

JUAN RODRIGUEZ CABRILLO



Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo is often named as the “discoverer” of California. Though history shows that several other explorers (Alarcón, Díaz) were actually in California a few years earlier, Cabrillo gets credit for being the first European to explore the California coast.

EARLY HISTORY

Neither Cabrillo’s name nor country of birth is known with certainty. It is possible that his true name was Juan Rodríguez and that “Cabrillo,” which means “little goat,” was a nickname or referred to his home town. He signed papers as “Juan Rodz,” which indicates a Spanish spelling. However, early historians said that he was Portuguese.

Whatever his name and origin, Cabrillo left Europe sometime after 1510 and landed in Cuba. There he joined an expedition under Pánfilo de Narváez who was sent from Cuba to try to stop the Spanish conqueror Hernándo Cortés. Cabrillo deserted from this group and joined Cortés at

Lived: about 1500-1543

Explored California in: 1542

Exploring for: Spain

Explored: by sea on the California coast as far as the Oregon border

Veracruz, Mexico. He was with Cortés in 1521 in the conquest of the Aztecs. Cortés put Cabrillo in charge of building thirteen boats, brigantines about 40 feet long. These were used in the attack on the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan.

Cabrillo also took part in the conquest of Guatemala and El Salvador, and was granted land that included Indian villages in both these areas. For the next 15 years Cabrillo managed his plantations, mines, and the shipyards built by Pedro de Alvarado, governor of Guatemala.

BACKGROUND

When Alvarado died in 1541, Antonio de Mendoza, the viceroy (governor) of New Spain (Mexico), gained control of the ships, including the *San Salvador* which was owned and captained by Cabrillo. Mendoza was still looking for a land of great wealth somewhere to the north, as well as for a water passage across the continent. He was disappointed that his previous attempts had failed, but he decided to try again. He outfitted an expedition with Cabrillo as captain.

CABRILLO’S JOURNEY

Cabrillo had three ships in his command, none of them very well built. Besides the *San Salvador*, a 100-foot galleon, there was the frigate *Victoria*, commanded by pilot Bartolomé Ferrer (sometimes spelled Ferrelo), and the *San Miguel*, a small launch commanded by Antonio Correa.

The crews of these three vessels numbered about 200 men, many of them forced into service. The *San Salvador* was armed with cannon.

Cabrillo left the port of Navidad in Mexico on June 27, 1542, with supplies for a two-year voyage. He headed up the coast of Baja (Lower) California. High winds and strong currents slowed the ships down.

Landing in Alta (Upper) California

On September 28, after three months of sailing, Cabrillo brought his ships into a bay which he called a "very good enclosed port." He named it San Miguel, and claimed the land for Spain. Today it is San Diego Bay. Cabrillo's was the first known landing of a ship on the coast of Alta (Upper) California.

The ships then continued on up the coast of California, stopping at islands now called Santa Catalina and San Clemente, and passing the Santa Barbara Channel Islands. Along the way they saw and talked with many Indians. They noted the streamers of smoke from Indian campfires along San Pedro and Santa Monica bays. They admired the plank canoes of the Chumash Indians near present-day Oxnard. Cabrillo always made friendly gestures toward the Indians and avoided any fighting.

Forced back by strong winds at Point Conception, the ships anchored at one of the Channel Islands now called San Miguel. During the week they stayed there, Cabrillo apparently fell and broke his arm. However, as soon as the weather allowed, he continued on to the north.

On November 16 the three ships anchored in Monterey Bay. They may well have gone further north, perhaps as far as Point Reyes, but they did not see the entrance to San Francisco Bay. The



seas were very stormy and the ships were taking a hard beating. Cabrillo decided to turn south again and they reached San Miguel Island on November 23.

Cabrillo's Death

Cabrillo died on this island on January 3, 1543. One story says it was a result of his broken arm in October. Others say that he slipped on a rock in December and

shattered his shinbone. He then became very ill and died. Reports say that he was buried on San Miguel Island, but the site of his grave is not known.

Before he died, Cabrillo appointed Bartolomé Ferrer as captain of the expedition, and directed him to continue exploration of the northern coast.

On February 18, 1543, Ferrer started north again. The weather was still bad, and somewhere off the northern California coast, about the first of March, the ships became separated. Fearing to perish against the rocky coast, short of food, and with many of the crew sick from scurvy, each ship headed south. They met again far down the coast of Baja California, and sailed on together to the port of Navidad, arriving on April 14, 1543.

WHAT HE ACCOMPLISHED

Cabrillo was the first to chart the coastline of California. He was the first to bring back to New Spain reports of the various Indian groups living along the coast. And he officially claimed the land for Spain.

Cabrillo National Monument on Point Loma in San Diego commemorates the exploration of Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo with a 14-foot sandstone statue completed in 1939. Point Cabrillo in Mendocino County is named for him, as is Cabrillo Point in Monterey County.