

CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL LANDMARKS SERIES

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TRINIDAD HEAD

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by

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TRINIDAD HEAD

On the northern California coast, far above Cape Mendocino, just a few points beyond 41° , there is a sharp and high headland which juts out into the Pacific Ocean. To the southeast, at its foot and sheltered by it, is a little cove, the none too sure haven since the eighteenth century of white mariners from many nations. In 1579, Francis Drake, after his audacious and successful course of depredation along the entire Pacific Coast of America, probably sighted this promontory, and possibly even its bay, in his search for a place to refit his treasure-laden ship and to refresh his tired crew.¹ Sebastian Vizcaino, during his voyage of exploration in 1603, might have done the same, although this is far less likely.²

Then followed, as far as is known, a century and a half in which no white man or his ship approached this part of the coast. Annually the Manila galleons plied across the North Pacific from the Philippines to Acapulco, but hardly as far north as this. As yet Spain herself had no interest in exploring or in settling this far northern

1. Davidson, Discovery of Humboldt Bay, 2-3.

2. Coy, The Humboldt Bay region, 1850-1875, 20-21.

coast, and other nations had not yet begun to intrude into the North Pacific and thus to challenge Spain's claim to exclusive sovereignty over it.

During the third quarter of the eighteenth century a change came about. What we today call the Pacific Northwest, as well as the North Pacific Ocean, threatened to become more or less intense areas of international rivalry. During the entire seventeenth century, Russia had been expanding eastward across the forests, plains, and tundras of Siberia, and by 1706 she stood at Kamchatka, facing the Pacific and wondering how rich the rumored land, eastward across the sea, really was.

To Vitus Bering, a Dane, came the commission from the Russian imperial government to explore eastward and northward in the Pacific from Kamchatka. In 1728, he passed through the strait which now bears his name, and with Chirikof, in 1741, reached the North American mainland. Then followed the first swarming of the "outlaw hunters" for the rich seal and otter skins of the Aleutian Islands. In distant St. Petersburg the imperial interest was thereby eventually re-awakened in this new region, and in 1766-1769 Krenitzin and Levashef were sent to follow up the explorations begun by Bering and to investigate the optimistic reports of the fur traders.³

3. For a concise resume of this Russian advance, see Chapman, Founding of Spanish California, 175 ff.

At that time the English, by sea and land, were also approaching the North Pacific coast area. Most of their voyages around South America in that period, it is true, were restricted to the South Pacific. But with Canada in their full possession since 1763, the English were also advancing by land from Montreal and the shores of Hudson Bay. The rich pelts of beaver, mink, and bear were here, as well, the prizes sought. The tempo of this westward and northward drive was, moreover, soon to be increased by the determined rivalry between the Northwest and the Hudson Bay fur companies, whereby English explorers and traders approached ever nearer the Arctic and the Pacific oceans.⁴

To Spain, this vision of what might be was very distressing. Clearly the danger was not imminent, but an ever greater threat to her centuries-old hegemony of the Pacific was nevertheless there. Particularly, her rich possession of New Spain would be one of the first to be endangered. In answer, therefore, Spain advanced her own frontier. In 1769-1770, by the founding of San Diego and Monterey, Alta California was occupied, and its northern settlement became for the time being the last Spanish outpost.

4. For a brief account of this English expansion by land and sea, consult Chapman, A history of California: the Spanish Period, 262-268.

Still the Spanish did not rest easily. Previously, and now again, the Conde de Lacy, Spanish ambassador to Russia, sent alarming reports about the plans of Russians and other foreigners in the North Pacific. New exploring expeditions northward along the California coast to a higher latitude than ever before were therefore ordered by the home government. Thus, tardily, was opened a new period of Spanish discovery along the western coast of North America, interrupted since the time of Vizcaino.

By August, 1773, the decision had been reached to send six capable naval officers to New Spain to conduct the proposed new explorations from the west coast as a base, but these did not leave Spain until June of the following year.⁵ Meanwhile, Bucareli, the viceroy of New Spain, had sent out a trial expedition of one vessel, the Santiago, under the command of Juan Pérez, an old Manila galleon pilot, with orders to sail to 60° north, and to claim for Spain such land as he touched. Late in January, 1774, Pérez sailed from the port of San Blas, reached Monterey in May, and the following month sailed northwestward, not sighting land again until he had reached 54° on July 19th. He did not go much farther north, nor did he land or take possession of any part of the country. He made his return to Monterey

5. Wagner, H. R. and Baker, A. J., "Fray Benito de la Sierra's account of the Hezeta expedition to the northwest coast in 1775," in the California Historical Society Quarterly, IX, (1930), 203.

mainly out of sight of land. "Thus ended," as Wagner says, "a perfectly futile expedition."⁶

Even before Pérez returned to San Blas, the naval officers detailed by the Spanish government had arrived in Mexico City, and Bucareli immediately set about preparing for a second expedition along the northwest coast. Soon, at San Blas, all was a bustle. The Santiago was again made ready, this time to sail under the command of Bruno de Hezeta, who had orders to advance northward to 65°. The thirty-six foot schooner Sonora was fitted out as consort to the larger ship and placed under Juan de Ayala and Juan Francisco Bodega y Quadra, with Francisco Antonio Mourelle as second sailing master. A third ship, the San Carlos, commanded by Don Miguel Manrique, was to accompany the expedition and was charged with the exploration of San Francisco Bay. Owing to the scarcity of secular clergymen to serve as chaplains on the ships, the Franciscan College of San Fernando in Mexico City was called upon to supply them, two, Miguel de la Campa Cos and Benito de la Sierra, being detailed to go.⁷

"On March 16, 1775," says Fray Benito de la Sierra in his diary of the voyage, "at five of the afternoon, we left

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6. Wagner, H. R. and Baker, A. J., "Fray Benito de la Sierra's account of the Hezeta expedition to the northwest coast in 1775," in the California Historical Society Quarterly, IX, (1930), 204.
7. For the preparation of the Hezeta expedition, see: Wagner, H.R. and Baker, A.J., "Fray Benito de la Sierra's account of the Hezeta expedition to the northwest coast in 1775," in the California Historical Society Quarterly, IX, (1930), 204-207.

the church of San Blas with the image of Our Lady, Maria Santissima, and reciting the litany advanced in procession to the shore where we embarked." The Voyage was hardly under way before an unusual incident occurred. The commander of the San Carlos, Don Miguel Menrique, went mad, carrying and brandishing six loaded pistols under the delusion he was being pursued, and therefore had to be set ashore. This occasioned a shifting of commands, Juan de Ayala going aboard the San Carlos and Juan Francisco de la Bodega y Quadra taking charge of the Sonora.

Laboriously the ships worked their way northward, delayed by calms and the slow sailing of the diminutive Sonora, but never making a stop. It was not until June 7th, however, that land was described on the horizon toward the northwest. On the 9th the two vessels were able to come closer in towards the shore and to follow it, "approaching to a high cape, which seemed to promise shelter, though we were obliged to proceed cautiously, as many small islands concealed from us some rocks, which scarcely appeared above the surface of the sea."⁸ Sighting a "land-locked harbor" to the southwest they determined to enter it, and to make a landing for wood and water, anchoring at four o'clock in the afternoon.

8. Coy, Humboldt Bay region, 1850-1875, 23.

Four canoe-loads of Indians in the meanwhile had come from shore, and soon fell to bartering with the sailors, trading pelts for knives, and then joyfully departing. The following day the natives returned, this time women as well as men, "all wearing crowns of flowers and foliage." They came alongside without hesitation and invited the Spaniards to their village. This proffer was accepted, although the visitors carried their guns with them, which first caused some distrust, but soon the chief ordered his own men to remove the strings from their bows as a gesture of friendship. Fray Benito observed, upon entering the houses, that the Indians lived in a poverty-stricken condition, that they were entirely uninterested in any article of dress, but that they were friendly and were keen bargainers. With nightfall, the Spaniards returned to their ships.

The events of the next days are best told in the language of the Padre Benito himself:⁹

On the 11th, on which this year our Holy Mother Church celebrates the ineffable

9. "Fray Benito de la Sierra's account of the Hezeta expedition," op. cit., 218-223. From here the two ships sailed northward, but became separated on July 30th. Hezeta with the Santiago got to 49° 17' N.L., made a number of landings and discovered the mouth of the Columbia River; Bodega with the tiny Sonora explored to nearly 53°, "made a thorough survey from the limit formerly reached by Pérez, and landed twice to take possession." After these marked successes, sickness and lack of provisions forced both ships back to Monterey by fall. Chapman, A history of California: the Spanish Period, 278.

Mystery of the Blessed Trinity, the Commandant Don Bruno de Hezeta determined to take possession of this land in the name of our Catholic King, and to make the necessary arrangements at break of day sent the pilot Don Cristobal Revilla with some armed men, who at the top of the hill which serves as a shelter to the port made an arbor which they adorned as suitably as possible for performing the holy sacrifice of the mass. On their advising that all was ready we went on shore with all the officers and the greater part of the men of the Frigate and the Schooner, and on the beach worshipped the Holy Cross which had been constructed for the purpose of being placed in position on the top of the hill. My companion and I chanted the Te Deum Laudamus, after which, the men being marshalled in good order, we made our way to the summit, not without difficulty as the path was rough and steep and in places even dangerous. On reaching the top the Holy Cross was duly set up and the Commandant took formal possession of the territory, in accordance with the instructions of his Excellency the Viceroy Don Antonio Maria Bucareli. This being concluded, Fray Campa said mass and preached a sermon with great tranquillity as the Indians contented themselves with observing from their settlement what we were doing. The day being the feast of the Santissima Trinidad, caused us to give that name to the port....

On descending, near the beach we were met by four Indians, one of whom, the one whom the afternoon before we had considered the most intelligent of our visitors, was asked by the captain of the Schooner to repeat, 'Long live Charles III!' This he did very cheerfully in unison with our men at the salute with the guns, not being perturbed by the roar of the guns on board which were discharged when our men on shore fired volleys with their guns. The Indians of the settlement did not receive it with so much equanimity because the noise of the cannon and the echoes which resounded in the mountains caused them to tremble with fear, as they told us when in the afternoon we went to visit them and explained by signs what it all signified and that they were our friends. We pointed out the cross to them, charging them not to remove it; whereupon their chief harangued them, and they promised not to tear it down.

On the 12th we commenced to make provision of water and wood and as a matter of precaution the Commandant sent some arms, which proved to be unnecessary because the Indians showed themselves to be friendly and assisted in the work. We went to dine on the beach and after we sat down a number of Indians with their wives and children came from the settlement by the river and stationed themselves near us, one of them seating himself by the side of Padre Campa. They received with great gratitude what was given them from the table, putting it away after tasting it, but a dish of mussels having been put on the table they were unable to restrain themselves and put their hands into the dish, especially he that was seated next to the padre, who partook of it with great avidity, laughing and embracing him repeatedly. On the dinner being finished they departed in a great state of contentment....

Some of the sailors went to one of the Indian camps and saw them very busy in one of their huts, in the centre of which was a stone-lined pit where a fire was always maintained. They observed that the Indians went in and out of this, giving them to understand with sighs that they had some grief. They came out perspiring freely and went to wash themselves in a water-course nearby. Going in again they continued their wailing. They explained that one of their people had died, and the horrible smell which came out from the hut seemed to prove that they were burning the body. Many of the people from the two largest villages adjacent to the port came to see them. In the afternoon (14th) we went on shore to see these guests and to make them presents and Padre Campa asked them if any other ships had come there. They answered that none had, but that lower down (indicating the direction of Monterey) they knew that large ships like these came. He gave them to understand that two such ships called there every year where we were, and that we ourselves would return to their country little by little. On hearing this they showed great pleasure, especially a big youth who laughing joyfully embraced him....

The port is situated in latitude $41^{\circ}6'N$. [actually $41^{\circ}3'$;] it is well sheltered but the bottom for the most part is rocky.... The hill which shelters the port is properly speaking a peninsula, because only at the northern end does it communicate with the land. It dominates the whole harbor and would be very suitable for the erection of a fort, because the part of

it that fronts the sea is steep and rocky; at the southern end a stream of water comes down between the rocks. We found the climate cold and the sky generally cloudy. During the short time that the sun was shining we would go out to warm ourselves, the climate being like Mexico in the depth of winter. The soil is well-watered and very fertile and the trees come down to the beach, on the edge of which we saw an abundance of strawberries. The hills are covered with great pines, tall and straight, and the land with many herbs and flowers, among them Castilian roses and lilies and camomile, mint, celery, pennyroyal, wild marjoram and other herbs, many of them aromatic, which are eaten by the Indians. The latter among other things gave us mulberries to eat, some yellow and some purple, the latter being of a better flavour than the former. The only birds I saw were crows, sparrows, and swallows, but the men who went up the river said that they had seen doves, nightingales, and a number of other birds whose names they did not know. Of animals, to judge by the skins we saw in possession of the Indians, deer abound and bears are not lacking, and apparently there are also bison, because we saw a skin among the Indians and even noticed the hoof prints of one at the edge of the river. We went this day [18th] to bid farewell to the Indians, who spontaneously gave us to understand that they would not remove the Cross which we had set up on the day we took possession. They showed great grief at our departure and told us by signs that they would mourn for us for five days, begging us to return, and assuring us that when we did we would find the Cross as we had left it.

Thus the Spaniards, and for that matter white men, for the first time, so far as is known, set foot upon and formally laid claim to the California coast this far north, in what is today Humboldt County, and gave the names to Trinidad Head and Bay which they now possess. The promise of the Spaniards to return and to occupy the country, however, they were never in a position to carry out, although the Indians kept their part of the bargain by leaving the wooden cross on Trinidad Head unmolested. There it was seen in April, 1793,

although, in a state of partial decay, by the men of the maritime exploring expedition under Vancouver, and the weather-beaten inscription it still carried was: "CAROLUS III. DEI. G. HISPANIARUM, REX," silent emblem of an outpost of Spanish empire in the western hemisphere which in a very few decades was to be swept away.¹⁰ Before this occurred there came by sea the vanguard of restless Americans from the Atlantic seaboard of North America with frigate and China clipper in search of the sea otter, and the wealth in the trade of Alaska and the Orient. Thus, William Shaler with the Lelia Byrd, in 1804, was the first to bring an American vessel, into Trinidad Bay, and his example was quickly followed by others.¹¹

Yet for Trinidad Bay and surrounding territory nothing permanent resulted from these spasmodic visits of Americans and others. Not until practically mid-century did the discovery of gold on the upper Trinity River result in the "re-discovery" by land and sea of the headland and bay, and in the founding of the town of Trinidad (April 8-13, 1850), the first along this northern coast. In a few months it had a population of three hundred, and communication had been opened to the Trinity mines, to which at first it was an

10. Coy, The Humboldt Bay region, 1850-1875, 26.

11. Ibid., 27-30.

important gateway. Then followed the exaggerated Gold Bluff mining excitement, for which Trinidad was the base, becoming a roaring camp of three thousand persons almost overnight. As the seat of justice of Klamath County, 1851-1854, it reached its peak of importance, prospering chiefly from lumbering and its favorable location as a shipping point to the mines. Then came decay in the face of the surging growth of towns with better harbors and more permanent sources of prosperity: Crescent City, the new county seat of Klamath, to the north, and Union, Eureka, and Buckstown on Humboldt Bay to the south.¹²

Today Trinidad is a sleepy town of less than a hundred inhabitants, but rich in memories of the past, still nestling behind the bold headland first sighted and marked with a pine cross by the men of Hezeta. Another cross of granite, bearing the original inscription, since 1913 marks the spot, a tribute of the clubwomen of Humboldt County to the first white discoverers.¹³

12. Coy, The Humboldt Bay region, 1850-1875, 49-51.

13. See: Humboldt Times, September 10, 1913.

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TRINIDAD HEAD

(summary by Engel Sluiter)

Trinidad Head is a bold promontory on the northern California coast. It was probably first sighted by white men under Francis Drake, but the Spaniards in the late eighteenth century were the first to set foot upon it. There they laid formal claim in the name of the king of Spain to the California coast in what is now Humboldt County, and named Trinidad Head and Bay.

After Spain had advanced her frontier into Alta California in 1769-1770 by the founding of San Diego and Monterey, she planned, for the first time since Vizcaino's voyage in 1603, to make new explorations along the northwest coast, in order to seek out and lay claim to the country, and to determine the extent of danger from foreign intruders, particularly the Russians and the English, in this area.

In 1774, the viceroy of New Spain, Bucareli, sent Juan Perez with a single vessel to reconnoiter. Perez reached 54° north latitude, although he did little actual exploring of the coast and did not land to take possession. The following year a second expedition was outfitted at San Blas, two ships of which, the Santiago, commanded by Bruno de Nezeta and the schooner Sonora finally under Juan Francisco Bodega y Quadra, were intended to resume the northern exploration, if

possible to 65°. Two Franciscan fathers, Miguel de la Campa Cos and Benito de la Sierra, chaplains for the voyage, kept diaries.

Sailing from San Blas on March 16, 1775, the ships held northwestward out of sight of land until June 7, when land appeared on the northeastern horizon. Two days later the ships were anchored behind a "high cape" in a small roadstead which seemed to promise shelter. There friendly Indians went to the ships to barter, and to invite the visitors to shore.

The commandant, Don Bruno de Hezeta, determined on the 11th to claim the land in the name of his king. He went on shore with officers and men and took formal possession of the territory, in accordance with the instructions of his Excellency the Viceroy, Don Antonio Maria Bucareli. The day being the feast of the Santisima Trinidad, that name was given to the port. Although the Spaniards did not make good their promise to the Indians to return and to occupy the country, the wooden cross they placed on Trinidad Head was left unmolested. The English explorer, Vancouver, saw it there, in 1793, and deciphered its inscription: "Carolus III, Dei G. Hyspaniarum Rex." During the California gold rush, the American town of Trinidad was founded, in 1850, behind the frowning headland, only to go through mushroom growth and decay. Today Trinidad is a town of less than a hundred inhabitants, but rich in memories of the past. One of these is commemorated, since 1913, in a granite cross, at the summit of the headland, which bears the original inscription.