

Captain George Vancouver and the Lewis and Clark Expedition
A Round-About Connection
By Robert Heacock

From the upper portions of the Columbia River at Musselshell Rapids and just behind what is now McNary Lock and Dam, we have the following information from William Clark of the Lewis and Clark Expedition:

*[Clark]
October 19th Saturday 1805
I discovered a high mountain of emence hight covered with Snow, this must be one of the mountains laid down by Vancouver, as Seen from the mouth of the Columbia River, from the Course which it bears which is West I take it to be Mt. St. Helens, destant (about 120) 156 miles*

Thomas Jefferson first started making attempts to explore the west to the Pacific Ocean in 1783 when he asked the esteemed frontier hero George Rogers Clark about the potential of Clark leading a westward expedition. Ill health caused Clark to decline the offer, but of course his younger brother William later did take up the challenge. Jefferson initially envisioned the destination of westward expansion for the young United States as the 'Northwest', then the Ohio River Valley to the Mississippi River. However, circumstances change.

What information was Jefferson aware of that caused him to reset his sights to the great Pacific Northwest, what we now know as the states of Washington, Oregon and Idaho and the mouth of the Columbia River? And how did that figure into the planning of the expedition by Meriwether Lewis? And what about later chapters in the Expedition story as they headed out of the Rocky Mountains and down the Snake and Columbia Rivers?

Landmarks on the Pacific Northwest coast were first described with the 1603 discovery of Cape Blanco on the southern Oregon coast by Martin de Aguilar on the ship *Tres Reyes*. Sailing from Acapulco, Mexico, Aguilar and most of his crew died of scurvy on the return, but his discovery was important to later explorers.

Juan Perez, originally from Majorca, Spain, sailing from San Blas (north of Puerto Vallarta, Mexico) January 25, 1774, aboard the frigate *Santiago*, was the first Spanish foray up the coast to determine any Russian presence, and solidify the Spanish claims of Discovery. Perez voyaged to what is now Southeast Alaska, but returned to San Blas with no maps, no landings and no possession ceremonies, though he did briefly trade with the natives at different locations along the British Columbia coastline, including Nootka Sound on Vancouver Island.

In 1775 the Spanish sent a second expedition, again the *Santiago* plus another smaller ship, the *Sonora*, which was more suitable to navigate the many small inlets and bays of the coast. Bruno

de Heceta (Hezeta) y Dudagoitia, a Basque from Bilbao, Spain, on board the *Santiago* first noticed the mouth of the 'Great River of the West' on August 17, 1775 writing:

' these currents and seething of the waters have led me to believe that it may be a mouth of some great river or some passage to another sea'.

But his crew was sick with scurvy, and he could not explore the opening of the river. The *Sonora* was captained by Juan Francisco de la Bodega y Quadra, who will figure in our story at a later date.

March 7, 1778 saw Captain James Cook arrive on the Northwest Coast during his Third Expedition. Cook was on the H.M.S. *Resolution* and Captain Charles Clerke command the H.M.S. *Discovery*. They reached the Oregon coast at Cape Foulweather and weather blew them south until they located Cape Blanco, and then headed north. More bad weather kept them from much of the coasts of Oregon and Washington. They finally reached Nootka Sound on Vancouver Island on March 29, 1778. One of Captain Cook's crew was a young midshipman named George Vancouver, whom we will also hear about later. Cook continued north and explored Alaska, the Bering Strait and the Aleutian Islands and then went to Kealahakua Bay on the Island of Hawaii where he was killed on February 14, 1789. Subsequent published accounts of his voyage promptly opened up the lucrative trade in sea otter furs from the Pacific Northwest and Alaska to Canton, China.

British fur trader Captain John Meares was on the Pacific Northwest coast on two occasions and overwintered in Prince William Sound 1786/1787. Meares underestimated the Alaskan winters and 23 of his 30 man crew of the *Nootka* died of scurvy and starvation. But that spring he departed the Pacific Northwest to trade furs in Canton, China and later returned on another ship, the *Felice Adventurer*. While searching for the Northwest Passage Meares was off the mouth of the Columbia River on July 6, 1788, but did not recognize it as a river as the Spanish had done and showed his frustration by assigning the labels 'Cape Disappointment' and 'Deception Bay'.

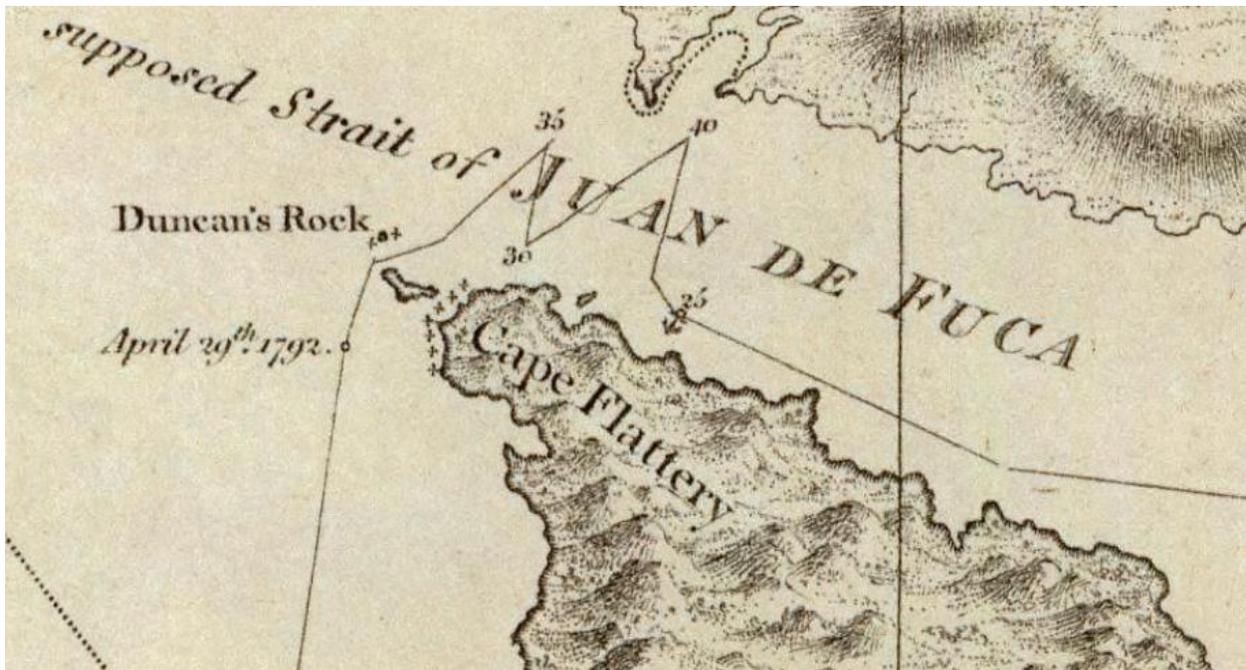
In late August, 1788 American fur trader Captain Robert Gray from Boston, aboard the *Lady Washington*, was headed north up the Oregon coast. He noted the mouth of the Columbia River, but bad weather prevented him from entering the river. He finally had to depart the area and returned to Boston via Canton, being the first American to circumnavigate the globe.

Eventually the British Crown wanted to conclusively resolve the possible existence of the fabled Northwest Passage or 'Straits of Anian', as Captain Cook's explorations were not sufficiently detailed in the area in question. So George Vancouver, now Captain Vancouver, was tasked with the mission. He was also to meet the Spanish authorities at Nootka Sound and resolve the 'Nootka Controversy', where in 1789 the Spanish authorities had seized four British merchant ships. Captain Vancouver departed Falmouth Bay, England on April 1, 1791, on the H.M.S. *Discovery*, accompanied by H.M.S. *Chatham* commanded by Lieutenant William Broughton. They spent time in Hawaii and arrived at Cape Mendocino on the Northern California coast on

April 17, 1792 and proceeded north and noted Cape Blanco. On April 27, Vancouver was off the mouth of the Columbia River, as Captain Meares had been, and also like Meares, failed to recognize it is as the mouth of a river, writing:

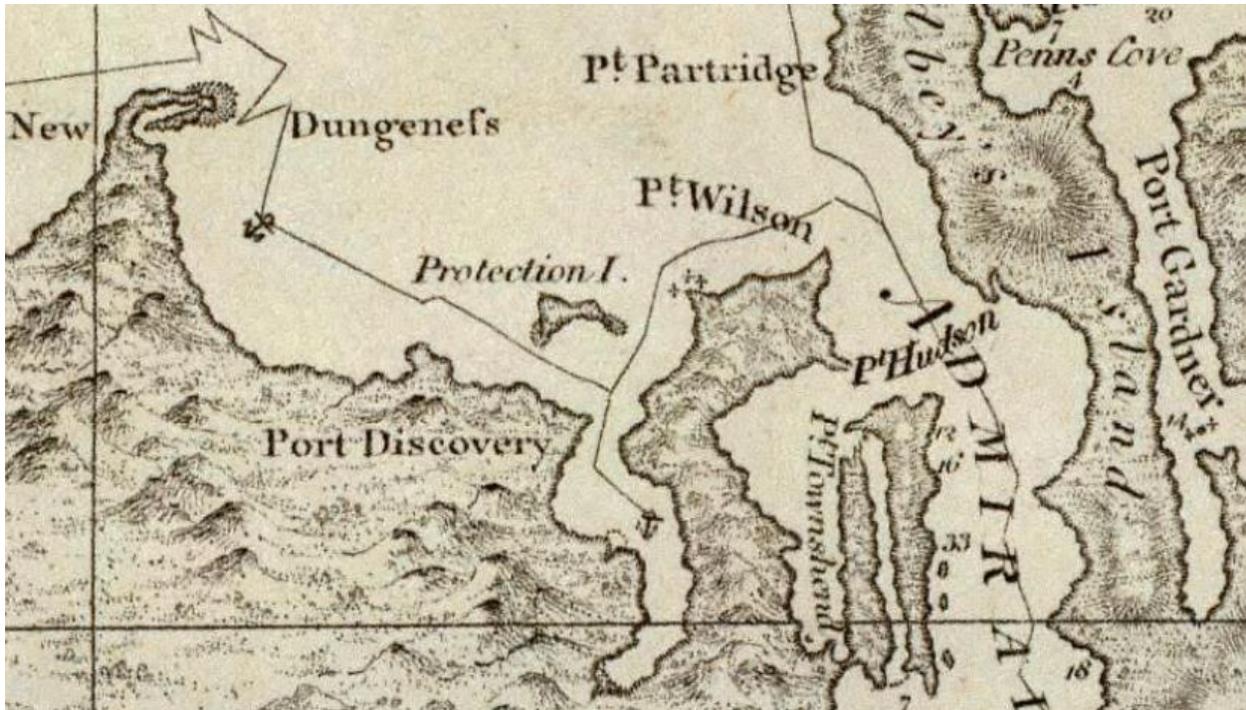
'...I presume it to be that which he (Meares) calls cape Disappointment and the opening south of it Deception bay... ...Not considering this opening worthy of more attention, I continued our pursuit to the N.W.... a most luxuriant landscape...'

Two days later Vancouver was off Cape Flattery and the far northwestern tip of Washington and was joined by Captain Robert Gray, returning from Boston for the second time, this time on the *Columbia Rediviva*. They exchanged notes, with Gray indicating that he had seen a river down the coast in 1788, and Vancouver indicated that he was at the location just 2 days ago, but did not feel it was a river but rather a large bay.



The Coast of N.W. America, George Vancouver 1798

The ships parted and Vancouver later anchored at Contractor's Point in Discovery Bay, west of Port Hadlock. While Captain Vancouver was surveying Hood Canal near Bangor and Hazel Point by small boat on May 11, 1792, Captain Grey crossed the Columbia River Bar. After trading with natives while anchored at various locations on the north (Washington) shore and proceeding about 30 miles up the river to near Skamokawa, Gray departed the Columbia River on May 20. He later provided a copy of his map to the Spanish at Nootka Sound and spent a total of 4 1/2 months in the area before again heading with furs to China and tea to Boston.



The Coast of N.W. America, George Vancouver 1798

Vancouver departed Discovery Bay on May 18, 1792, traversed Admiralty Inlet and proceeded to survey Puget Sound. They anchored on May 21 west of Alki Point between Restoration Point and Blake Island, and again sent out small boats, eventually surveying to Budd Inlet and Olympia.



The Coast of N.W. America, George Vancouver 1798

Departing their Puget Sound anchorage on May 29, they proceeded north to the east side of Camano Island to past Tulalip, then Saratoga Passage, then up Admiralty Inlet to the San Juan Islands and Rosario Passage. Vancouver anchored at Strawberry Bay on the west side of Cypress Island on June 8. After exploring the San Juan Islands, the ships anchored at Birch Bay near the Canadian border, and again sent out small boats, with Captain Vancouver and Peter Puget heading north.



The Coast of N.W. America, George Vancouver 1798

Unbeknownst to Vancouver, the Spanish were also in the area, and in the San Juan Islands about 3 days behind Vancouver. They had two ships, the *Sutul* commanded by Captain Alcala Galiano and *Mexicana* with Captain Cayetano Valdes. After an 11 day, 330 mile trip in small boats to Jervis Inlet and Howe Sound, Vancouver and his men were rowing back to the *Discovery* on June 20, 1792, and happened upon the Spanish who were anchored at 'Spanish Banks' off Point Grey and north of what is now the University of British Columbia, which is west of Vancouver, British Columbia. Vancouver wrote 'I experienced no small degree of mortification...' to find the Spanish also mapping the area, even more so when he found out they had also been there in 1791. But they decided to cooperate, and shared mapping duties and notes as the four ships worked their way north up the Strait of Georgia. They divided the duties so that the Spanish surveyed the east side of Vancouver Island and the western Strait of Georgia, and the English did the mainland and eastern side of the Strait of Georgia.



Nicholas King's Map of 1803

On July 4, 1792 Vancouver's men discovered Johnstone Strait, the inlet through the labyrinth of islands and bays at the northern reaches of the Strait of Georgia which leads to northern Vancouver Island and Queen Charlotte Sound. This also showed that Vancouver Island was not part of the mainland and established what is now known as the Inside Passage.

Vancouver parted company with the Spanish ships, and 'proceeded on' to meet the Spanish emissary Francisco Bodega at Nootka Sound, arriving on August 28. The officials were unable to reach a final agreement about the Nootka Controversy, but they did maintain cordial relations as they decided to let diplomats in Europe resolve the matter. Their resultant maps of the area named Vancouver Island as 'Quadra and Vancouver Island', now known by its singular name.

At Nootka Sound, Bodega had also provided Vancouver a copy of Robert Gray's map of the mouth and estuary of the Columbia River. This caused Vancouver to send Lieutenant Broughton to map the river as far as possible, and to determine if it might be the long sought Northwest Passage. Broughton went 127 miles up the Columbia River to Reed Island, near Washougal, Washington which he reached on October 30, 1792. Broughton determined the river, though a major waterway, would not serve as the fabled 'Northwest Passage'.

The northern surveying season concluded, Vancouver went to Monterey, California to continue meetings with Bodega and then wintered in Hawaii. The next two seasons he continued to map the coast of British Columbia and Southeast Alaska completing his coastal survey task on August 19, 1794 at Point Conclusion, on the southeast side of Baranov Island near Sitka, celebrating this milestone with an extra ration of grog. Finally, on October 20, 1795 HMS *Discovery* anchored in the Thames River, 4 ½ years after departing Falmouth. It was the longest voyage on record in time and distance, and with only six men lost.

In the spring of 1803 while preparing for the Lewis and Clark Expedition, President Thomas Jefferson and Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin asked surveyor Nicholas King to make a map for the Lewis and Clark Expedition, containing information from several sources, including Captain Vancouver.

During his extensive mapping of the Pacific Northwest, Vancouver identified the volcanic mountains he had seen. These were Mount Hood, Mount St. Helens, and Mount Rainier, which were on Nicholas King's 1803 map carried by the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Vancouver also documented Mount Baker, which dominates the Strait of Georgia, and saw but did not name Mount Adams. However, neither of these two latter mountains made it to the King map, nor Clark's 1814 map.

As the Lewis and Clark Expedition was descending the Snake River, they were looking for these landmarks identified by Vancouver to finally put them 'back on the map'. Since they left Fort Mandan on April 7, 1805 they had been in uncharted territory. At their second Snake River campsite on October 11, 1805 at Almota Creek, Captain Clark climbed 200 feet up a slope, but the surrounding 1,000 foot high hills would not allow a view. On October 15, at Burr Canyon, Lewis walked to the top of the western hills and again was unable to see any volcanos as they were hidden behind the great bulk of Rattlesnake Ridge, what Clark called '*a high point to the west*'. But on October 18, still 250 air miles from Cape Disappointment, Lewis climbed the hills southeast of Wallula Gap and was able to see the top of Mount Hood, as Clark wrote:

[Clark]
October 18th Friday 1805
Saw a mountain bearing S. W. conical form Covered with Snow.



Nicholas King's map of 1803

As the Lewis and Clark Expedition was getting closer to their goal of the Pacific Ocean, their interest in the results of Vancouver Expedition and resultant maps was increasing, with these

notes as they approached the Sandy (*Quicksand*) River only 123 river miles from the Pacific Ocean:

[Gass]

Sunday 3rd. (of November, 1805)

At this place we dined on venison and goose; and from which we can see the high point of a mountain covered with snow, in about a southeast direction from us. Our Commanding Officers are of opinion that it is Mount Hood, discovered by a Lieutenant of Vancouver, who was up this river 75 miles

In addition, from Station Camp at the opening of the mouth of the Columbia River we have these comments:

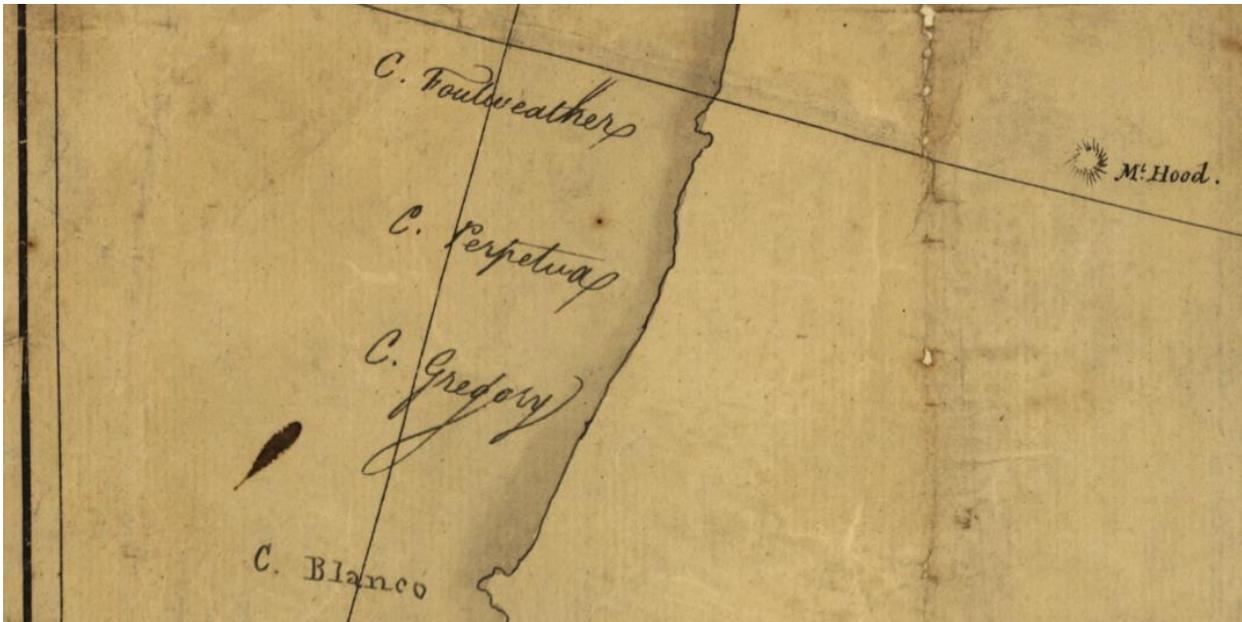
[Clark]

November 14th Thursday 1805

Capt Lewis concluded to proceed on by land & find if possible the white people the Indians say is below and examine if a Bay is Situated near the mouth of this river as laid down by Vancouver in which we expect, if there is white traders to find them &c. at 3 oClock he Set out with 4 men...

Nicholas King's 1803 map was commissioned to encompass an area up to 55 Degrees North latitude. On the Pacific coastal region, this would be about halfway between Prince Rupert, British Columbia, and Ketchikan in Southeast Alaska and was well mapped by Vancouver. Note that the upper left or northwest corner of the King map is torn and missing, but it does still provide detail which includes Vancouver Island, the Strait of Georgia and Puget Sound as mapped by Vancouver.

The southern limit of the Pacific coast portion of King's map starts at about the latitude of 42 North, which is now the California-Oregon border. Features on the map are Cape Blanco, Cape Gregory (now Cape Arago), Cape Perpetua, Cape Foulweather, Cape Mezari (Tillamook Head) and other locations.



Nicholas King's Map of 1803

The impact of both the Vancouver Expedition and the Lewis and Clark Expedition were significant, and they also had similarities. Each was based on exploration, discovery and mapping, with trade and political ramifications. Each was tasked with finding a navigable waterway between the Eastern and Western oceans of North America, yet this passage was not there to be found. So, there was a sense of disappointment, but rational minds would not consider this a failure or dwell on this matter.

We are unaware of how much time Vancouver had estimated his task would take, but the painstaking details of his maps of the complicated coastal areas on the Pacific Northwest did require an extraordinary effort coupled with tedious tasks and daily difficulties. We do know that both Lewis and Clark had underestimated the time needed for them to complete their mission.

Each Expedition continued to persevere and be resourceful in their daily efforts, with the later Lewis and Clark Expedition certainly 'proceeding on' in the same vein as Captain Vancouver.

Each succeeded in their mission, with minimal loss of life of their men or others they encountered, and each also made a historic impact of epic proportions. Both Expeditions produced maps that were still in use decades later and not surpassed until more modern methods were developed and greater needs identified. Interestingly enough, both Captain George Vancouver and Captain Meriwether Lewis died about three years after their triumphant returns, with their health compromised by malaria. Lieutenant William Clark and Lieutenant William Broughton each had long and decorated careers in service to their countries.

Robert Heacock
Liberty Lake, Washington
June, 2020

Sources:

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Map - Nicholas King 1803 map courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Map - The Coast of N.W. America by George Vancouver, 1798 -Courtesy of the Library of Congress

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