

George Vancouver (1758-1798)

Named Vashon's Island, May 28, 1792

George Vancouver was an important explorer of Puget Sound. He served for 25 years in the British Navy, and commanded the *Discovery* on her expedition to the North Pacific. In April 1792, George Vancouver entered the Strait of Juan de Fuca and commenced his exploration of Puget Sound. He named every island, mountain, waterway, and point of land in sight -- 75 in all.

Vancouver was the youngest of five children in a well-to-do family from King's Lynn, Norfolk, England. His career began at age 15 (some sources say 13) as an able bodied seaman aboard James Cook's ship, *Resolution*. George's father, John Jasper Vancouver, was assistant collector of customs at King's Lynn (actually the functioning official, as the position of collector was a sinecure). His mother, Bridget Berners, came from an old county family.

King's Lynn was then a busy seaport, and John Jasper had many contacts in maritime and official circles. In 1772, When Cook was preparing to sail on the second of his three great voyages to the Pacific, no doubt it was through those contacts that Jasper was able to bring young George to Cook's attention and have him appointed to the *Resolution*. It was a much sought after position and meant that Vancouver would receive a rigorous training in seamanship, navigation and surveying under Cook and also under William Wales, a noted astronomer, who was serving on the *Resolution*. A decade later, when Vancouver was naming a point on the British Columbia coast after Wales, he noted in his journal that it was to Wales' "kind instruction" that he was indebted "for that information which has enabled me to traverse and delineate these lonely regions."

In October 1780, after passing his examination, he received a lieutenant's commission. His first appointment was to the sloop *Martin*. Early in 1782 she was sent to the West Indies Station, where Vancouver was to spend the better part of five years. His last and most important spell of duty there was in the *Europa*, flagship of Commodore Sir Alan (later Admiral Lord) Gardner, in whom he found a friend and influential patron. It was also in the *Europa* that Vancouver met four young men who were to figure in his own survey of the Northwest Coast—Peter Puget, Joseph Baker, Joseph Whidbey and Zachary Mudge. Vancouver himself rose to be 1st Lieutenant (second-in-command) of the *Europa*, and his friendship with Gardner became doubly important when, not long after the ship returned to England, Gardner became a member of the board of admiralty. Vancouver was given command of the British exploring expedition to the North Pacific. Vancouver's ships were the *Discovery*, 337 tons (not Cook's ship of the same name—a new vessel specially purchased and outfitted), and the much smaller *Chatham*. They sailed from Falmouth on April 1, 1791, and followed Cook's route to the Northwest Coast—the Cape of Good Hope, Australia (the southwest corner of which Vancouver was the first to explore), New Zealand, Tahiti and Hawaii. It was a year-long voyage; the ships reached the coast of California in April 1792 and then sailing north, entered the Strait of Juan de Fuca.



George Vancouver, 1792

Upon entering the Strait of Juan de Fuca Vancouver commenced his exploration of Puget Sound. He named every island, mountain, waterway, and point of land in sight, including previously recorded Spanish landmarks. In May, Lieutenant Peter Puget, under Vancouver's orders, explored more remote western channels, while Vancouver surveyed south of Bainbridge Island's Restoration Point.

George Vancouver's 1792 investigations of Puget Sound and environs were for the purpose of seeking scientific and commercial information. His principal assignment, however, was to arrange meetings with Spanish representatives in Nootka Sound on the west coast of Vancouver Island. Vestiges of the search for the mythical Northwest Passage were also woven into his orders, i.e. to acquire "information with respect to the nature and extent of water communication ... between the North West Coast of America and the country on the opposite side of the continent"



Voyages into the PNW

Vancouver's assignment was complicated. After examining the shorelines and islands that Captain Cook missed in 1778, he was to calm matters with Spain, which had a long-standing claim to Nootka Sound and its general surroundings. This delicate issue had been exacerbated by the 1788 visit of adventurer and retired British Navy Lieutenant John Meares (1756?-1809). Meares named the Strait of Juan de Fuca, Shoalwater (Willapa) Bay and just missed the Columbia River. Meares also established a trading post at Nootka Sound, which nearly precipitated a war with Spain. Captain Vancouver had therefore been asked by the Board of Admiralty to engage the Spanish in diplomatic talks.

George Vancouver was the first recorded European to enter Puget Sound above the entrance to Admiralty Inlet. He soon met Captain Robert Gray of the ship *Columbia Rediviva*, who told him that he (Gray) had discovered the Columbia River. Vancouver did not believe this information, but he changed his mind when his second-in-command, Lieutenant William R. Broughton, who crossed the Columbia bar a month after Gray aboard the *Chatham*, confirmed that he had heard of Gray's previous visit. The Columbia River issue had far-reaching implications, including the strengthening of America's claim to Oregon.



After dropping anchor in 210 feet of water in mid-channel between Blake Island and Bainbridge Island on May 19, 1792, Vancouver began giving names to every prominence and waterway within view:

- Mt. Baker, the 10,778-foot volcanic peak east of Bellingham, was named after his third lieutenant, Joseph Baker;
- Mt. Rainier, at 14,110 feet, honored his friend Rear Admiral Peter Rainier;
- Port Townsend took its name from the Marquis of Townshend;
- Hood's Canal was named for the Right Honorable Lord Hood;
- Marrowstone Point for the island's alleged deposits of marrowstone;
- Whidbey Island honored the master of the *Discovery*, Joseph Whidbey;
- Vashon Island was named for Vancouver's friend and colleague, Captain James Vashon.
- Restoration Point was first called Village Point for an Indian settlement, then changed to honor the anniversary of the restoration to the English throne of the Stuart monarch, Charles II. Restoration Point, which looks across the Sound at today's King County, served as Vancouver's Puget Sound headquarters.

Vancouver entrusted the surveying of the waters immediately to the west of Restoration Point to his clerk, H. M. Orchard, hence the name Port Orchard near Bremerton. Insuring

that his patrons, the Board of Admiralty, were remembered, he named the north part of this great body of water Admiralty Inlet. He called the southern portion -- everything south of today's Tacoma -- Puget's Sound in honor of his valued lieutenant, Peter Puget. In Vancouver's words: "To commemorate Mr. Puget's exertions, the south extremity of it I named Puget's Sound." Over time, despite the name Admiralty Inlet on government charts, the entire inland sea is generally but incorrectly called Puget Sound.



Vancouver and the Indians

The weather was warm during Vancouver's brief visit -- over 90 degrees in the month of May -- so men aboard the *Discovery* saw King County, Admiralty Inlet, and Puget Sound in all its shimmering, verdant glory. Vancouver described the area in glowing terms in his log, then weighed anchor and sailed north to negotiate with the Spanish at Nootka Sound.

Captain Vancouver's Spanish counterpart to the north, Senor Don Juan Francisco de la Bodega y Quadra, was born in Lima, Peru. Quadra was, from virtually all contemporary descriptions, a born leader and gentleman of the Old School. Vancouver and Quadra got along famously, sharing stories and festive dinners on silver plate. Although they became close friends, they could not agree on what to do about Meares's little fort and claim to Nootka Sound.



Vancouver and Sloop *Discovery*

Vancouver suggested that England receive possession of Nootka and Clayoquot and that Neah Bay be considered a free port for both nations. Quadra politely disagreed. What they did agree on was a name for the large island upon which their discussions took place. Amicably called "Quadra and Vancouver's Island," time and the eventual domination of British and Canadians caused the "Quadra" portion to disappear.

Although various opinions concerning George Vancouver persist, his contemporaries and more recent scholars generally give him high marks as a diligent, though strict skipper. Exceptions to this view were his ship's surgeon and botanist, Archibald Menzies, and several of his subordinates. Skilled in his job, Vancouver could be irascible, quarrelsome, and unreasonable in disciplinary actions.

Vancouver fell into poor health toward the end of his career -- perhaps he had tuberculosis -- and was described as "an old man" when he was 40 years old. Whatever his personal quirks or failings, Vancouver's explorations yielded an impressive record of scientific observation, map-making, and a detailed and literary ship's log.

Edmond S. Meany, in *Vancouver's Discovery of Puget Sound*, writes, "[Vancouver's] observations of the soil, the climate, the trees, flowers, and birds are surprising when one remembers the newness of all to members of the party. Especially valuable and interesting are the recorded observations of the natives. Their houses, canoes, weapons,

clothing, food, and language, all were commented upon in a way that will always prove of help to the student of these aboriginal peoples."

Sources:

Edmond S. Meany, *Vancouver's Discovery of Puget Sound* (Portland, Oregon: Binfords & Mort, Publishers., 1942). Also see: Clarence B. Bagley, *History of King County, Washington* (Chicago-Seattle: The S. J. Clarke Publishing Company., 1929); Gordon Speck, *Northwest Explorations*(Portland, Oregon: Binfords & Mort, Publishers, 1970); Murray Morgan, *Puget's Sound* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979).

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