



*“Gabiola Txikia” is Basque for “Lesser Gabriola” and is the name of a building that still stands on what was the old Gaviola family estate in the Kilimon Valley near Mendaro, Spain. Photo courtesy Juan Garate.*

## **Gavi “what a”? Or how Gabriola got its name.**

Trying to spread a rumour on a small island is like attempting to light a fire with kindling that is damp. After five minutes, you either need to stand back to prevent being scorched, or, you’re facing something sooty and smelling of smoke that clearly needs re-constructing. Historical facts are a bit like that too.

Sometime in the early 1930s, a fellow by the name of Henry Wagner was wading through lists of names of 18th-century politicians, military personnel, and other Spanish bigwigs trying to find someone with the family name “Gaviola”. There was nobody. So, being from California where there was a precedent for it, and being at a loss for any other suggestion, he remarked that perhaps “Gaviola” was really “gaviota”, which means a “seagull”. And so it became known to everyone who can Google that Gabriola’s name is derived from the Spanish word for a seagull. And this, what in retrospect seemed even to Henry himself a rather silly idea, caught fire as it were.

Now why a bunch of seasoned sailors on an unknown coast, thousands of miles from home, should wish to record that on approaching Gabriola Island they had seen a seagull has always been a mystery to me. Not many seagulls mind you, just one, because Henry Wagner was seeking to explain the chart annotation “Punta de Gaviola”, not “Punta de las Gaviolas” (plural). In the phonetic spelling of 18th-century Spain, B and V were interchangeable, so “Gaviola” could easily be spelled “Gabiola” and often was, so when the British navy got hold of the name in the mid-1850s, it is no surprise that it was rendered “Gabriola”. The “r” was inserted by an

English cartographer, either because he was lazy and careless, or because, just like Microsoft WORD's spellchecker, he suspected that "Gabriela" is what was *really* meant.

Gabriola is in fact, in all probability, named after Simón Gabiola y Zabala, a Basque aristocrat and a Knight of the Order of Santiago. Although Simón's ancestral home was in Mendaro in the Basque country—"Gaviola" is a Basque not Spanish word—he lived and worked in Seville as the paymaster for the fleet escorting the merchant vessels regularly plying between Spain and the New World. Being in charge of the King's money was not a soft job back then and paymasters often went to sea and were not exempt from the perils of the voyages. His name was given to the area around Law Point and the Flat Top Islands by Juan Francisco Bodega y Quadra, because like Simón, Bodega y Quadra was from an aristocratic Basque family, because he too had been made a Knight of the Order of Santiago, because the young sailor Narváez, who actually visited Gabriola, had named Nanaimo Harbour and the Northumberland Channel "Bocas de Hija" but when it came to compiling a chart of all of southern Vancouver Island it was found that name had already been used, and because Francisco Hija was the respected *comisario* of the Spanish naval establishment at San Blas and at one time had, like Simón, been a paymaster. It's all in [SHALE 13](#) published in June, 2006, if you want the whole story.

I'm not sure why the family name Gaviola went sufficiently into hiding for Henry Wagner not to be able to find it, but I do see that Simón once asked the King to reserve his job for the future husband of one of his four daughters. The Spanish custom of children having the surnames of both parents would have ensured that the name survived for one generation as a "...y Gaviola", but, from then on, the mother's name would have been lost. But there's more research to be done.

Now let me see...does anyone have a light?...and a tourist brochure I could use for kindling?

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