

Captain George Vancouver's Unnecessary Excursion

The exploration of the northwest coast of North America in 1792-1794 by British Captain George Vancouver was an epic example of seamanship, discipline and constant dedication to the task of coastal mapping in the labyrinth of bays and inlets of this coastal area. It was also one of the world's epic feats of endurance as the longest sea voyage in history covering a span of more than four and a half years, eclipsing those of Ferdinand Magellan, Francis Drake, and even James Cook's third expedition. So, it is no wonder that Vancouver is held in such high regard throughout England and North America.

The results of Vancouver's expedition were also important to that of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, as his detailed mapping found its way into Nicholas King's map of 1803, which was itself commissioned by Thomas Jefferson and carried by Lewis and Clark.

When on the northwest coast Vancouver observed but did not recognize the opening of the Columbia River at the Pacific Ocean. Nor did he recognize the opening of another major waterway, the Fraser River on the southern British Columbia coast. These are two omissions would have been helpful to his mission of mapping, exploring and claiming discoveries for the Crown. They have resulted in some criticism, but allowances have been made on these issues. However, while in Puget Sound, Vancouver inexplicably took it upon himself to proceed on his own mapping expedition, which actually duplicated a major portion of the work by his officers and crew, wasting valuable time and resources.

While HMS *Discovery* and HMS *Chatham* were anchored at Contractor's Point in Discovery Bay, which is west of Port Townsend and Port Hadlock, Vancouver and his men surveyed Hood Canal. After departing Discovery Bay on May 17, 1792, they had a brief landing at Protection Island and then proceeded down Admiralty Inlet to what is now Puget Sound. The *Chatham* departed to explore the San Juan Islands, with the *Discovery* eventually anchoring west of West Seattle's Alki Point in between Restoration Point and Blake Island. It was in these few days that Vancouver sighted and identified Mount Rainier and Mount St. Helens, two landmarks on the King Map that were so important to Lewis and Clark on their outbound journey.

The process of mapping the coastal areas was to anchor their ships and send out smaller ship's boats, by oar or sail, to do their detailed surveys. This included a standardized method of keeping the mainland on the starboard or right side of their small boats. Thus, they would travel in was in effect a counterclockwise direction, eventually returning to their starting point.

While *Chatham* was in the San Juan Islands, *Discovery* 3rd Lieutenant Peter Puget, master Joseph Whidbey, naturalist Archibald Menzies and other crewmen set out from Restoration Point at 4:00 AM on May 19 in the *Discovery*'s smaller boats with the task to map the area south of their anchorage, wherever it may lead them. With provisions for a week, they headed south down Colvos Passage on the west side of Vashon Island.

After making various stops, Puget departed his final camp at Hunter's Point on the morning of May 25th and then went to what he called 'Friendly Village' at the head of Eld Inlet near what is now Evergreen State College near Tumwater. Puget then explored adjacent Budd Inlet at Olympia and had breakfast

and decided to proceed directly back to *Discovery*. While on their lengthy return at 8:00 PM one of Puget's men briefly noted behind them a campfire on the northern portion of Ketron Island, adjacent to present Steilacoom. They thought that this fire was related to a camp by local natives. Puget and Whidbey arrived back at *Discovery* at 2:00 AM on May 26.

Vancouver departed *Discovery* on his own survey trip in the early morning of May 25th and proceeded down East Passage alongside Des Moines and the mainland shore. He stopped for lunch at Brown's Point, just north of Tacoma and Commencement Bay and then made their evening camp at the northern end of Ketron Island, mentioned above. Vancouver's campfire was apparently the one briefly noted by Puget's crew. Vancouver did mention that he had briefly seen sails of two small boats that evening, but the boats were not close enough to identify or hail, and Vancouver felt they were native canoes.

The next day Vancouver departed and proceeded to make several stops in the Sound, unaware of the efforts made by Puget and Whidbey, and apparently not suspecting that the two small boats he had seen were Puget and Whidbey concluding their surveys. The areas that were duplicated by Vancouver were far flung locations of Budd Inlet at Olympia, and the head of Case Inlet at Fair Harbor. Vancouver returned to *Discovery* at 9:00 PM on May 28. *Discovery* weighed anchor at Restoration Point and departed for the northern Puget Sound and San Juan Islands at 8:30 AM on May 29.

So let us consider what the result would have been if the two surveying parties would have had a good view ahead of each other, where opportunity and curiosity could have prevailed, as opposed to a fleeting view in their rear view mirror. Certainly, Vancouver would have cut his excursion short and return to *Discovery* with Puget and Whidbey. Hindsight is always helpful, but there seems to be no clear reason for Vancouver to duplicate the work of his capable and qualified officers and crew, aside from a desire to place his own personal stamp on the survey results.

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