

Field Guide to Coronado History:

Who Discovered Coronado?

By Bruce Linder



Galleon San Salvador approaching Point Loma and Coronado,
September 1542

Ever ask yourself the question of when, exactly, Coronado was “discovered?”

As with anything, there are several approaches to this, depending on what you think the word “discovered” means to you.

Native American Indians in all likelihood were the true discoverers. But no one outside of local or regional circles really knew much of that discovery, as Indian historical traditions were largely oral in

nature.

Elisha Babcock and Hampton Story “discovered” and realized Coronado’s true potential and had a hand in naming our little island – you don’t want to discount that.

But, if “discovery” conjures up visions of explorers, sailing ships, mapmakers, and venturing into the unknown; that discoverer was, without a doubt, Spaniard Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo. And that date of discovery reaches back 470 years to September 1542 with his arrival in San Diego Bay aboard galleon *San Salvador*.

That date is important in history as there are parallels between Cabrillo’s voyage of discovery along the American west coast to what was happening almost simultaneously with voyages of discovery along America’s east coast. If *San Salvador* is, correctly, the “founding ship” of Coronado and California, she predated the *Mayflower*, the founding ship of Pilgrim New England, by almost 80 years.

Cabrillo led an expedition of three small exploration ships, part of a two-pronged venture by New Spain to discover trade routes across the Pacific to connect Mexico with Asia. Cabrillo was to head northward up the unexplored coast of California (theory had the coastline bending to the west toward Japan), then connecting with a second expedition that had sailed due westward across the Pacific.

Sailing from southern Mexico, Cabrillo made rapid progress up the Baja California coastline carefully charting harbors and coastlines. After weeks of sailing he happened upon three small islands, naming them “Islas Desiertas,” and then recorded “high mountains” inland and haze from the smoke of Indian controlled burns of open land after harvest. He had finally reached what no European had ever seen, the coastline of San Diego and the Coronado Islands beyond.

The agreeable curve of the white sands of today’s Silver Strand would have certainly caught his gaze but probably not the bay beyond. More important to Cabrillo at that moment was the dramatic jut of the Point Loma headland.

As Cabrillo sailed in uncharted seas, his routine was to seek a protected anchorage every night so as not to run into unseen dangers in the dark. Approaching from the south, the safety of an anchorage behind Point Loma would have been obvious and it drew *San Salvador* toward it like a magnet.

Cabrillo anchored snugly under Point Loma's heights near present day Ballast Point. His reception by the natives was generally positive helped by Cabrillo's enlightened aim of friendship rather than conquest. As important, the impressive expanse of the newly discovered bay suddenly became clear ("a sheltered port and a very good one," read Cabrillo's official description of the newly discovered harbor). Cabrillo named the bay "San Miguel" and quickly ordered a series of land and bay surveys.

Cabrillo's priorities always included trading for food from the natives and foraging for all-important water and firewood. From the natives, he learned that the best source for water, remarkably, was within a stone's throw of his anchorage – at a bounteous natural spring located on the flat, scrubby land across the bay's entrance from *San Salvador*.

As Spanish boats shuttled to and from the spring near what is today Zuniga Point on North Island, sailors interacted with native families, who came for the convenient water and well as for fish and oysters. Spanish survey parties would have undoubtedly walked Coronado's nearby beach and explored the open spaces of the two peninsular lands separated by a narrow inlet on the bay, later to be named Spanish Bight.

Cabrillo would stay five days, anchored in the protected harbor, before continuing his voyage northward all the way up to the Oregon border. His other discoveries would include Palos Verdes, the Channel Islands, Point Conception, Monterey Bay, and the Big Sur coast. *San Salvador* would return a second time to Coronado and San Diego harbor on her return voyage south.

Upon the ship's return to Mexico, Coronado and San Miguel Bay began to appear on a hundred different Spanish charts of California and the Pacific. Now "discovered" and no longer simply labeled as

“Unknown Land,” the entire California coastline beckoned for further exploration. And for Coronado, a second chapter of “discovery” would soon follow.

A full-scale authentic sailing replica of galleon *San Salvador*, a five-year project of the Maritime Museum of San Diego to build, will be launched with great fanfare from Broadway Pier on Sunday, April 19th – a once-every-400-year event.

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