

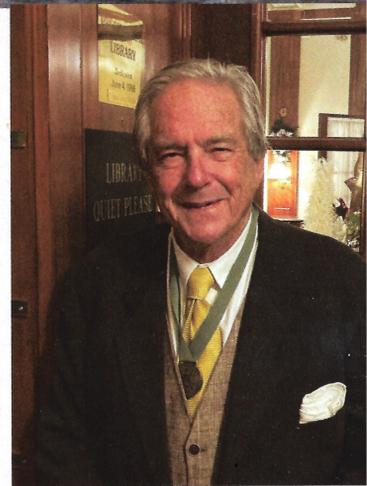
# Forgotten Spanish Explorers in Oak Bay Waters

By Dr. Barry Gough, on behalf of the Oak Bay Heritage Foundation



Gordon Miller depicts the Santa Saturnina led by a longboat on Spanish exploration of Haro Strait, summer 1791, with Mount Baker in the background.

*This Oak Bay Heritage Foundation lecture was presented by historian Dr. Barry Gough, as part of the Marion Cumming Lecture Series, at the Windsor Pavilion, on January 21st 2026. Dr. Gough is the author of "Juan de Fuca's Strait: Voyages in the Waterway of Forgotten Dreams".*



Dr. Barry Gough

Sailing south from Nootka Sound, Spanish ships searching for a Northwest Passage were the first to chart the Strait of Juan de Fuca and northern waters beyond.

Credit for the initial phase goes to Manuel Quimper in the sloop *Princesa Real* in 1790. He named Gonzales Point, one of the southernmost points of Vancouver Island, after his first mate Gonzalo Lopez de Haro. That famous vessel had been seized from British traders, sparking off the Nootka Crisis. Gonzales is a prominent name in Oak Bay, not only for this famous point but also the street of the same name and Gonzales Hill, near the small observatory.

In the following year's quest, the schooner *Santa Saturnina* under Jose Maria Narvaez, rounded Gonzalez Point, and entered Haro Strait and reached the Canal del Rosario, now Strait of Georgia. Local Indigenous people knew these waters, but for the Spanish navigators this was a new watery world. Gonzales Point, we note, is the tee box of Victoria Golf Club's 9th hole and it marks the dividing line between two 1850 deeds of conveyance when local headsmen surrendered aboriginal title to the Crown via James Douglas, agent of the Hudson's Bay Company.

The diaries of Quimper and Narvaez, or their pilots, recount armed resistance by Indigenous people near Gonzales Point, now the tee box of Victoria Golf Club's 9th hole. An armed longboat from Lieutenant Francisco Eliza's Spanish warship *San Carlos*, lying off Cordova, now Esquimalt, was successfully deployed in support of the *Santa Saturnina*. The vessels sailed on, past the San Juan archipelago, which the Spanish thought an island. The 1792 chart shows numerous

Spanish placenames such as Isla de Saturna, Lasqueti and Texada, Punta de Langara, now Point Grey, and Brazo de Florida Blanco, now Burrard Inlet.

In 1792, Alcala Galiano and Caetano Valdes, in the *Sutil* and *Mexicana*, extended the discoveries of Quimper and Narvaez. They met up with Captain George Vancouver off Point Grey. The British navigator had orders to search every possibility for a Northwest Passage. The *Discovery* and *Chatham* thoroughly investigated the continental shore. Captain Vancouver suggested that the Spanish explore the east coast and they showed that Vancouver Island was indeed an island. At Nootka, Vancouver met his opposite Bodega y Quadra and suggested that Vancouver and Quadra Island should be its name, which was agreed.

All of this happened three centuries after Columbus. This indicates how remote our shores were from the Atlantic world. The sailing ship was the tool of empires. The Spanish contribution is often forgotten. When Spain's Vice-Consul spoke at the unveiling of the Historic Sites and Monument's cairn and tablet on a wintry day in November 1925, he uttered words that echo down through the years: "There is a deep significance in the mingling of Spain's flag with Britain's upon that monument. It seems to me a tribute to the progress of the world that two countries which once worked in rivalry should so far have forgotten old prejudices that they should twine their flags together." 🇪🇸