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TIP of BALLAST POINT

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TIP OF BALLAST POINT

Ballast Point, in San Diego Bay, California, was discovered by the Spanish explorer Cabrillo in 1542. It was named La Punta de Guijarros (the Point of Cobblestones) by Vizcaino, the next European to visit the bay, in 1602. It sheltered the anchorage of Vila's expedition by water, which met the land expedition of Father Serra and jointly founded the first settlement in Alta California in 1769. The tip of Ballast Point was the site of the first Pacific Coast beacon light. Farther from the tip was the location of Fort Guijarros, built by the Spanish authorities after the British explorer Vancouver reported on the defense conditions of the Spanish province in 1793. An American ship, the Lelia Byrd, exchanged shots with the guns of Fort Guijarros when the ship's commander attempted to smuggle sea otter skins out of the harbor in 1803. A whaling station was operated on Ballast Point from about 1856 until the United States government acquired it, in 1869, for military, lighthouse and quarantine purposes.

The eastern, northern, and northwestern shores of San Diego Bay resemble a great fishhook in shape, with the point of the hook, represented by Point Loma, extending southward. The barb of the hook is Ballast Point, which

projects northeastward from Point Loma. So close is the tip of Ballast Point to Coronado that the harbor entrance is only about one-fourth of a mile in width. A long, low, curving peninsula connects Coronado with the mainland at the southern end of the bay.

San Diego has been called the cradle of civilization on the Pacific Coast of the United States, and similarly, the Jamestown and Plymouth Rock of the West. Based upon priority, however, the eastern places might be called the Ballast Points of the Atlantic Coast, since the visit to San Diego Bay by Juan Rodriguez, commonly called Cabrillo, was made sixty-five years before the settlement at Jamestown and nearly eight decades before the historic landing at Plymouth.

Soon after the soldiers and explorers under the command of Cortez had reached the Pacific Coast of what we call Mexico, plans for reaching the East Indies, the goal of Columbus, were begun. These involved exploration of the coast to the northwest, as well as across the Pacific.¹

The rugged nature of the land along the west coast made it imperative that exploration be conducted by sea expeditions. To outfit the small vessels built on the Pacific for that purpose, cordage, iron work, anchors and guns were

1. G. Davidson, "The Discovery of San Diego Bay," Transactions and proceedings of the Geographical Society of the Pacific, III, 37.

brought overland from Vera Cruz, on the Gulf of Mexico.

Discovery of the Gulf of California led to an expedition commanded by Ulloa, in 1539-1540, which, after some difficulty with adverse winds, crossed to the west side of the gulf, rounded the lower tip of Lower or Baja California, and went as far north as a point about 165 nautical miles to the south of the entrance to San Diego Bay.

The viceroy, Don Antonio de Mendoza, fitted out the next expedition of two ships and placed in command Juan Rodriguez, commonly called by his mother's name, Cabrillo, and Bartolome Ferrer or Ferrelo. Cabrillo, to use his common name, was Portuguese and a very good mariner; Ferrelo was his chief pilot and second in command.

The expedition started June 27, 1542, from the Port of Navidad on the west coast of Mexico, to the southeast of the southern tip of Lower California, in about the same latitude as the southern end of the Gulf of Mexico.

Ferrelo, who took command of the flagship after Cabrillo's death in January, 1543, a few months after the bay of San Diego had been discovered, supplies the meager details of that discovery in his diary, as follows:²

2. Translation from the Spanish of the account by Pilot Ferrel (Ferrelo) of the voyage of Cabrillo along the west coast of North America in 1542, United States Geographical Surveys, west of the 100th meridian, VII, 1879, Appendix to Part 1. 305 ff.

The Thursday (September 28, 1542) following they proceeded about six leagues along a coast running north-northwest and discovered a port enclosed and very good, to which they gave the name of San Miguel (now San Diego). It is in thirty-four and one-third degrees (actually $32^{\circ}40'$) and after anchoring in it they went on shore, which had people, three of whom remained and all the others fled. To these they gave some presents; and they said by signs that in the interior had passed people like the Spaniards. They manifested much fear. This same day at night they went on shore from the ships to fish with a net, and it appears that there were here some Indians, and they began to discharge arrows and wounded three men.

The next day, in the morning, they entered farther within the harbor, which is large, with the boat, and they brought away two boys, who understood nothing by signs, and they gave them both shirts, and immediately sent them away.

And the following day, in the morning, there came to the ship three full-grown Indians, and by signs they said that there were traveling in the interior men like us, with beards, and clothed and armed like those of the ships, and they made signs that they carried cross-bow and swords, and made gestures with the right arm, as if they were throwing lances, and went running in a posture as if riding on horseback and made signs that they killed many of the native Indians.³ This people are well disposed and advanced; they go covered with skins of animals. Being in this port there passed a very great tempest, but on account of the port's

3. "Reference probably here made to Coronado's expedition in 1540," comments H. W. Henshaw, author of the introductory notes accompanying the translation.

being good they suffered nothing. It was a violent storm from the west-southwest and south-southwest. This is the first storm which they have experienced. They were in this port until the following Tuesday. Here Christians are called Guacamal.

The following Tuesday, on the 3d day of the month of October, they departed from this port....

Such is the translation into English of the all too brief description of the first contact made by Europeans within what was later to become the State of California.

Although Ferrelo's account is not specific as to the exact spot on which the first landing was made by Cabrillo's expedition, study of the topography has convinced local historians that Ballast Point is the most highly probable.⁴ The following description of the San Diego Bay area, from the standpoint of a student of the Pacific Coast, renders the conclusion likely:⁵

Next to that of San Francisco no harbor on the Pacific Coast of the United States approaches in excellence the Bay of San Diego. To the southward are the great landfalls of Table Mountain and the Three Sharp Peaks; and the secondary landfall of the Coronados Islands. And from either the southwest or northwest the location is readily distinguished by the notable landmark of Point Loma, (from which Ballast

4. Rensch, Hero Eugene, and Rensch, Ethel Grace, Historic Spots in California, 167.

5. Davidson, op. cit., 45-46.

Point projects) whose southern point is in latitude $32^{\circ}39'$ north. Vessels approaching San Diego Bay make the ridge of Point Loma as a long, flat-topped Island when about twenty-five miles distant. It is clearly in view when the main land is not yet seen. This general appearance of the high ridge being an island is occasioned by the bay to the southeast, by the low land to the northeast, and by the Puerto Falso (False Bay) and adjacent low land to the north and northwest.

The entrance to the Bay of San Diego lies under the southeast side of Point Loma, about two miles inside the extremity of the Point. It is easily approached on account of the absence of outlying dangers, and is marked by a great field of kelp to the southwest, and by great buoys leading across the bar. Just outside the narrow entrance to the bay is a bar having 20 feet of water upon it at low water; but on account of the absence of heavy seas in this low latitude and the protection of the great kelp field, and the projection of Point Loma outside the bar, the bar may be safely passed at all times. In 42 years (preceding 1892) there are only two or three reports of the swell breaking upon the bar during the southeast storms of winter.

The bay itself is a long curving body of water twelve miles in length and from one-half to two miles in width. For the first six or seven miles from the entrance there is a fine broad channel, carrying four to eight fathoms (24-48 ft.) of water. The southern part of the bay is occupied by extensive flats through which a channel with 20 to 12 feet of water is formed. Between the southern part of the bay and the ocean lies a very narrow strip of low dunes. Near the entrance this expands into a broad

and extensive area, which presses close upon and borders the channel abreast of Ballast Point.

When the expedition touched again at San Diego Bay in March, 1543, Ferrelo was in command. Cabrillo had died and was buried at San Miguel Island, westernmost of the Santa Barbara group. After waiting six days for the other boat from which his had become separated, Ferrelo sailed away. Thereafter, for nearly sixty years, no white men passed through the harbor entrance.

Sebastian Vizcaino came to the Pacific Coast in 1602. His squadron entered the harbor on November 10 and presumably anchored off Ballast Point. Next day an expedition went ashore to survey a hill, no doubt Point Loma. Vizcaino wrote of his observations: "The summit of this hill (457 feet high) commanded a view of the whole harbor, which appeared very great and very commodious, and well sheltered from every wind." From there they also saw False Bay to the northwest. On their return, Vizcaino "ordered a tent to be taken on shore for religious worship," evidently the first church edifice to be constructed in California. Vizcaino's account continues:

(he ordered) that the ships should be cleaned and tallowed; the people

6. Davidson, op. cit., 43-45.

at the same time being employed in wooding and keeping guard. They obtained their water from a sandy beach, on a little island of sand where they dug deep trenches, in which, during the flood tide, the water was fresh and good, but on the ebb tide it was salt.

One day a sentinel, who was posted on the hill, gave warning that he saw a great number of Indians coming along the shore, naked, and their skins daubed with black and white colors, and armed with bows and arrows. On this the Gen. desired Father Antonio de la Ascension to go toward them and offer them peace. The Father was attended by Ensign Juan Francisco and six soldiers. On coming up to the Indians, having made signs of peace (with a piece of white linen, and throwing earth upon their hands) the savages immediately delivered their bows and arrows to the soldiers. Father Antonio embraced them and gave them bread and necklaces, with which they were greatly pleased; but on coming to the General's quarters the Indians, at the sight of such a number of people, drew back to a little eminence, from whence they sent two women, who, approaching the General's tent with a timid air, the Fathers and others made them presents of beads, biscuits and strings of bugles, and then dismissed them to give their countrymen an account of the usage they had met with from the strangers. Their report was doubtless very favorable, for soon after the Indians all came with them to see the Spaniards. Most of them were painted or besmeared with black and white and their heads covered with feathers. The General and the others received them with extreme courtesy, and distributed among them several things and a great deal of fish which had been caught with the seine in their presence. The kind of paint they used looked like a mixture of

silver and blue color, and on asking them by signs what it was they gave us a piece of metallic ore, from which they had made it; and they signified by signs that a certain people of the country who had beards were clothed like the Spaniards, made from this mineral very fine ribbons, resembling the laces on the soldiers' buff coats, and some like that on a purple velvet doublet, in which the General was then dressed, adding that these men, by their dress, complexions and customs, seemed to be of the same country with ourselves. The Indians were quite transported with the good treatment shown them (in marked contrast with that accorded them later), and every third day they came for biscuit and fish, bringing with them skins of several kinds of beasts, as sables, wild cats, and the nets with which they catch them.

In this harbor there is a great variety of fish, as oysters, mussels, lobsters, soles, sardines, etc., and in some of the esteros, which make into the land, were found geese, ducks, etc; and quails, rabbits and hares were also found in great numbers. The General and Father Antonio being desirous of viewing the country took with them some soldiers, and walked a considerable distance from the coast, and were highly delighted with the mildness of the climate and the goodness of the soil.

Everything being finished according to the General's orders, the squadron left this place on the 20th of November (1602), but many of the soldiers were sickly, and some very valuable persons had died while they continued in this harbor.

The deadly scurvy had taken toll, and took much more before the expedition returned to its home port in January, 1603.

Another long period, 166 years, passed, during which the Spanish made no efforts to settle at San Diego. But by 1769 Spain at last decided that if she did not act soon the Russians or others might secure rights along the coast. Therefore, two expeditions by land and two by water were dispatched from Lower California by Inspector-general Don Jose de Galvez, with instructions to meet at San Diego. After a 54-day voyage the first vessel, the San Antonio, under command of Captain Juan Perez, reached San Diego Bay and anchored at Ballast Point, then called Punta de Guijarros, on April 11, 1769.⁷

Two of the crew had died and half the remainder were too ill with scurvy to do any work when, on May 1, the other ship, San Carlos, anchored beside the San Antonio at Point Guijarros. Captain Vila found that Captain Perez was himself in poor health and that he had only seven men able to work. Some of them had symptoms of the scurvy. Two missionary fathers were the only ones in the party in actual good health. Captain Vila himself had only two seamen in good condition. All the other sailors, and more than half of the soldiers, were ill with scurvy. Even the surgeon was too ill to aid the others. During the next few

7. Engelhardt, Zephyrin, San Diego Mission, 9.

days, small parties were sent ashore to bury the dead, to explore the nearby territory, and to build barracks to care for their sick comrades.

After the arrival of the land parties, it was decided to send the San Antonio to San Blas to secure supplies and more seamen to replace the sick and the dead. The need for a beacon for such vessels from the south led to the fact that: "The actual first light on California's shores was very truly Spanish. It was a lantern hung on a pole erected at the tip of Ballast Point; and was the signal for supply ships coming northward after 1769."⁸

The British explorer, Captain George Vancouver, ably summed up the situation of the Spanish establishments at San Diego and elsewhere. So much so, indeed, that although his suggestions were made to the English government they were carried out by the Spanish.

Vancouver had been instructed to keep in view as the principal objects of his explorations of the North Pacific:⁹

1st, the acquiring accurate information with respect to the nature and extent of any water communication which may tend, in any considerable

8. Davidson, Winifred, Where California began, 143.

9. Vancouver, George, Voyage of discovery, I, 60-61.

degree, to facilitate an intercourse for the purpose of commerce, between the northwest coast, and the country upon the opposite side of the continent, which are inhabited or occupied by his Majesty's subjects.

2dly, the ascertaining, with as much precision as possible, the number, extent, and situation of any settlements which have been made within the limits above mentioned, by any European nation, and the time when such settlement was first made.

These investigations, to determine whether the mythical Straits of Anien which were supposed to provide a short passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific on the north side of the new continent actually existed and also to survey the settlements of other European nations in the Pacific area, excited the suspicions of the Spanish.

The Spanish governor at Monterey gave orders that Vancouver should be provided with only necessary supplies, but extended no other assistance. Nevertheless, several of the officers in charge of various presidios, including the one at San Diego, courteously gave him every help which a liberal construction of the restrictive orders of their superior would allow.

Vancouver anchored near Point Guijarros, which he referred to as "ponta de Guiranos,"¹⁰ a low spit of land, projecting from the high steep cliffs within the former, and

10. Vancouver, Voyage of discovery, IV, 358.

which, properly speaking, constitutes the west point of entrance into the port."

In drawing his conclusions from his extensive voyages of discovery, Captain Vancouver expressed his amazement that the Spanish were so careless of their dear-bought possessions as to leave them almost entirely unprotected from attack and easy capture by any nation which chose to send a few men to take them. Having made two short visits to San Diego Bay, in the latter part of 1793 and in December, 1794, he wrote:¹¹

With little difficulty St. Diego might also be rendered a place of considerable strength, by establishing a small force at the entrance of the port; where, at this time, there were neither works, guns, houses, or other habitations nearer than the presidio, which is at the distance of at least six miles from the port, and where they have only three small pieces of brass cannon.

Such is the condition of this country as it respects to its internal security, and external defence: but why such an extent of territory should have been, and after all the expence (sic) and labour that has been bestowed upon its colonization turned to no account whatever, is a mystery in the science of state policy not easily to be explained.

The remedy suggested by Vancouver for the weakness so apparent to him at San Diego Bay was begun shortly.

11. Vancouver, Voyage of discovery, IV, 412-413.

Instead of the three small pieces of brass cannon, which were much like those used on yachts for firing salutes and were far less deadly than a modern rifle, a fort with a battery of ten guns was planned. Located on Ballast Point, the fort was not finished before 1800.¹²

In that year the ship Betsy, the first United States craft to enter San Diego Bay, anchored there for wood and water. Next, in February, 1803, Captain John Brown, in command of the Alexander, was compelled to leave after a searching party sent by the Spanish commandant discovered on board nearly 500 sea otter skins. Captain Brown had secured them from the Indians and soldiers, regardless of the fact that such trade was strictly forbidden by Spanish laws.¹³

One of the most exciting events in the history of Ballast Point was the attempt by Captain William Shaler and Richard J. Cleveland, mate and part-owner of the Lelia Byrd, to escape with smuggled otter skins in March, 1803. After the experience with the Alexander, the Spanish made a prompt effort to prevent a repetition of illicit trading.

The commandant boarded the Lelia Byrd and announced that she must leave as soon as she had taken on required supplies. He left a guard of five men on board to see that no

12. Smythe, History of San Diego, 85.

13. Ibid., 88-89.

trading was done meanwhile. After three days he again went aboard the vessel to receive his pay for the supplies furnished, expecting that she would leave next morning.

The traders had discovered that a thousand otter skins were in the possession of the commandant. Had there been any opportunity, they would have been only too glad to procure them. Before 9:00 o'clock at night a boat went ashore for skins, presumably secured elsewhere, and returned safely. A second boat was intercepted, however, and the captured men were bound and kept under guard all night. In the morning they were rescued by four of their comrades who, "to prevent mischief, took away their (the Spanish soldiers) arms, dipped them in the water, and left them on the beach."¹⁴

The Americans disarmed the Spanish guardsmen, who were still on board, and made ready to sail out of the harbor, past the fort on Point Guijarros. Previous examination had shown them that the fort had six nine-pounders, with plenty of powder and ball. Shaler and Cleveland moved all six of their three-pound cannon to the side facing the fort. The land breeze had become so weak that it took them three-quarters of an hour to come from their anchorage a mile inside the harbor entrance, past Point Guijarros. As

14. R. J. Cleveland, A narrative of voyage and commercial enterprises, 197.

described by Cleveland:¹⁵

As soon as our sails were loosed and we began to heave up the anchor, a gun without shot was discharged from the battery and the Spanish flag hoisted; perceiving no effect from this, they fired a shot ahead. By this time our anchor was up, all sail was set, and we were gradually approaching the fort. In the hope of preventing their firing, we caused the guard in their uniforms to stand alone in the most exposed and conspicuous station; but it had no effect, not even when so near the fort, that they must have been heard imploring them to desist firing, and seen to fall with their faces to the deck, at every renewed discharge of the cannon. We had been subjected to a cannonade of three quarters of an hour, without returning a shot, and, fortunately, with injury only to our rigging and sails. When arrived abreast the fort, several shot struck our hull, one between wind and water, which was temporarily stopped by a wad of oakum. We now opened our fire, and, at the first broadside, saw numbers, probably of those who came to see the fun, scampering away up the hill at the back of the fort. Our second broadside seemed to have caused the complete abandonment of their guns, as none were fired afterwards; nor could we see any person in the fort, excepting a soldier who stood upon the ramparts, waving his hat, as if to desire us to desist firing.

Having passed out of reach of their

15. Cleveland, A narrative of voyages and commercial enterprises, 198.

cannon, the poor guards, who had been left on board, saw themselves completely in our power, without the chance of rescue, and probably calculated on such treatment as they knew would have been our lot, if equally in the power of their Commandant. Their exhibition of fear was really ludicrous, for, while we were tying up their fire arms, so as to prevent their using them, and getting the boat ready to send them harmlessly on shore, they were all the time tremblingly imploring for mercy; nor could they be made to believe, until they were actually on shore, that we intended to do them no harm. When landed and their arms handed to them, they embraced each other, crossed themselves, and fell on their knees in prayer. As our boat was leaving them, they rose up and cried at the utmost stretch of their voices, 'Vivan, vivan los Americanos.'

Ironically enough, the otter skins, worth probably about 8,000 dollars in San Diego and five or ten times as much in China, were never sold. Three years after they were taken from the traders they were found by their owners to be decayed and were thrown into the ocean.¹⁶

The story of the fight between the trading ship and the little fort on Point Guijarros was still being told, with all the variations which time and repetition bring, thirty-three years later, when Richard Henry Dana visited San Diego.

16. Smythe, History of San Diego, 91-92.

In July, 1828, Captain John Bradshaw of the Franklin was injured and his ship was damaged in both hull and rigging when he was fired on while escaping past the fort on Ballast Point. He had been accused of smuggling and ordered to deposit his cargo in the warehouse, pending an investigation of the charges. Instead of keeping his promise to comply with that demand, he cut his cable and hurried away in a shower of cannon balls.¹⁷

No garrison was maintained at Fort Guijarros after 1835. In 1839 only two of the nine cannon were serviceable, although there were fifty cannisters of grape and 300 balls. Not even a guard was provided for the property, and in 1840 the contents of the fort were sold for forty dollars.¹⁸

About 1856 or 1857 a whaling station was established on Ballast Point.¹⁹ The whales were killed with bomb lances shot from small boats, and towed to the trying works at the point. The blubber was cut into pieces and heated until brown in two 150-gallon iron pots. The pieces were pressed to extract the oil, and the residue was used for fuel. Ladled into casks to cool, the oil was

17. Smythe, History of San Diego, 117.

18. Ibid., 128-129.

19. E. C. Starks, "A History of California Shore Whaling," Fish Bulletin No. 6, State of California Fish and Game Commission.

stored, awaiting shipment.²⁰ When the United States government acquired Ballast Point, in 1869, for military, lighthouse and quarantine purposes, the whaling station there was abandoned.²¹ In the 1880's a lighthouse was built at the water's edge on Ballast Point. In 1907, Smythe wrote of a fog bell there, which, he said, "It is necessary to use but little."²²

The many rounded stones on the point suggested to Vizcaino, in 1602, the name La Punta de Guijarros - the Point of Cobblestones. American trading ships, after bringing cargoes of English and Yankee goods from Boston, carried away many tons of the stones as ballast.²³ Quantities of the cobbles were taken to Sacramento and sold at twenty dollars a ton for street paving;²⁴ some went around the Horn to Boston and other east coast cities for the same use.²⁵ Through serving first as ballast and then as cobblestones, the rocks made a logical connection between the original Spanish name, La Punta de Guijarros, and the present American one, Ballast Point.

20. Smythe, History of San Diego, 111.

21. Starks, "A History of California Shore Whaling," Fish Bulletin No. 6, State of California Fish and Game Commission.

22. Smythe, History of San Diego, 702.

23. R. A. Vandegrift and L. Mecham, "San Diego City," The Grizzly Bear Vol. XXVI, No. 6, April, 1920.

24. Mrs. A. S. C. Forbes, California missions and landmarks, 51.

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