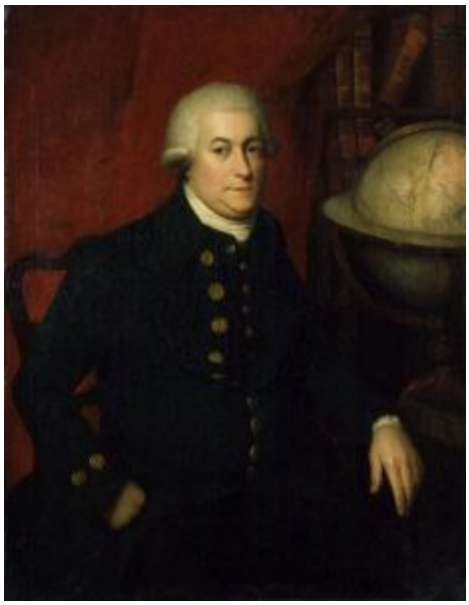
Early Exploration of the Northwest San Juan Islands by Mike Vouri 2010-2020

It was around 5 p.m., May 18, 1792, on the southern tip of what the Spanish had charted Isla y Archipelago San Juan. An ebb tide was roiling the rock-fringed waters of Cattle Pass (between presently known San Juan Island and Lopez Island) and the wind was freshening in the narrow channel. Not a happy prospect for His Majesty's Armed Tender Chatham at 65 feet and 131 tons.

His Majesty's Armed Tender Chatham slips through Cattle Pass, guided by a longboat on May 18, 1792. This was the first European reconnaissance of the interior waterways of the San Juan Islands. (Painting by Captain Steve Mayo, stevemayoart.com)

William Broughton, captain of HM Armed Tender Chatham, was an excellent ship handler and navigator, who had proved his worth during the voyage from Western Australia to Tahiti when he conned his shipped through and then mapped the treacherous Snares while rounding New Zealand. This feat seems to bely that he was on board when the Chatham lost her stream anchor off Cypress Island.

Undaunted, her commander, Lieutenant William Broughton, dispatched the ship's cutter under Master James Johnstone, who carefully guided both craft "...through a passage of a mile in width...close to the larboard Rocky Island as we entered." In skirting what we now know as Goose Island, the British sailors aboard Chatham became the first Europeans to enter the interior channels of the San Juan Archipelago. They would spend the next three days roughly charting the central waterways and fleshing out that single mass—shaped like a "pork chop"—the Spanish under pilot Jose Maria Narvaez had circled the year before.



George Vancouver was 34 years old at the start of his expedition in 1791 and generally regarded as one of the finest navigators in the Royal Navy. His charts of the Northwest Coast represent one of the signal achievements of his era. However, he was less successful with interpersonal and professional relations with his officers and crew, which cost him dearly at the end if the voyage.

However, the main thrust of the expedition was striking up the equally virgin environs of the freshly named Puget's Sound. There, expedition commander Captain George Vancouver, aboard the 300-ton H.M. Sloop of War Discovery, was indulging his right of prior discovery by charting every feature of the massive estuary and naming most of them in the process. And he was far from finished. Before his North Pacific mission ended he would survey 1,700 miles of coastline and dispel forever the myth of a Northwest Passage across North America..

Discovery and Chatham had left England more than a year before, calling at the Cape of Good Hope, Tahiti and Hawaii and charting the coast of western Australia. The expedition could not have been in better hands in this respect. Vancouver was considered one of the finest navigators in the Royal Navy, having apprenticed as a midshipman under the renowned Captain James Cook. Additionally, he combined the keen eye of a geographer with the skill of a diarist, very much like his surgeon/botanist Archibald Menzies, one of the "old men" among the group at the ripe age of 38. However, on this voyage (his first in command) Vancouver also would tread the uncertain path of a novice in the arts of diplomacy. Following the survey season, May-October, he was scheduled to meet his Spanish counterpart, Juan Francisco de la Bodega y Quadra, at Nootka Sound. There they hoped to settle the 1789 incident that nearly plunged the two nations into war.

When Vancouver dispatched Broughton from Admiralty Inlet on the morning of May 18 to examine the "broken shore" to the northwest, he was still operating under the assumption that his expedition was the first to reach what became known as the Salish Sea. He hadn't a clue that he'd been preceded up the Strait of Juan de Fuca (a name and idea he scorned) in 1790 by the Spanish Captain Manuel Quimper, and the Haro, Rosario and Georgia straits by Captain Francisco Eliza in 1791. The dons also had used Vancouver's "Port Discovery" as a rest stop, observatory and base camp, naming it Puerto de Quadra.

Eliza's chief pilot Narvaez had charted Cattle Pass as Boca de Horcasites, but opted for the more open passage of Rosario when heading north. Broughton, who left the channel nameless, continued past Harbor Rock and entered Griffin Bay, which he described as "closed to the Westward." He dropped anchor at 8:30 p.m. probably off Shaw Island where San Juan and Upright channels intersect. He described this junction as "a deep Arm of the Sea in a N. N. E. direction and soon after another of greater breadth and extending to the N. W'ward."

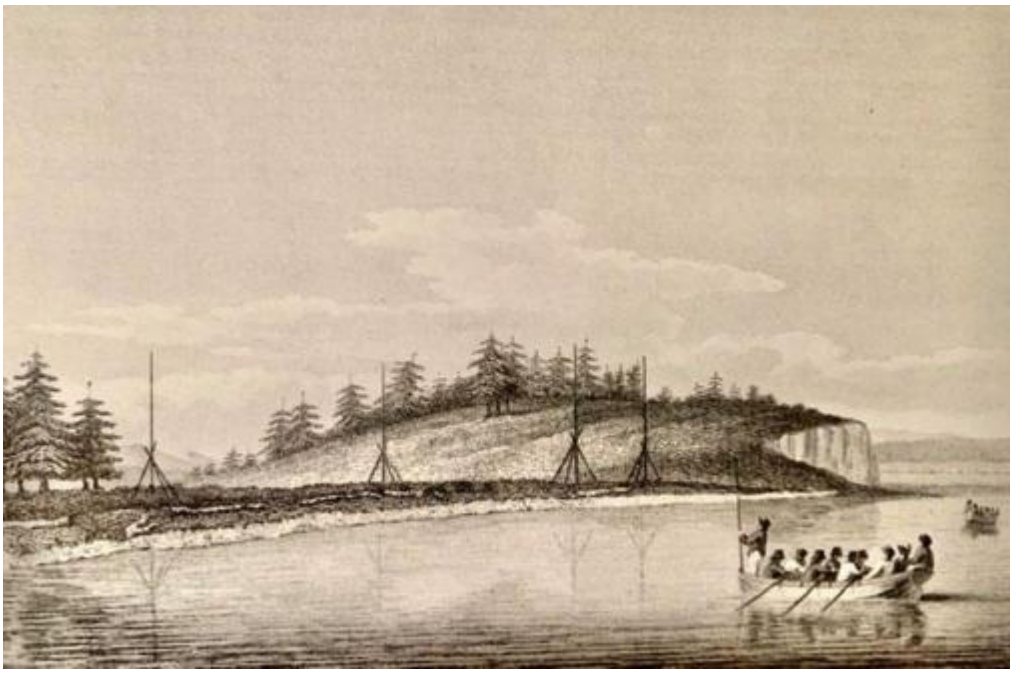
The next morning Johnstone and crew pulled six miles up San Juan Channel in two longboats. He was forced to come about after encountering stiff winds from the Northeast, but not before identifying Presidents and Spieden channels running in opposite directions and beyond the broad reach of the Georgia Strait. Broughton later described the Strait as "...an extensive Opening called by us the N.W.

passage." We know now that Johnstone, an experienced navigator on his second visit to the Northwest Coast, was determined to return to San Juan Channel and finish the job.

Broughton had shifted the Chatham to another anchorage in Upright Channel between Flat Point off Lopez and Canoe islands. The next day, Johnstone returned to Cattle Pass to sketch the channel while first officer, Lieutenant James Hanson, conned Lopez Sound, then West Sound to the opening of Wasp Passage. It was at the head of West Sound that Hanson met three local residents—the first any of the crew had seen in the islands—who traded three deer carcasses and a live fawn.

Broughton's logs are lamentably spare, mainly addressing ship movements, the strong tidal currents of which any island mariner is aware, and the weather—windy, yet salubrious. We have a pretty good idea of his anchorages from the soundings taken to ensure a secure set on the bottom. These were charted by Johnstone and inculcated into a comprehensive map of the Northern Straits and Puget Sound done, post-expedition, by Lieutenant Joseph Baker of Discovery. For details we must rely on the brief shore excursions of people such as ship's clerk Edward Bell, 21, whose anonymous journal was not credited to him until the 20th Century. He was struck by "...soil so rich the grass in several parts grew to man height."

After more charting by boat of the middle passages, Broughton anchored in Harney Sound between Shaw and Orcas. On the morning of the 21st, they caught an ebb tide and the boats gingerly rowed Chatham through Peavine Pass (between Obstruction and Blakley islands) into Rosario Strait. The passage made an impression on Bell: "The navigation in this place so full of Rocks and small Islands was intricate and dangerous...we touched Rock on one side, whilst at the other we had twenty-two fathoms of water."



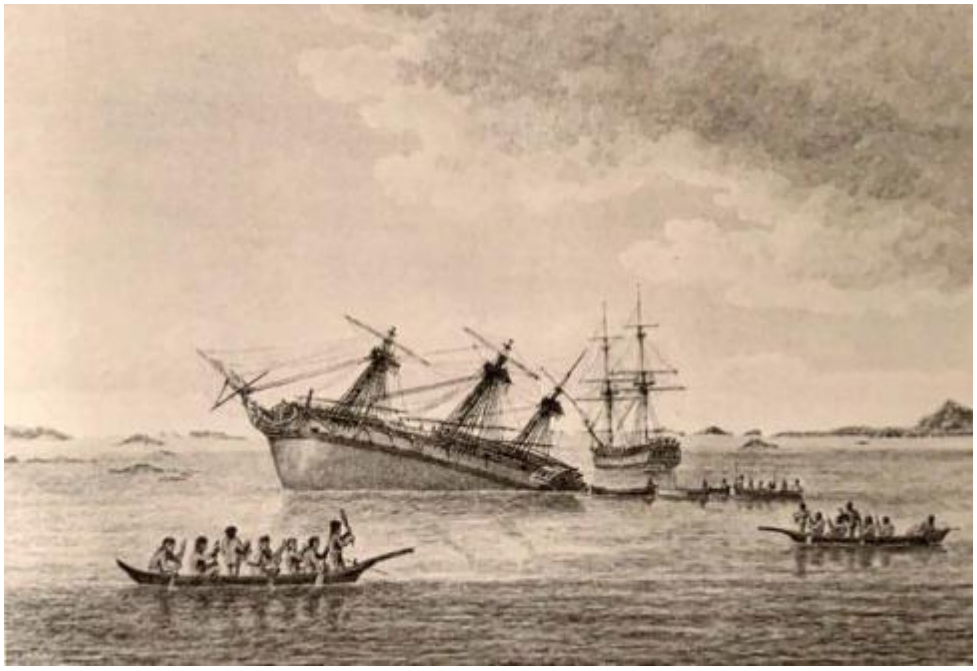
One of H.M. Sloop of War Discovery's longboats rows toward the beach on the site of today's Port Townsend. George Vancouver and William Broughton surveyed the coastline of Puget Sound and the Strait of Georgia in boats for safety and accuracy. The Coast Salish people would affix nets to the towers on shore to trap low-flying ducks.

The expedition reunited off Bainbridge Island on May 25, with Vancouver preparing to chart Puget Sound to its southern limit, then turning north to determine if the great island that he would name for himself and Bodega y Quadra was insular. He offered only scant mention of Broughton's islands survey in his journal. He was focused on the "continent" to the east, where a passage or great river might penetrate deep into the hinterlands. He remained skeptical, however. Two more "very lofty, round, snowy mountains" further to the south of Mt. Rainier had been sighted from Admiralty Inlet (a rarity these days). To him, this indicated a massive front running north-south, which would block any such opening. Too bad he had dismissed weeks before a supposition by the American Captain Robert Gray that a great river, the Columbia, existed to the south.

After consulting with Broughton, Vancouver decided that further exploration could only be accomplished by longboat under oars or sail. The labyrinth of islands, channels and inlets that captains and crew had encountered was akin to wandering through a garden maze with eight-foot hedges. It was blind and treacherous, and the readings from the ships were inaccurate. However, there was a price, which Vancouver acknowledged:

"...the execution of such a service in open boats would necessarily be extremely labourious, and expose those so employed to numerous dangers and unpleasant situations, that might occasionally produce great fatigue, and protract their return to the ships."

The expedition worked its way back to Admiralty Inlet, noodling around and doubling back through Possession Sound and Skagit Bay. A rare day off was granted on June 4 near Everett, where the crew celebrated King George III's birthday, and Vancouver formally claimed Puget Sound and everything they might see in the future for the Crown. What is now Washington State was proclaimed "New Georgia," (there has always been a George in Washington) and the great expanse of water Broughton reported to the north, the
"Gulph of Georgia."



His Majesty's Sloop of War Discovery grounded on rocks while passing through Queen Charlotte Sound in August 1792 following the survey of the Strait of Georgia. The crew stripped her down and she floated off with the tide. The Armed Tender Chatham standlng off to the right, grounded the following day, but also was successfully freed.

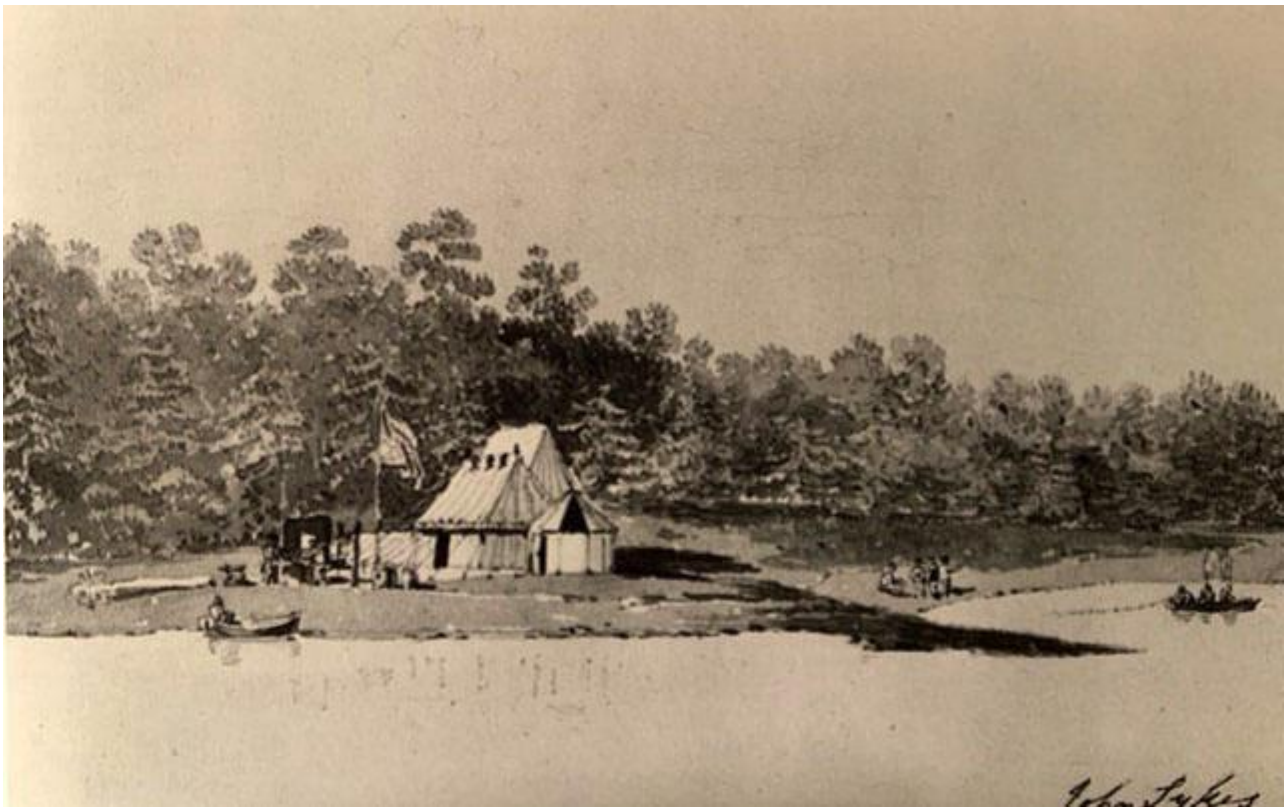
Chatham ran into trouble four days later while preparing to join Discovery at Cypress Island, losing her stream anchor in another swift-running tide. Broughton, however, was not on board if Menzies' journal is to be believed. Taking advantage of a flat calm in Guemes Channel, the captain left the ship to slip through Lopez Pass and again explore the island group with Menzies along. The naturalist took

advantage of the occasion to record several species of plants on either Decatur or Blakely, including Hooker's Onion, Chocolate Lily, Sandwort, Pacific Madrone (which bears his name) and perhaps even Camas. He was struck by the contrast between the islands' topography and that of the mainland:

"The Shores were almost every where steep rugged & cliffy which made Landing difficult & the woods were in many places equally difficult of access from the rocky cliffs & chasms / with which they abounded, but I was not at all displeased at the change & general ruggedness of the surface of the Country as it produced a pleasing variety in the objects of my pursuit & added Considerably to my Catalogue of Plants."

Returning to the ships by way of Thatcher Pass, the men reveled in the experience: "We rowed through some small Channels among these Islands & on our return again in the cool of the evening which was serene & pleasant we saw several Deer browsing among the Cliffs in different places..."

The explorers did not reach Discovery until after dark and it was not until the next morning that a messenger arrived with the news of Chatham's calamity. However, Vancouver recorded in his journal that Broughton had been aboard Chatham during the incident and sent the messenger. This was underscored by silence from every other officer of the expedition, including Edward Bell. The question remains: Who went ashore with Menzies? We'll never know.



The Vancouver expedition would set up shore stations periodically to take astronomical readings that were key to establishing location on the charts. The camps also were used for brewing spruce beer, a mildly intoxicating concoction of conifer needles, molasses and yeast that prevented scurvy. The closest stations to San Juan were on Discovery and Birch bays.

Vancouver next selected Birch Bay as a base camp. From there, he would venture north with two boats into the George Strait and Joseph Whidbey would finish his coastal reconnaissance by charting the freshly named Bellingham Bay. Whidbey had already identified the large island Vancouver named for him, rowed though Deception Pass and Padilla Bay and attempted the Swinomish Channel.

The Spanish goletas (schooners) Mexicana and Sutil, probably in the Rosario Strait.

Vancouver was "astonished" that the Spanish would undertake an expedition in ships so small (each only 46 feet). The Spanish, while admiring Discovery, thought Chatham "very ill shaped." The Chatman's crew called her the "Dung Barge."

Frigate Captain Dianisio Alcala-Galiano led the 1792 Spanish expedition to the Georgia Strait, encountering the British ships north of Birch Bay. Galiano ignored the San Juans to focus on the mainland. He was decapitated by a solid shot during the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805.

A few days after Vancouver's departure, Whidbey returned from Bellingham Bay with the astounding news that he had seen two small Spanish ships. These were the Sutil and Mexicana, each 46 feet long with a crew of 17, dispatched from Acapulco in March to expand on Eliza's expedition the year before. And as with Vancouver, they had been ordered by the viceroy to hunt for a Northwest Passage—but

not tell anyone if they found it. The commander was Captain Dianisio Alcala-Galiano of the Sutil with Captain Cayetano Valdez second in command aboard Mexicana. Intrigued and alarmed, Broughton caught up with them off Point Roberts, where he learned that they had sailed from Nootka on June 5 and anchored off the tip of Lopez before turning up Rosario Strait. This is probably when those in Birch Bay learned they were not the first, and might have spurred Johnstone's and Menzies' final cruise through the islands.

The two had been friends since Johnstone's midshipman days. Menzies also had been with Johnstone on a 1786 cruise to Nootka Sound. They left in two boats on the morning of June 18. We have a rough idea of where they stopped by the depth soundings on Baker's maps, but scholars and expedition history buffs differ on the order. Let's just say they called at Matia, Sucia, Orcas, Waldron, South Pender, Skipjack, Flattop, Johns and Spieden islands—a typical summer gunkholing adventure. Menzies mentioned a couple of new varieties of herbs, as well as a grove of red cedar. They camped for the evening on a "small island" where "...the weather was exceeding mild pleasant & favorable for our pursuits."

The next morning on their return to Birch Bay, the boats likely stopped where Eastsound is today. They encountered a family weaving baskets and matts from dried rushes, and the party was invited for lunch. "Their food at this time was some dried fish & Clams; we also saw some fresh Halibut & purchased two large pieces of it for an English half penny each. The crew nearly acquired in trade a chunk of porpoise thinking it was venison, but backed off when advised by Menzies. The doctor also reported woolly dogs, similar to the more than Whidbey had seen shaved bare on Skagit Bay. These were muzzled, which Menzies presumed had been done as a courtesy. They finished off this stop with a two-mile hike, where on a seaside portion, they came upon a "low extensive morass" covered by bulrushes..

The surgeon/botanist Archibald Menzies in later years. Menzies was no friend to Vancouver, but gave stellar service in both capacities. He made two longboat excursions into the San Juans and made the most of his time.

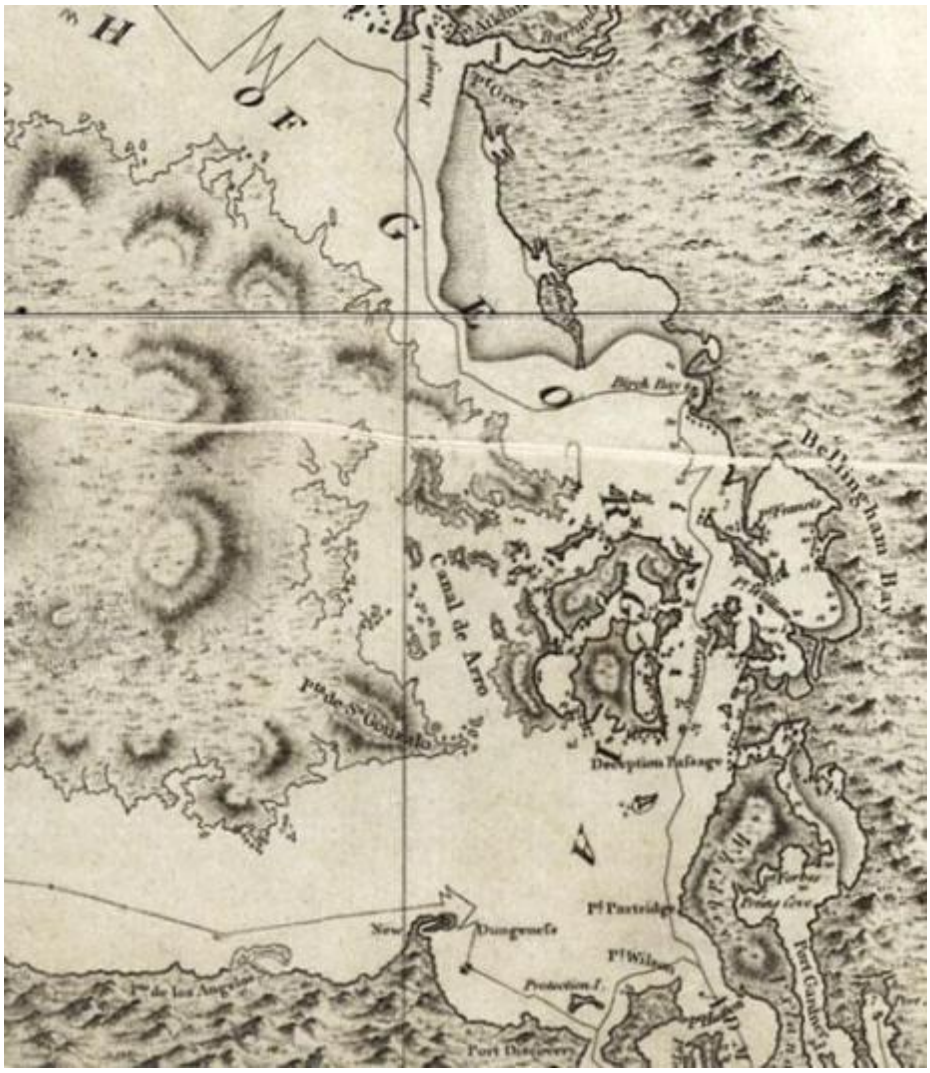
Meanwhile, Vancouver had completed his exhausting expedition along the Georgia Strait when he too encountered Galiano and Valdes and learned the bad/good news. Yes, they had Narvaez's charts of the northern strait, and no they had not gone up Puget Sound, the opening charted by Narvaez as Boca de Ensenada. The meeting was so amicable that the two parties exchanged charts (unusual for the secretive Spanish) and agreed to jointly explore a passage that might accommodate a northern circumnavigation of Vancouver Island. However, Vancouver later wrote:

"I cannot avoid acknowledging that, on this occasion, I experienced no small degree of mortification in finding the external shores of the gulph had been visited, and already examined a few miles beyond where my researches during the excursion, had extended..."

But would he honor the rule of prior discovery and embrace the Spanish names he had unwittingly overwritten, including the lyrical Canal del Neustra Signora del Rosario? Nope. The Gulph of Georgia it remained, which is the Strait of Georgia today. Menzies thought this was bad form, citing Port Discovery over Puerto de Quadra as an example: "...(it) surely gives their name a prior right of continuing, to prevent that confusion of names which are but too common in new discovered countries."

As for the San Juan Islands, the final verdict on pursuing further exploration was summed up by Vancouver in a journal entry upon his return to Birch Bay:

"During my absence, the boats of the Discovery and Chatham had been employed in attempting to gain some further knowledge of the numerous islands we passed by on our arrival in this bay; but they were found so abundantly dispersed as to preclude any correct examination, without having sufficient leisure for the purpose."



This detail from Folio No. 5 of the map collection if the Vancouver expedition was an amalgamation of charts drawn by officers heading the various boat crews. In this rendering, compiled by Lieutenant Joseph Baker, the individual islands in the San Juan group begin to emerge.

And so the four ships from two nations passed into history as they made their way through Johnstone Strait on their way to circumnavigate Vancouver Island. The world would have its first glimpse of the San Juan Islands' channels and individual islands when Lieutenant Joseph Baker's Folio Sheet No. 5 was published in 1798. But not one name was assigned to any island, channel or feature, save for Cypress Island, Strawberry Bay and Canal de Arro, a Spanish name, incorrectly spelled.

It would be up to others to sort out issues such as prior discovery, names and possession and those wouldn't be settled for another 75 years.

Next time: Wilkes celebrates the War of 1812 and Kellett seeks order.

For further reading: The Early Exploration of Inland Washington Waters: Journals and Logs from Six Expeditions, 1786-1792 by Richard W. Blumenthal; Uncharted Waters: The Explorations of Jose Narvaez (1768-1840) by Jim McDowell; Historical Atlas of the Pacific Northwest: Maps of Exploration and Discovery by Derek Hayes; San Juan Islands Coastal Place Names and Cartographic Nomenclature by Bryce Wood; Menzies Journal of Vancouver's Voyage,April to October 1792," edited by C.F. Newcombe; and "Lieutenant W. R. Broughton (commanding HMS Chatham), James Johnstone (Master), Archibald Menzies (surgeon/naturalist) and the survey of the San Juan Archipelago, 1792," by Eric Groves, Department of Botany, Natural History Museum, London.

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