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The 18th-Century Spanish Expeditions to Gabriola [out of date, use caution]

Living on El Verano Drive, or “the Summer Drive” as we would say in English, has not failed to draw my attention to the fact that both the Spanish and the Native people, who called it Tl’eyelth and Tlutsa, were here before me. The name “Gabriola” is, as many guidebooks explain, derived from “Gavriola”, (v’s and b’s are fairly interchangeable in Spanish) which is an English spelling mistake for “Gaviola”, which was a Spanish spelling mistake for “Gaviota”, which means, seagull [This is wrong, see later articles]. The name first appears on the chart “Carta Que Comprehende...” which was compiled at Nootka in the late summer of 1791 by the Spanish naval officers Eliza, Pantoja, Verdía, and Narváez. It was probably Narváez who applied the name “Punta de Gaviota”, Seagull Point [This is wrong, see later articles], to Law Point and the surrounding Flat Top Islands. What kind of seagull? Hard to say, but I like to think it was a Bonaparte Gull, a wonderful drawing of which is in the Naval Museum in Madrid, drawn by José Cardero. I have seen the drawing labelled “Laughing Gull”, which is amusing, for while Cardero quite definitely sailed around Vancouver Island, he did not visit the Atlantic coast, which is where the black-headed Laughing Gulls mostly live. Gabriola might equally well have ended up being called “Casatilli Island”, because the same chart gives the name “Punta de Casatilli” to Orlebar Point. The Marqués de Casa Tilly was a high-ranking Spanish naval officer at the time. I don’t think I would like “Tilly Island”, which is what the name would inevitably have evolved to, but the not-so-unusual Italian version of the name, “Casatelli Island”, sounds all right to me.

The Spanish visit in July 1791 in the *Santa Saturnina* and an accompanying longboat was the first of two visits. The following year, Galiano and Valdés, two officers assigned by Malaspina to explore the Georgia Strait, also visited our island in the *Sutil* and *Mexicana*. They stayed from the afternoon of Friday, June 15 to the very early morning of Tuesday, June 19, 1792, in the bay they named *Cala del Descanso*, or “cove of rest”, an appropriate enough name for what seems to have been a pleasant long weekend.

I’m not entirely convinced that *Cala del Descanso* is our *Descanso* (ferry terminal) bay. [It isn’t, see later articles] The Spanish records [John Kendrick’s translation] describe the expedition’s approach to it thus: “...they arrived at the east point of the Bocas de Winthuysen [entrances to Nanaimo Harbour] and passed between the point and the islet...[commonly said to be Snake Island, but why not Entrance Island?].... We followed the coast, still with the objective of looking for an anchorage, and discovered one at a distance of a [nautical] mile from the point...let go the anchor in 6 fathoms sand, stopping between two points”.

Descanso Bay is actually a lot more than one mile from Orlebar Point, so I suppose that the “east point” was Tinson or Malaspina Point, or a combination of the two. The six fathoms are interesting. An 18th-century Spanish fathom was a bit less than an English one is, so we are talking about 33 feet here, and to relate this to a modern chart, we must not forget the tide. In the late afternoon and evening of June 15, 1792, my calculations show that the tide was fairly high,

about 12 feet, so the anchorage would show on a modern chart as about 21 feet, or 3.5 fathoms, or, if you are younger than me, 6.4 metres. The only place in Descanso Bay that is this shallow, and sandy, is the beach along Easthom Road. It fits I suppose, but I do wonder about Taylor Bay. It's much sandier and shallower! Later on in the records it says (paraphrasing) "...we went to visit the interior of the entry of Winthuysen and saw coves which had been previously seen from the land, the second of which is more sheltered than Descanso, but the bottom not as clear, nor with as good holding ground [sounds like the present-day Descanso to me].... We passed a channel trending eastwards [Northumberland Channel] and from its direction should have led to the archipelago [Flat Top Islands] we had seen from the point [Law Point] preceding the east point of the harbour." Full marks to the Spanish—they guessed that Gabriola was an island.

The only problem with my revolutionary theory that Descanso was actually Taylor Bay is water. [\[It was Pilot Bay not Taylor Bay, see later articles\]](#) The Spanish were shown a source of freshwater by the Native people, thirty barrels a day of it, from "two trickles" at a place on the east shore of the harbour and about two cables (400 yards) beyond the location of the ships. No problem there for the conservatives—there is a tiny creek emptying into the sea just around the corner from the ferry terminal. So, unless someone in the Twin Beaches area can point me toward a tiny trickle, or better still, two tiny trickles, of freshwater, I'll have to delay my claim to fame. [\[The source of water was near Sea Girt Road, see later articles\]](#)

The Spanish of both the 1791 and 1792 expeditions made contact with the local people. We know that from the 1791 chart which shows a settlement at or near Silva Bay and an anchorage off the Whalebone Beach area, and from the written records of the 1792 expedition which, unlike those of the earlier one, have survived. In 1792, the Spanish visited the village at Twin Beaches called Wh'sumiiletsen, but it is not clear to me from the records how far from their anchorage this was. Cardero, who travelled with the 1792 expedition and drew the Malaspina Galleries, has left us fascinating portraits of two of the Snunéymux^w chiefs, one from Nanaimo and one from Gabriola. According to the Fort Langley Journals (1828), the Snunéymux^w people travelled each year, en masse, to their village on the Fraser River (the present-day Katzie Reserve across from Port Hammond) near the end of June, so the Spanish visits must have coincided with the time of preparation for departure. This might account for some of their apparent (some might add justified) anxiety at the Spanish presence—but that's another story.
