Historical Background

General Overview

The story of Cabrillo and his galleon San Salvador took place during the age of European exploration that began with the Portuguese sailing southward around Africa to reach India and the Spice Islands, and the Spanish sailing westward with the same goal—to tap into the riches of Asia. Columbus’s 1492 voyage never reached Asia; instead, it bumped into the islands and continents of the Americas, unknown to Europeans before then. After Columbus, dozens of Spanish voyages continued to explore the area and colonize islands such as Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic) and Cuba. By 1520, Spanish settlement, administration, and trade were well established in the islands, even though explorers and settlers still didn’t know how those lands fit into the geography of the world or how far away Asia might still be. In 1513 Vasco Núñez de Balboa came upon another vast ocean—the Pacific—on the other side of Panama, but it took a Spanish voyage around the world in 1519–22, led by the Portuguese Ferdinand Magellan, to show just how vast that ocean was. At the same time, Hernán Cortés was launching an invasion of Mexico. With the crucial help of local allies, Cortés defeated the Aztec Empire by 1524 and established Spanish rule in what was dubbed New Spain. Thereafter, exploration of the western coasts of North America aimed to figure out how the continent might connect to Asia and how to get there and back. Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo was a key figure in that effort and a classic example of the sort of men who triumphed during the first fifty years after Columbus. Cabrillo began his military career as a simple crossbowman, but his exploits in the conquest of Guatemala gained him wealth, noble (hidalgo) status, and appointment as captain-general of the small fleet that explored the California coast in 1542. In that role, Cabrillo became the symbolic founder of San Diego.

Military men such as Cabrillo were conquerors (conquistadores) of the new lands across the sea, and they signed on hoping to gain personal wealth, fame, and privileges from the Spanish crown. Instead, many went to their graves, outnumbered and cut down in battle or killed by tropical diseases in the steamy environments on the coasts and inland forests. Those who survived were used to hardship and toughened by their experiences. The crown
was glad to have their services in gaining new territories and spreading the knowledge of Christianity to new peoples, but it is not surprising that the goals of the *conquistadores* often clashed with official rules about how to behave and how to treat the new peoples they encountered. Many *conquistadores* were ruthless in victory as well as in battle, illegally enslaving indigenous peoples, exploiting their labor, and violently opposing priests and royal officials who tried to enforce legal and humane standards. As an added horror, diseases that were common and not very deadly in the Old World of Europe, Africa, and Asia had a devastating effect on New World peoples who had never experienced those diseases. No one at the time knew why, but the combination of conquest, exploitation, and unfamiliar diseases resulted in a huge decline of the indigenous populations, which did not begin to recover until more than a century after the conquest. As colonial society developed, some African slaves were imported to supplement the labor supplies, but the peak of the Atlantic slave trade would not come until more than two centuries later.

**Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo: Origins and Career before the 1542 Voyage**

Today many monuments, streets, commercial enterprises and public institutions bear the name of Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, but until recently, we knew very little about his origins, and all the documents we had identified him only as Juan Rodríguez. Then, in 2015, a document came to light recording his testimony as a witness in an official investigation in Spain in 1532. During his swearing in as a witness, he identified himself as Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo and said that he was a *natural* or native of Palma de Micer Gilio, a small town near Córdoba, Spain, that is now called Palma del Río. You can learn about how the mystery about his birthplace was finally solved by reading the news story included in this guide.

So, what do we know about his career? Juan Rodríguez arrived in what Europeans called the New World in 1514 at the age of fifteen. Classified as a crossbowman, in 1519–1521 he joined the expedition of Hernán Cortés that marched inland from the Mexican coast to conquer the Aztec Empire. Cabrillo helped to build the boats that crossed Lake Texcoco to invade the Aztec’s island capital of Tenochtitlán (now Mexico City). After the conquest, Pedro de Alvarado took Juan Rodríguez with him to conquer Guatemala. To reward his
services, in 1524 Alvarado gave Juan Rodríguez extensive estates. He became a wealthy rancher and in 1529 received permission to mine gold from streams on his land. In 1532 he sailed to Spain and, incidentally, testified in the previously mentioned investigation that proves his Spanish identity. During his time in Spain, Cabrillo married Beatriz Sánchez de Ortega, who returned with him to Guatemala in 1533. They settled on Cabrillo’s vast and productive estates, and he and his wife had two sons by 1536, the first named Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo. The senior Cabrillo became involved in a variety of commercial and domestic affairs in Guatemala. Among other ventures, Cabrillo built a 200-tonelada galleon named Santiago in the Guatemalan port of Acajutla in 1534, which Pedro de Alvarado promptly requisitioned for his own use.

Alvarado, then governor of Guatemala, enlisted Cabrillo’s help to assemble a fleet of thirteen ships. Records suggest that between 1536 and 1540 Cabrillo’s shipyard built six or seven vessels, of which San Salvador was the largest, and six other vessels were extensively refitted. The work required skilled shipwrights, woodworkers, and talented foremen to produce and refit so many vessels at once. That was possible because Alvarado and the viceroy, Don Antonio de Mendoza, had royal permission to reassign shipwrights and other workers from all over New Spain. Estimates of the size of the workforce overseen by Cabrillo range as high as 400, including some slaves, all of whom were forced to work at a rapid pace. When San Salvador was finished, Cabrillo took her on a profitable trading voyage to Peru, which gave him and his crew experience in long-range sailing.

The ships that Cabrillo and others built at Alvarado’s request were intended to seek routes to the Spice Islands (Moluccas), Japan (Cipango), and China (Cathay or Catayo). One possible route was to sail due west, though Magellan’s voyage had shown how very wide the Pacific Ocean was. However, because maps of the time often showed Asia not too far from the coast of northwestern America, many thought it would be quicker to sail toward the north and northwest, following the curve of what is now California and Oregon and eventually reaching Asia. To test both possibilities, one group of three vessels would sail west across the Pacific. Another three vessels would sail up the northwestern coast in search of a shorter route to the riches of Asia.
Alvarado wanted a more suitable base for his expeditions away from busy Acapulco, and he commissioned Cabrillo to sail north to locate a site. Cabrillo found an appropriate bay eventually called La Navidad, located near present-day Manzanillo. When Alvarado was called away to quell a native uprising, he left Cabrillo in charge of preparations for the voyages. Unfortunately, Alvarado was killed during the uprising, and Viceroy Mendoza took charge of the fleet. Following two failed attempt to sail up the northwest coast, Mendoza named Cabrillo as captain-general for the third such expedition.

*San Salvador, those on board, and Cabrillo’s Voyage*

In California, images of the galleon San Salvador appear almost as often as the name Cabrillo, even appearing on San Diego County and City government letterheads and seals, but they are based on what little we know about other ships of the period. From descriptions and drawings of the era, we believe she was a full-rigged galleon with square sails on the mainmast, fore-mast, and bowsprit, and a lateen mizzen, with a low fore-castle, a beak-head under the bowsprit, and a high aft-castle and taffrail. She had two fully planked decks and reportedly measured about 200 *toneladas* in the reckoning of the day. She was about 75 feet in length on the main deck, with a 25-foot beam.

Manning ratios of the time suggest that San Salvador may have carried 20–30 sailors and the same number of soldiers—in other words, about 40–60 persons—probably including some slaves. The sailors would mostly have been adult seamen (*marineros*), plus younger apprentices (*grumetes*), and even a few boys (*paños*). Officers, bureaucrats, and a clergyman or two added to the total. The sea officers would have included Cabrillo as captain general (*capitán general*), plus the ship’s master (*maestre*) and his subordinates; the ship’s pilot (*piloto*); a carpenter (*carpintero*) and caulkier (*calafate*); and perhaps a few other craftsmen and a medical officer (barber-surgeon, *cirujano*). Cabrillo would be the ultimate commander of the soldiers on board, aided by a lieutenant (*alférez*). If Cabrillo brought along a few trusted colleagues, they would have helped to keep the soldiers in line. The bureaucrats
would have included a representative of the crown with his servant or slave, and the official scribe (*escribano*), who kept a record of the voyage. Altogether, there may have been between 75 and 90 people on board, but this is guesswork. We don’t have a list of who was on board, so we have to rely on what we know about other ships of the period, along with official rules about manning Spanish ships for exploration.

We also don’t know what the sailors and soldiers earned on *San Salvador*. However, *marineros* on Spain’s Atlantic fleets seem to have earned about 26.5 silver *reales* per month in the mid-sixteenth century, *grumetes* earned 17.6, and *pages* earned 13.2. Depending on the price of food, the crown may have paid twice as much to feed a sailor than to pay his wages. The basic pay for a soldier could be considerably more than an adult sailor earned, but soldiers typically had to pay for their own rations, weapons, and medical care if they were hospitalized on land. Complicating matters, sailors who had particular skills and soldiers who had proven their worth could earn bonuses that were larger than their base pay.

Ships built on New Spain’s west coast were the product of what shipwrights had learned in Europe. Although indigenous laborers soon learned the techniques of European shipbuilding, large vessels such as *San Salvador* would not have borrowed much from local traditions. There are no plans available for the original *San Salvador*, and such plans may never have existed. Instead, Cabrillo and other experienced shipbuilders would have known the traditional proportions of the ship they wanted to build—for example, the relationship between the maximum breadth of the ship (beam or *manga*), and the length of the keel (*quilla*) and the first planked deck (*eslora*). They would then assemble the timbers for the keel, shape and attach the ribs and other structural elements to it, and close in the hull with planking. As soon as the keel was laid and the master rib was attached, experienced shipbuilders had a very good sense of what the finished vessel would look like. There was a variety of suitable woods for ships’ timbers and spars available in nearby forests, and fibers for rope and rigging could also be obtained locally. Similarly, there were forges to make iron nails, spikes, and ship fittings for the project. However, materials such as sails, guns, tools, and ready-made rigging and fittings were imported from Spain to the Caribbean and carried overland to Pacific ports by local workers and African slaves.
Cabrillo’s 1542 fleet consisted of three vessels: *San Salvador*, also known as the capitana (flag ship) or *Juan Rodríguez; La Victoria*, a smaller ship with two masts; and *San Miguel*, a 30 ft. pinnace or long boat known as a bergantín or fragata, with a partially covered fore-deck and a sail and benches for 13 pairs of oars. *San Miguel* might also be towed, but it was too big to be brought aboard *San Salvador*. Armament for the vessels probably would have been light. The soldiers’ weapons included crossbows, lances, swords, and possibly a few matchlock harquebuses. *San Salvador* and *Victoria* each carried several wrought-iron guns (bombardetas) and rail-mounted swivel guns (versos). Both types were breech-loading weapons that could be quickly reloaded with a removeable prepared charge (serviola). Another rail-mounted swivel gun may also have been carried aboard *San Miguel* to protect shore parties.

Cabrillo’s small fleet departed La Navidad on June 27, 1542 and headed north. It was a difficult voyage along an inhospitable and uncharted coast, going against the prevailing winds and currents. They frequently hove to at night to avoid running aground or encountering other hazards, and they sought anchorages to avoid rough weather. Often they encountered local natives, took soundings, and recorded descriptions and locations of potential harbors.

They entered the bay we call San Diego on September 28, probably landing at what is now Ballast Point—the West’s Plymouth Rock. An ancient Kumeyaay petroglyph of what might be a galleon has been located and documented in the desert east of San Diego, which suggests that local residents had observed the ships sailing along the coast. Natives they encountered at first fled in fear. When they returned later, they explained their fear by indicating that bearded men like Cabrillo’s were not far inland, and that they had killed many natives. To make the encounter more terrifying, some of the Spaniards were riding horses, which the Indians presumably had never seen before. After six days in San Diego Bay, during which the Spaniards and natives exchanged small gifts, Cabrillo’s ships continued their journey. They made many landings and met with larger populations of natives as they progressed north, who continued to tell stories about warlike Spaniards traveling inland. Cabrillo surmised that the inland Spaniards were part of the land army of Francisco Vázquez
de Coronado—perhaps the contingent of Hernando de Alarcón, which had been sent to explore the Colorado River. Continuing north along the coast, Cabrillo landed on and described several of the Channel Islands before sailing as far north as what is now the Russian River area of Sonoma County. As stormy weather impeded their progress, Cabrillo decided to return to the Channel Islands for the winter, where he hoped to rest his crew and make some repairs before again pushing north. It was on one of those islands, likely San Salvador / La Capitana (now Santa Catalina), that he died. The exact circumstances surrounding his death are not clear. He seems to have suffered a shattered shinbone or a broken arm during a hostile encounter with natives, perhaps from an accidental fall. In any case, the injury became infected and resulted in gangrene. Cabrillo died on January 3, 1543, at the age of 44. His burial place remains unknown.

The pilot, Bartolomé Ferrer, then took command of the expedition, promising to fulfill Cabrillo’s dying orders to complete the mission. San Salvador and her consorts resumed their arduous voyage north, initially making good progress but later encountering contrary winds and seas. After reaching nearly to what is now the Oregon border, winter storms again drove the small fleet south. Battered and exhausted, the vessels returned to La Navidad on April 14, 1543. The governor took over San Salvador and her consorts, along with three vessels from the Alarcón (Sea of Cortés) expedition. After a period of refitting, the six ships embarked on a trading voyage to Peru late in 1543. Few of the men and none of the ships were heard from again, and that is where the record ended. Sixty years passed before another attempt was made to explore the coast of Alta California.