

Not Worthy of More Attention

Captain Vancouver's Omission of Exploration

British Captain George Vancouver explored the Oregon and Washington coastline aboard the H.M.S. *Discovery* in April 1792. He followed several early Spanish explorers, British Captains James Cook and John Meares and others. Captain Vancouver's skills as a navigator and cartographer were said to be only exceeded by that of Captain Cook, with whom Vancouver had sailed previously. Captain Vancouver's current mission was to seek the 'Northwest Passage' and to map the area, and he had a limited sailing season to do so.

Arriving from the 'Sandwich' or Hawaiian Islands, Captain Vancouver eventually sighted Cape Disappointment, named by Captain Meares, which is at the mouth of the Columbia River. But he had expected that a large river, if it existed, would discharge directly into the sea, not realizing that the mouth of the Columbia River curves at that point. That perception, combined with breakers that extended miles into the ocean on the shifting sand, caused him to not recognize this opening as that of a large river, in this case the 'River of the West'. Captain Vancouver's journal of that day includes the following:

April 27, 1792

Noon brought us to a very conspicuous point of land composed of a cluster of hummocks, moderately high, and projecting into the sea from the low land before mentioned. These hummocks are barren, and steep near the sea, but their tops thinly covered with wood. On the south side of this promontory was the appearance of an inlet, or small river, the land behind not indicating it to be of any great extent; nor did it seem accessible for vessels of our burthen, as the breakers extended from the above point two or three miles into the ocean, until they joined those on the beach nearly 4 leagues farther south. On reference to Mr. Meares's description of the coast south of this promontory, I was at first induced to believe it to be cape Showalter. But on ascertaining its latitude, I presumed it to be that which he calls cape Disappointment; and the opening to the south of it, Deception bay. This cape was found to be in latitude 46 (degree) 19', longitude 236 (degree) 6'.

The sea had now changed from it's natural, to river colloured water; the probable consequence of some streams falling into the bay, or into the ocean to the north of it, through the low land. Not considering this opening worthy of more attention, I continued our pursuit to the N. W. being desirous to embrace the advantages of the now prevailing breeze and pleasant weather, so favorable to our examination of the coast, which now took a direction N. 12 W; the latitude at this time was 46 (degree) 14'; longitude 236 (degree) 1 ½'; and the variation of the compass 18 (degree) eastwardly. In this situation we had soundings at the depth of 33 fathoms, black sandy bottom; the northern most land seen from the deck bore by compass north; the promontory of cape Disappointment, from N. 14 E. to N. 32 E.; this, the nearest shore, was about two leagues distant; and the southernmost land in sight bore E. by S.

The journal continues with a description of '...a most luxuriant landscape...' as Captain Vancouver traveled north along the Washington coast. On April 29 *Discovery* entered the Strait of Juan De Fuca

where Captain Vancouver later explored Puget Sound and noted and named Mount Baker, Mount Rainier, and Mount St. Helens and also saw Mount Adams.

On April 29, Capt Vancouver met the American Captain Robert Gray and the *Columbia Rediviva* at the Strait of Juan De Fuca near Cape Flattery, and they compared notes about the area, with Gray saying he felt that there was large river in the area based on his observations on this and a prior voyage to the area in 1788. But Captain Vancouver did not feel this was correct and continued on his northern route and exploration of Puget Sound.

On May 12, while Captain Vancouver was exploring Hood Canal and anchored off Bangor at Hazel Point, Captain Gray entered the mouth of the Columbia River at Cape Disappointment and 'Deception Bay'. The Official Log reads as follows:

At four, A.M., saw the entrance of our desired port bearing east-south-east, distance six leagues; in steering sails, and hauled our wind inshore. At eight, A.M., being a little to windward of the entrance of the harbor, bore away, and run in east-north-east between the breakers, having from five to seven fathoms of water. When we were over the bar, we found this to be a large river of fresh water, up which we steered. Many canoes came alongside.

Captain Gray explored the estuary while anchoring at several locations along the Washington shore, and continued trading. After collecting 450 otter and beaver pelts, he departed the Columbia River on May 20, and traveled north up the coast for further explorations.

In August, Captain Vancouver met with Captain Gray at Nootka Sound, on what is now Vancouver Island, and later saw Captain Gray's chart of the Columbia River mouth. This chart apparently was the one that was discovered in 1961 in Vancouver's forgotten papers. Captain Vancouver realized his error in not exploring 'Deception Bay' and so sent Lieutenant William Broughton up the Columbia River aboard the *Chatham*, arriving at his turnaround at Vancouver Point near Washougal, Washington on October 30, 1792.

Captain Vancouver confirmed that there was no 'Northwest Passage' across the northern portion of the Americas, as had been surmised by the cartographers of the day. He mapped and named many bays, islands and smaller rivers. The mountains he named were on the map made in 1803 by Nicholas King, as requested by Thomas Jefferson and Albert Gallatin. These were the mountains the Lewis and Clark Expedition were searching for as they descended the Snake River in October 1805. The omission of the Columbia River and also the Fraser River from his discoveries, combined with the subsequent arrival of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, then helped to solidify the United State's claim to the area when the boundary disputes were eventually settled.

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