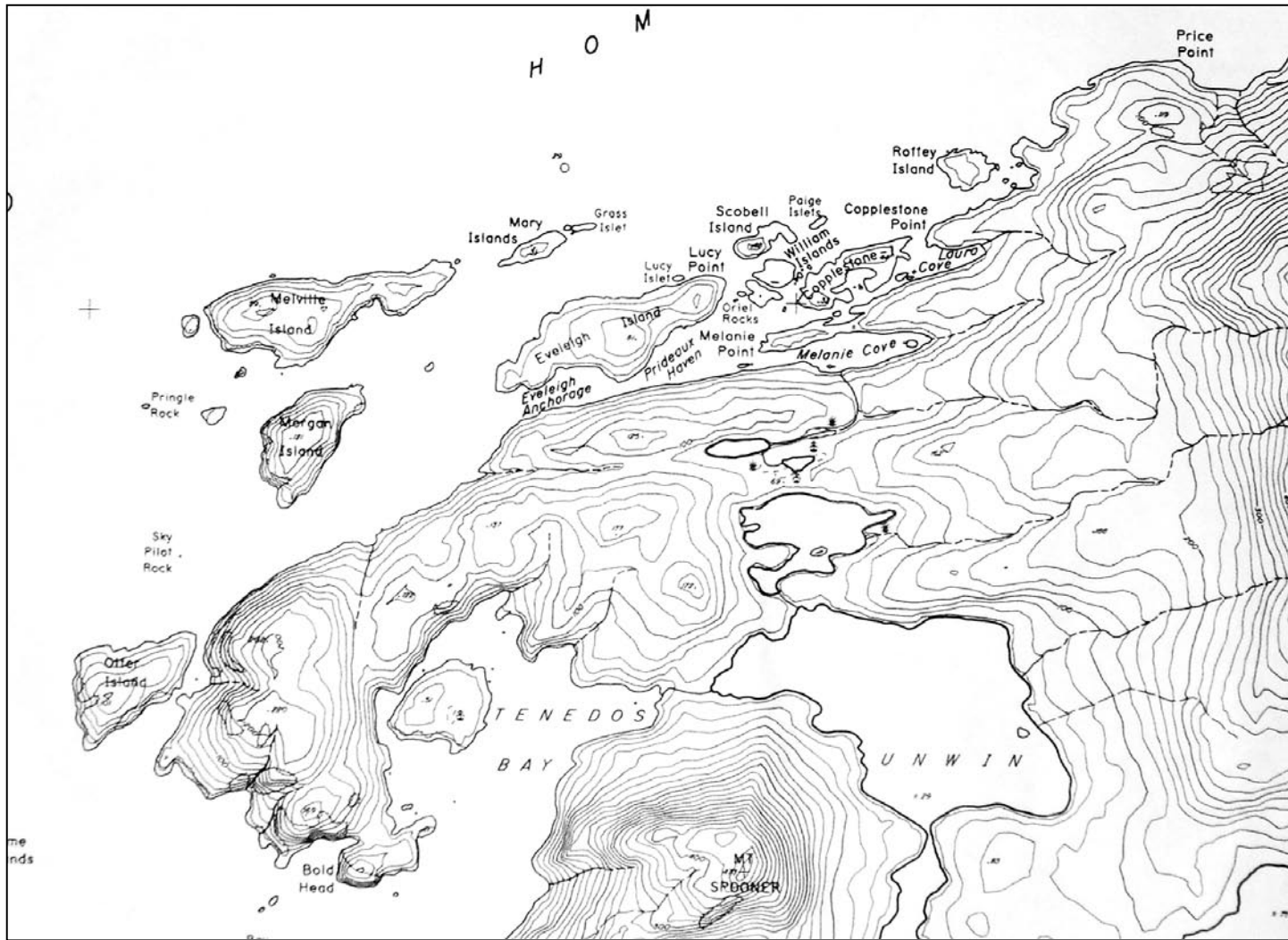
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Prideaux Haven on the east shore of the Homfray Channel. Eveleigh Island is actually joined to the mainland by an isthmus, but only at low tide. The day that Puget & Whidbey were there, they would have passed right over it, but Galiano a week later on the day of a full moon wouldn't have. Menzies' account clearly states that Flea Village was at the northern end of this group of islands, perhaps near Roffey Island.

left to right = 7 km or 3.8 n-mile, 20 m contours

BC Topographical Map 97K.017 50°08'N, 124°40'W

Flea Village — Vancouver expedition accounts

by Nick Doe

[...continued from [File FV-561](#)]

Vancouver's account

Let's start the reports of the historical records with an extract from Captain Vancouver's account of the boat expedition of Puget and Whidbey.¹ You'll have to excuse the large number of words, that's how everyone wrote in the old days. Remember this is not a firsthand account; Captain Vancouver was not on this particular expedition.

“The eastern shore [of Homfray Channel], for the space of two leagues [6 nautical miles], was found much indented; and several small islands and rocks [Prideaux Haven] were seen lying near it...

“...The country they had visited differed little, excepting in one or two spots, from the region in which we were then stationed [Teakerne Arm]: the whole presented one desolate, rude, and inhospitable aspect. It has already been considered as not entirely destitute of the human race; and that it had been more populous than at present, was manifested by the party having discovered an extensive deserted Village, computed to have been the residence of nearly three hundred persons [*my emphasis*].

“It was built on a rock, whose perpendicular cliffs were nearly inaccessible on every side; and connected with the main, by a low narrow neck of land, about the centre of which grew a tree, from whose branches planks were laid to the rock, forming by this means a communication that could easily be removed,

to prevent their being molested by their internal unfriendly neighbours; and protected in front, which was presented to the sea, from their external enemies, by a platform which, with much labour and ingenuity had been constructed on a level with their houses, and overhung and guarded the rock.

“This, with great stability, was formed by large timbers judiciously placed for supporting each other in every direction; their lower ends were well secured in the chasms of the rocks about half way to the water's edge, admitting the platform to be so projected as to command the foot of the rock against any attempt to storm the Village.

“The whole seemed so skilfully contrived, and so firmly and well executed, as rendered it difficult to be considered the work of the untutored tribes we had been accustomed to meet...[etc. etc.]

“Whilst examining these abandoned dwellings, and admiring the rude citadel projected for their defence, our gentlemen were suddenly assailed by an unexpected numerous enemy, whose legions made so furious an attack upon each of their persons, that unable to vanquish their foes, or to sustain the conflict, they rushed up to their necks in water. This expedient, however, proved ineffectual; nor was it till after all their clothes were boiled, that they were disengaged from an immense horde of fleas, which they had disturbed by examining too minutely the filthy garments and apparel of the late inhabitants.”

Menzies' account

Archibald Menzies was the expedition's official “botanist” (which as his instructions made clear didn't prevent him from also being

¹ W. Kaye Lambe (ed.), *The Voyage of George Vancouver, 1791–5*, pp.602–4, Hakluyt Society, London 1984.

its zoologist, geologist, and anthropologist) and he accompanied Puget and Whidbey on their boat expedition. His journal, likely completed, as was Vancouver's, some years later, reads as follows:²

“After quitting this bay [Tenedos Bay] we followed the same shore which still tended north eastward & soon after passed by a narrow channel on the inside of a cluster of steep rocky Islands wooded with pines [between the mainland and Otter and Eveleigh Islands], but did not proceed above a league [3 nautical miles] when at the farther end of these islands [Prideaux Haven] we came to a small cove in the bottom of which the picturesque ruins of a deserted Village placd on the summit of an elevated projecting rock excited our curiosity & induced us to land close to it to view its structure.

“This rock was inaccessible on every side except a narrow pass from the land by means of steps that admitted only one person to ascend at a time & which seemd to be well guarded in case of attack, for right over it a large maple tree diffusd its spreading branches in such an advantageous manner to afford an easy & ready access from the summit of the rock to a conceald place amongst its branches, where a small party could watch unobservd & defend the pass with great ease.

“We found at the top of the rock nearly level & wholly occupied with the skeletons of houses—irregularly arranged & very crouded; in some places the space was enlarged by strong scaffolds projecting over the rock & supporting houses apparently well securd— These also acted as a defence by increasing the natural strength of the place & rendering it still more secure & inaccessible. From the fresh appearance of every thing about this Village &

the intollerable stench it would seem as if it had been very lately occupied by the Natives.

“The narrow lanes between the houses were full of filth 'n' nastiness & swarmd with myriads of *fleas* which fixed themselves on our shoes stockings & cloths in such incredible number that the whole party was obligd to quit the rock in great precipitation, leaving the remainder of these assailants in full possession of their garrison without the least desire of facing again such troublesome enemy.

“We no sooner got to the water side than some immediately stripped themselves quite naked & immersed their cloth, others plungd themselves wholly into the sea in expectation of drowning their adherents, but to little or no purpose, for after being submersd for some time they leaped about as frisky as ever; in short we towd some of the cloths astern the boats, but nothing would clear them of this vermin till in the evening we steepd them in boiling water.

“For what we saw & experienced the few minutes we were in this Village, we have no doubt but these troublesome guests have obligd its late inhabitants to quit it & remove to some fresh situation, & this will in some measure account for the number of deserted villages we have observd in our different excursions through this country. The Natives being so indolent & filthy in their manner of living, that vermin & their own nastiness obliges them often to quit their situation & move about from one place to another.

“We pulled out a little from the shore & lay on our oars before the Village while Mr. Humphries took a sketch of it [now lost],³ & tho I can give but a very unequal idea of its romantic appearance, yet I will attempt to follow the expressive strokes of his pencil in a few words.

“The rock itself is somewhat round of a moderate height & projects into the cove; its

² C.F. Newcombe (ed.), *Menzies' Journal of Vancouver's Voyage—April to October, 1792*, pp.66–8, Archives of BC, Memoir No.V, 1923. By modern reckoning the date was June 26, 1792.

³ Andrew David: “This was ‘No.5, *The remains of an Indian Village in the Gulf of Georgia*’, brought back to England by Broughton from Monterey.”

face is here & there overgrown with raspberries & other bushes, while the summit is occupied with the crouded remains of the Village consisting of posts spurs & planks crossing each other with the utmost confusion in all directions. At the landing place which is a small beach close to the rock are standing the posts & beams of a solitary House which from its size painted ornaments & picturesque shelterd situation seemd to have been the residence of the Chief or some family of distinction.

“The shore on both sides is rocky, crouded with large stones & drift wood & here & there verged with maple trees whose wavering branches & light colord foliage formed a beautiful contrast with the gigantic aspect & dark verdurous hue of a thick forest of pinery which spread over a high prominent mountain that swelled out immediately behind to form the back ground with a steep acclivity from the outer point of the cove.

“This Village from the disasters we met with obtaind the name of *Flea Village* & its situation about three leagues to the north eastward of the situation of the vessels & a high conspicuous mountain to the westward of it on the opposite side of the arm was namd from its figure *Anvil Mountain* [Mt. Addenbroke?].

“We now found the arm [Homfray Channel] taking a turn round the bottom of this mountain to the north westward & was contracted to about a mile & a half wide with rocky shores & high steep mountains wooded with pines on both sides; those to the northward / had their summits chequered with snow; but night coming on we soon brought to & occupied ourselves in getting clear of the fleas by soaking our cloths in boiling water.”

Puget’s account

The only record of the encounter of the boat expedition with Flea Village that might actually have been made at the time would be in the rough log books kept by Peter Puget.

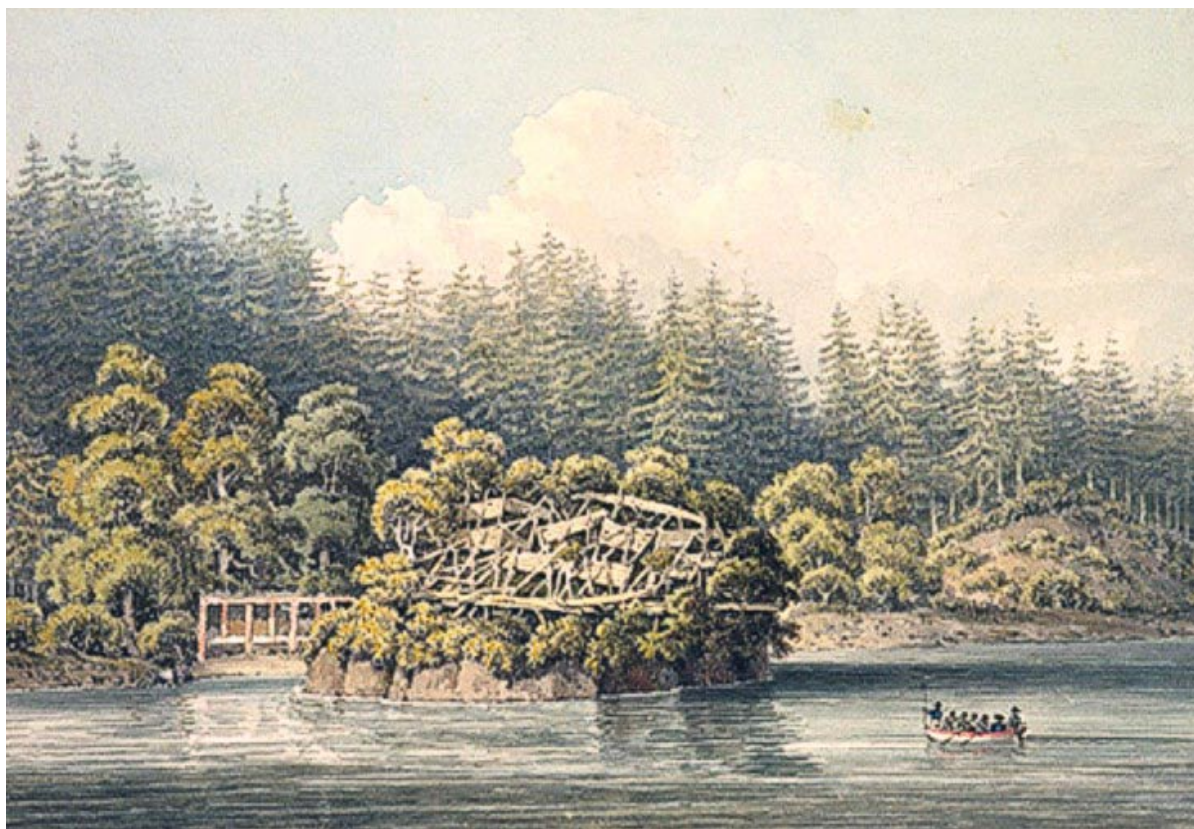
These were presented to the British Library by Peter’s son, Captain W.D. Puget in 1848. The rough logs are disorganized, discontinuous, hard to read in places, and not always accurately dated, but they are also a delightful source of firsthand impressions to those who revel in historical minutiae. Unfortunately, the relevant days in the rough logs have no entries other than those concerned with routine ship’s business and a note “employed surveying and sounding” so we have to rely on Puget’s official log, also probably written years after the event.⁴ He writes the following:

“...Leaving this bay [Tenedos Bay] we found the continent trended to the ENE but the extreme heat of the day prevented our pursuing it ‘till the afternoon, when with a fine breeze we continued our route in the above direction for three miles, passing an innumerable quantity of small islands [Prideaux Haven] and sunken rocks, which in many places had scarcely sufficient water for the boats. At the end of this insular navigation we perceived an old Indian Village at which we were induced to stop to fill our water from a fine river that emptied itself into the sea. We therefore landed for that purpose in a small bay close to this deserted Building.

“It was some time before we could discover by what path or method we were to ascend into it, as a platform projected considerably over the base of the rock, on top of which was this Village built.

“However on searching we found a plank laid to the branch of a tree from the ground and another from there to the rock. If this was the only entrance it had, this Building may be denominated a sort of rude fortification, for without ladders it cannot be ascended at any other than the proper gate way; and the

⁴ The official log is UK National Archives (*formerly* PRO) 55/27. The rough logs are British Library Additional Manuscripts 17542–51.



Watercolour by William Alexander said to be based on a sketch by John Sykes, a Midshipman on the *Discovery*, although Menzies says that it was “Mr. Humphries” who sketched Flea Village.

Menzies also noted that “...at the landing place, which is a small beach close to the rock, are standing the posts & beams of a solitary House, which from its size painted ornaments & picturesque shelterd situation seemd to have been the residence of the Chief or some family of distinction”. Possibly the structure on the left of the rock?

Copy from Newberry Library, Special Collections, Chicago, IL, location of the original sketch not known.

conveyance to this being removed, it absolutely would become a formidable place of defence.

“This Village must have been deserted some time for the houses were in such condition, shattered and broken, that it was almost impossible to distinguish the one from the other, but by what remained. I should suppose they were from ten to twenty feet in height & about sixteen feet broad & the same in length.

“The supporters and each end of the houses were exceedingly strong, and from the general arrangement of the Village, it was calculated to oppose a much larger force [of men] than it could possibly contain, and it was likewise well

adapted to secure the inhabitants from the inclement seasons, for to those corner supporters are fixed broad plank in the common mode of building, which entirely closes up the sides and ends, except a small entrance, which is left in every habitation from the outside.

“The roof is composed of the same materials, but made apparently without any declivity to carry off the rain. This no doubt is well contrived by some method of laying the boards.

“The Village is composed of three distinct buildings, each row being divided by a lane or

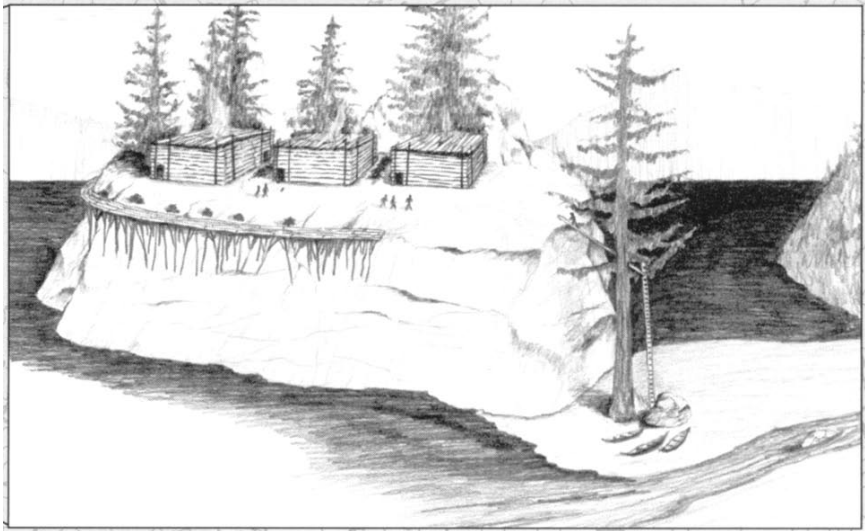
passage, in which was an astounding quantity of filth and dirt with a very offensive smell.

“On the brow of the rock towards the sea, the Natives had with much trouble carried out a platform on a level with the top of the rock nearly three feet in breadth and projecting beyond the water mark. This was supported by large pieces of timber, ten or twelve feet long, whose lower ends were placed in cavities about half way down the rock and strengthened by additional pieces in different directions, gradually increasing toward the top, ‘till the frame was of sufficient breadth to contain the extended platform with safety.

“Whether this mode of building is constructed against the assaults of the human species, or whether to prevent the bears....

“I shall however endeavour by reasoning to account for the present desertion of this Village⁵ This rock by its size was once I have no doubt the residence of about three hundred people, & either their own filth or opposition from their neighbours had forced them to quit their habitations by a precipitous retreat, for I have perceived many in our former excursions who have been in the act of changing their

⁵ British observers included in their lists of possible causes for apparent depopulation, epidemics, seasonal occupation, famine (failure of fishing grounds), and warfare. Disruption of aboriginal economies by the fur trade was seldom mentioned. Most explorers, like Puget, cautiously admitted they didn’t really know why they encountered so many “abandoned” sites. The Spanish had a better idea because they had observed the effects of disease in their missions in Baja and Alta California.



An imaginative interpretation of Vancouver's account by Keith Carlson. One problem is that it leaves the village's water supply vulnerable. In reality, it must have been concealed, accessible from the village, and easily defended. It does however have a beach for canoes.

Keith Carlson (ed), *A Stó:lō Coast Salish Historical Atlas*, p.87, Douglas & McIntyre, 2001

situation with their families that they carry the boards & all other useful parts for the purpose of rebuilding with all the domestic utensils such as boxes for the water, baskets, etc., in short, if I may be allowed the expression, it is a total removal of house & furniture.

“These [useful parts] are placed on spars seven or eight feet long whose ends are lashed to the gunwales of two large canoes, not unlike the plan of the double canoes at the southern islands [of the Pacific], differing only in the fixture of the spars & the space between the canoes.

“But in this Village, the plank was left, the houses seemed shattered by the inclemency of the weather. Their domestic utensils were in the houses & some carcasses of dogs were found among the ruins. From these circumstances, may we not infer that the inhabitants were driven from the Village instead of making a voluntary retreat, or else, why leave behind their materials for building, the formation of which must be attended with infinite labour to them.

“But what still more strengths the above opinion in my mind were the carcasses of the dogs, for I have always perceived these animals to be highly ?caressed? by the Indians, as the only domesticated creature in their possession. Whenever a removal took place, the dogs were always considered as part of the family.

“From these circumstances and from such only could we form an opinion, which however, may be fallacious.

...We came too early...and the tents pitched in a fine romantic situation among the trees.”

[...continued in [File FV-563](#)]

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[FV-568 Field trip #2, September 2005](#)

[FV-569 Field trip #3, September 2007](#)

[FV-570 A second look at Cardero's drawing.](#)