

Discovering San Francisco Bay

Watch the segments online at <http://education.savingthebay.org/discovering-san-francisco-bay>

Watch the segments on DVD: Episode 1, 26:31–28:20 and 28:27–30:33; 32:24–32:33 and 33:28–37:57

Video lengths: 4 minutes 22 seconds; 4 minutes 57 seconds

SUBJECT/S

Science

History

GRADE LEVELS

4–5

CA CONTENT STANDARDS

Grade 4

History–Social Science

4.1.3. Identify the state capital and describe the various regions of California, including how their characteristics and physical environments (e.g., water, landforms, vegetation, climate) affect human activity.

4.2.3. Describe the Spanish exploration and colonization of California, including the relationships among soldiers, missionaries, and Indians (e.g., Juan Crespi, Junipero Serra, Gaspar de Portolá).

4.3.2. Compare how and why people traveled to California and the routes they traveled (e.g., James Beckwourth, John Bidwell, John C. Fremont, Pio Pico).

VIDEO OVERVIEW

Upon reaching the San Francisco Bay, Spanish explorers came upon the largest inland network of tidal wetlands and marshes they had ever seen.



The *San Carlos* was the first European ship to enter San Francisco Bay on August 5, 1775.

In these segments you'll learn:

- that Portolá discovered the San Francisco estuary by mistake.
- how the appearance of the San Francisco Bay Area has changed dramatically since its discovery.
- that the San Francisco Bay–Delta region is one of the most productive ecosystems in the western Americas.

TOPIC BACKGROUND

The Spanish expedition led by Captain Gaspar de Portolá is credited with the first European discovery of San Francisco Bay in 1769. It is often called an accidental discovery, as the expedition was actually in search of Monterey Bay.

Prior to Portolá's expedition, European ships sailed up and down the California coast for more than 200 years. They never saw San Francisco Bay, most likely due to the fog that is so characteristic of the area's coastline. In 1542, Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo led the first European expedition that made contact with the California coast. The expedition landed in San Diego, then continued to Monterey Bay, and may have gone on as far as Point Reyes before turning back. In 1602, Sebastian Vizcaino led a sailing expedition to locate safe harbors for Spanish galleons in Alta California. Vizcaino mapped much of the California coast, including Monterey Bay, which he recommended as a site for settlement. However, it was not until the Spanish government in Mexico felt the threat of Russian settlement on the California coast that they began serious efforts to establish settlements in Alta California.

In 1769, a four-division expedition traveled by land and sea from La Paz, Baja California, to establish settlements in San Diego and Monterey. The four divisions first met in San Diego, then Portolá continued north with about 60 men in search of Monterey. The group included several Indians who played a critical role, blazing the trail for the Spanish and their horses and mules. Still, it took four grueling months to reach the tip of the San Francisco Peninsula, where the expedition camped in San Pedro Valley. Unable to find Monterey based on the description they had and surmising that they might have missed their destination, Portolá sent Sergeant José Francisco Ortega up Montara Mountain to the top of Sweeney Ridge to scout out their location. From this vantage point, Ortega could see 360 degrees around him; he became the first European to see the huge inland bay later named San Francisco Bay.

Despite this discovery, Portolá was disappointed over missing Monterey. In his journal, he wrote of his historic day simply: "We traveled for three hours, the entire road was bad, we halted without water."* Although frustrated with his failing expedition, Portolá's

VOCABULARY

arid

dry, lacking water

biological productivity

how much organic, or living, material is produced in an area

estuary

a semi-enclosed body of water where fresh water and salt water mix

discovery proved to be an important moment in California history; the unexpected harbor was an even better site for settlement than Monterey Bay. It was large enough to accommodate the entire Spanish naval fleet.

The Spanish soon came to recognize the value of the region. In 1775, the first European vessel sailed into San Francisco Bay, commanded by Juan Manuel de Ayala. During their stay, they charted the Bay, making maps and soundings of the estuary. The following year, Juan Bautista de Anza, captain of the small Presidio of Tubac in Sonora (now southern Arizona), led two expeditions that, with help from members of the Yuma, opened an overland route from Arizona to northern California and brought the first colonists to northern California. He established the first European settlement on the Bay—the Presidio of San Francisco—strategically located at the entrance to the Bay. Shortly thereafter, in 1776, Mission Dolores was established a few miles south in a location more conducive to agriculture. The location of these settlements made the west side of the Bay the primary focus of attention and ultimately gave rise to the city of San Francisco. By the time Mission San Jose was established in the 1790s, the east side of the Bay was already known as “Contra Costa,” the “opposite coast,” affecting perceptions and relationships for centuries to come.

*Sweeney Ridge, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, Golden Gate National Recreation Area, <http://www.nps.gov/goga/planyourvisit/upload/sb-sweeney-2008.pdf>

PRE-VIEWING ACTIVITY

- Read about the expeditions of Portolá, Ayala and Anza. Locate sites significant to the discovery and settlement of San Francisco on a map.

FOCUS QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING

- Why has Portolá’s discovery of the San Francisco Bay in 1769 been called a mistake? *because Portolá was looking for Monterey Bay and missed it*
- When did the first European ship enter San Francisco Bay? *on August 5, 1775;*
- How did Anza’s expedition describe what they found when they reached the San Francisco Bay and Delta and tried to travel across it? *as an impassable network of wetlands and marshes*
- What is located today in the area where Father Pedro Font saw sandy beaches? *the San Francisco Financial District*

POST-VIEWING QUESTIONS

- If Portolá, Ayala or Anza visited the San Francisco Bay Area today, would they recognize it? How does the area today compare with what they saw?

POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

- Ask students to put themselves in the position of Portolá, Ayala or Anza and write a journal entry for the day the explorer came upon the San Francisco Bay.
- Consider field trips centered on relevant historical sites and markers around the Bay, such as hiking the Sweeney Ridge Trail (San Mateo County), where you can see Ortega’s 360-degree panoramic view.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lori Mann is an environmental education consultant with 30 years' experience at the local, state, and national levels. She has worked extensively with curriculum development and review, has taught numerous environmental education courses and workshops, and served for 15 years as education director at Coyote Point Museum for Environmental Education in San Mateo, California.

KQED Education engages with community and educational organizations to broaden and deepen the impact of KQED media to effect positive change.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

California Historical Resources, Office of Historic Preservation, California State Parks
http://ohp.parks.ca.gov/listed_resources/

Find historical landmarks and other points of historical interest in California, including several Portolá and Anza expedition sites.

San Francisco Bay Discovery Site: Portolá Site Acquisition Monument, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior

<http://www.nps.gov/goga/historyculture/san-francisco-bay-discovery-site.htm>

Read more about the Portolá expedition and the site from which they first viewed the San Francisco Bay.

Sweeney Ridge, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, Golden Gate National Recreation Area

<http://www.nps.gov/goga/planyourvisit/upload/sb-sweeney-2008.pdf>

Learn more about the history of Sweeney Ridge and its role in the development of the Bay Area.

Web de Anza: An Interactive Study Environment on Spanish Exploration and Colonization of "Alta California" 1774–1776, Center for Advanced Technology in Education, University of Oregon

<http://anza.uoregon.edu/default.html>

Find primary source documents (including journals and maps) and multimedia resources relating to Anza's two overland expeditions to northern California, along with a teachers' center with suggestions for using the online materials in the classroom.

CREDITS

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VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

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Segment 1

NARRATOR: In 1769, fearing encroachment by the expanding Russian and British empires to the north, the Spanish government in Mexico decided to establish a presence in “alta,” or upper, California. Two previously identified sites were designated for settlement—San Diego and Monterey.

ROBERT SENKEWICZ: This expedition was led by Gaspar de Portolá. They get to the coast and they’re right in Monterey Bay. But they don’t recognize it, and so they decide to go farther and farther north.

MALCOLM MARGOLIN: And the expedition by this time was in such lousy shape. They’d been on the road for weeks and weeks and weeks. They were eating moldy flour. They didn’t know anything about the plants. They didn’t know what was edible and what wasn’t edible. They were suffering from scurvy. And they were in such rough shape that every day the expedition began with the priest saying the viaticum—saying the prayer they said over people they expected to die that day, and these people would be dragged along on litters as the expedition made its way.

SENKEWICZ: And by this time Portolá is starting to think maybe they’ve gone too far. And so he sends a soldier, Sergeant José Francisco Ortega, up to the mountains to sort of see what he can see. And Ortega gets up there to a place that’s now called Sweeney Ridge, and he looks out to the ocean ... and then Ortega turns around and looks and sees the largest inland body of water he had ever seen before.

NARRATOR: For the first time, newcomers to the American continents had discovered the largest estuary on the western coast of the Americas ... entirely by mistake.

SENKEWICZ: They’re really upset that they haven’t found Monterey. They don’t begin to understand the significance of the bay they have discovered for a few more years.

NARRATOR: Six years would pass before a ship was sent to investigate the great estuary, which, given its stature, Franciscan friars would redesignate “San Francisco Bay.” On August 5, 1775, the *San Carlos*, under the command of Juan Manuel de Ayala, would be the first ship from the outside world to attempt to enter the Bay’s treacherous entrance.

ACTOR (SPANISH): *Grande era el ímpetu de las corrientes que ...*

ACTOR (ENGLISH): At the entranceway to this harbour the current was so strong that I could make no more than half a knot’s headway. When I was a league inside the mouth and a quarter-mile from the shore, the wind all at once fell still ...

ACTOR (SPANISH): *Calma ...*

NARRATOR: At morning's light, the crew found its anchorage lay to the north of the entrance, in quiet waters near a small grove of willows—a *sausalito*. Seeking a safer anchorage, they eventually chose the sheltered side of a nearby wooded island they named "Our Lady of the Angels," Angel Island.

From here, over the next month the ship anchored while sailing master José de Cañizares and a small crew explored and surveyed the Bay. The world they encountered was one of breathtaking abundance.

JOHN HART: They would talk about the skies being darkened by flights of ducks and geese. They would talk about salmon, or whatever the fish was in the local river, spawning, coming up so thickly that you had the impression you could walk across the river. You see these same expressions used again and again, and they were used here. It really seems to have been a wildlife paradise, which is perhaps just a way of saying, a piece of the original world.

Segment 2

NARRATOR: On March 30, 1776, a party led by Juan Bautista de Anza reached the Bay's entrance.

ROBIN GROSSINGER: What they're trying to do is look for places for missions and presidios, places to establish their outposts of Spanish civilization. And so they need a few things: They need to find timber, they need some construction materials, they need access to water, they need good grasslands and range territory—and so they're always analyzing the landscape they're going through.

NARRATOR: The landscape they saw was far different from that of today and signifies the scope of change in the modern era. In 1776, the site that became San Francisco was a hilly, windswept peninsula of sand dunes and scrub with two notable wetlands on its eastern shore. The largest was a vast tidal lagoon that came to be called Mission Bay. Filled in piecemeal over the last 150 years, it is entirely gone. The second wetland lay a mile to the north at the site of today's Financial District. The tidal flat that came to be called Yerba Buena Cove would eventually become the original site for the city of San Francisco. Shallow and easily filled, today it, too, has vanished beneath the urban landscape.

DANIEL BACON: In 1776, this was the original shoreline of San Francisco, and Father Pedro Font would have seen a flat, sandy beach cove. Today, of course, it's the Financial District, and we're about six blocks away from San Francisco's existing shoreline.

NARRATOR: On horseback, the expedition moved south along the San Francisco Peninsula before circulating around a great network of tidal marsh and mudflats at the Bay's southern tip.

MALCOLM MARGOLIN: We now have a pretty clean shoreline. We now think we know where the Bay ends and where the waters begin. Back in those early days, you didn't have that. You had an indeterminate area.

ROBIN GROSSINGER: What that means is, you had this tremendous variation in the extent of the Bay. You can imagine if you were on a hill on a day with some fairly high tides, the size of the Bay could double in six hours.

NARRATOR: Reaching what they deemed the "Contra Costa," or opposite shore, the expedition quickly moved north along the Bay's largely treeless eastern plain to arrive along the shores of San Pablo Bay. Here was yet another vast opening in the coastal range, [which] they named after the Carquin people who inhabited its shores and fished there—Carquinez Strait. Beyond the strait lay yet another expansive bay and an intricate impassable network of channels and islands that blocked any further advance.

GROSSINGER: They're trying to get a sense of what the Delta is ... if it's a river, if it's part of the Bay. It's a confusing feature, and since it's so vast, you can't get around it.

ACTOR (in Spanish): *Subimos a lo alto de esta loma ...*

ACTOR (in English): We went up to the top of this hill, which overlooks the entire plain, and from there, we saw a confusion of water, tule marshes, a bit of woods near the mountains on the south, and an enormous stretch of flat land, such that in my lifetime I have not viewed so great an expanse of horizon ... nor do I expect to again. Looking eastward, we saw a large and very long snowy mountain range, white from crest to foot.

ACTOR (in Spanish): *... hasta la falda.*

NARRATOR: The distant mountains Font simply designated "Sierra Nevada"—snowy range. The puzzling confusion of waters below was, in fact, one of the great river deltas of the Americas—the confluence of the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers.

JEFF MOUNT: It was California's everglades in terms of its overall biological productivity, particularly in the upper portions of the estuary, in the Delta itself. This was 700,000 acres of tidal freshwater marsh ... extraordinary organic productivity within it. This was the most productive ecosystem in the western Americas.