On 27 September 1542, lookouts on three Spanish ships working their way slowly up a barren coastline sighted a distinctive wooded promontory to their north. Its aspect seemed to indicate a good anchorage, perhaps even a harbor. They confirmed this impression by sailing into it the following day and anchoring in the calm water beneath the headland, adjacent to a little sand and cobble spit which offered good landing. Having just crossed into uncharted waters, the advent of so fine a harbor may have seemed an auspicious discovery as well as a convenient one. Perhaps it was the precursor to great undertakings.

Several weeks later, the surviving members of the expedition would not have thought that event auspicious. By that time the leader of their expedition, a man of action and letters who had survived countless dangerous adventures, was dead. The explorers had not found China or the

In this 2001 painting by Gordon Miller, Cabrillo’s San Salvador rounds Point Loma in 1542.
MMSD Collections
kind of winds that would suggest a direct route or return from the Far East. They had found no indications of any strait connecting this ocean to the Atlantic, no islands replete with pearls, no great cities, no sources of silver or gold. Though the expedition had numerous encounters with the peoples who inhabited these lands, they did not seem members of complex and wealthy civilizations or proprietors of abundant resources. The ships had probed the empty ocean far to the northwest and had found only storms and death, neither of which held much value for the trading interests of the Spanish empire. So unpromising were the prospects of this new land that more than two centuries would pass before any Europeans could be tempted to establish a permanent settlement. The logs of the voyage, navigational information, first-hand accounts, and depositions would go missing from the historical record as would the flagship San Salvador, along with the only image ever painted of her. Even the names they had given to the places they discovered, such as the name they gave to that first harbor “El Puerto de San Miguel,” would be changed. Having failed in all aspects of their mission save one – to return and report what happened – the voyage would have seemed a disappointment best forgotten.

What they could not have known was that they had indeed sailed into waters of great undertakings. Sixty-five years before the first permanent English settlement on the North American continent, eighty years before the Mayflower crossed a much smaller ocean to New England; Europeans sighted, charted, and made first contact with the native inhabitants of what would one day be the west coast of the United States. When the small San Salvador entered the harbor the Spaniards called San Miguel, the galleon was perhaps the most powerful vessel in the Pacific Ocean. It was this same harbor that would one day project a strategic concentration of U.S. naval power. The coastline might have seemed unpromising, but

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California which is bounded by it today, if ranked as an independent nation, has
the world’s sixth largest economy. All of these things, which from the vantage
point of 1542 would have seemed so unlikely, came about in ways complex
beyond imagining. Perhaps for the very reason that it was so preposterous and
complex, we are drawn to that beginning as a way to explain, understand, and
validate ourselves. From our vantage point, naturally, that beginning now seems
equally as incomprehensible, alien and inaccessible. So much so that we have
found only one certain means to take us to that strange shore, and ironically it is
by the same means. For more than a century, with continuity and obsession, we
have been conjuring in our commemorative imaginations that ship for which there
are no plans, no precise dimensions, no images, and no known remains.

Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, whose flagship she was, is almost as enigmatic.
We are not entirely sure where he was born or into what circumstances,
or when and why he came to the New World. Though he is frequently
spoken of as Portuguese, this was derived from a somewhat ambiguous
reference in a 1615 compilation of Spanish voyages to the Indies by the
historian Antonio de Herrera. His career was spent entirely in the service of
Spain. We are not sure what the name Cabrillo signifies, as it was a name
he gave himself toward the end of his life after he had acquired property
and social standing to differentiate from all the other Juan Rodriguez’s of
his time. It is unclear where he learned the skills to build boats and ships,
to navigate, or write reports. We don’t know exactly where he died and
though a cryptic artifact was found on Santa Rosa Island in 1901 that
some people believe is his headstone, it is probably a fraud. We know
he died in a wilderness far from home in mundane circumstances due
to complications of either a broken leg or broken arm. And, of a life
that was adventurous, dangerous, violent, and long by the standards
of the time, he spent only the last eight weeks of it in California.

And yet, if one does an internet search of the name Cabrillo, it
will likely turn up hundreds of things bearing his name: churches,
schools, beaches, parks, freeways, streets, hospitals, hotels, colleges, aquariums,
lighthouses, performing arts centers, shopping malls, residential complexes,
retirement homes, marinas, yacht clubs, restaurants, daycare centers, and car
dealerships. The second most visited National Monument in the United States
is located on the headland he once gazed upon in making his landfall and is
named for him. A lonely windswept point on San Miguel Island has a monument
to him, as do landmarks in every port in the state. His ship, the San Salvador,
has appeared on the US 29¢ postage stamp, and can be found in art deco
pictographs throughout Balboa Park, in the mural inside the Avalon Casino, in
the outdoor atrium of the San Diego Municipal Complex, in the Santa Barbara
Courthouse, and the center of the seal of the City of San Diego. The San Salvador
sails in reconstruction as a children’s media center in the Point Loma branch
library and is the subject of artistic renderings of the voyage by fourth graders
throughout the state. None of California’s millions of residents, visitors, political
leaders, celebrities, or artists in all of its history have managed to inspire so much
willingness to identify a pivotal point in our history as this mysterious individual
who first sailed into its unknown territory and then vanished into its landscape.
a few weeks later. Ironically, though none of the names he invented for the places he saw survived, the name he invented for himself trumped all of them. For whatever he was in his life: conquistador, patron, community leader, shipbuilder, navigator, explorer; he has clearly become something else now. His subsequent career transformed events he could never have imagined.

Transformative Worldviews - 14th Century to the 16th Century

To have a sense of the kind of worldview Cabrillo may have held as he attempted to probe its unknown extent, it might be helpful to have a view of that world, or at least a view of how it had changed so abruptly. When they conceptualized their known world, medieval Europeans prior to Cabrillo’s time tended to think of it as a T inside an O, forming the continental divisions of Asia, Africa and Europe. Such T-O maps were oriented east-up, as east was believed to be the direction to the Garden of Eden. Jerusalem was located at the center of the world, as befitted the site of Christ’s resurrection. In fact, in its resemblance to a cross, the cartographic representation of world geography functioned as an augury of the Christian narrative and perhaps even contained clues to the prediction of the Apocalypse. In the most elaborate illuminated renditions, such as the fourteenth century Hereford Map, the Indian Ocean was shown as a closed sea, the Red Sea was pigmented red (naturally) and the more one moved outward from the center the more confrontations one might expect with monstrous creatures and races. Outermost of all and surrounding the known world was Oceanus Mares. This was not the ocean pathway to the Indies, however, it was the ocean of nightmares, marked in such maps by the iconography of death. In practice, the European medieval ocean was something best used as an efficient but tentative shoulder route, creeping from port to cape to port along the coast as though in a river, with occasional crossings to nearby shores, preferably those within sight. Even used in this way coastal navigation was problematic. In 1291, for instance, a well-funded and well-equipped expedition led by the Genoese brothers Ugolino and Vadino Vivaldo attempted to repeat earlier legendary exploits by Phoenicians and Carthaginians in sailing and rowing coastwise from
The fourteenth century Hereford Mappa Mundi, ca 1300, represents one of the most elaborate T-O maps framing a worldview laden with religious symbolism, and placing Jerusalem at the center of the world with the Red Sea moving outward from the center toward increasingly threatening forces.

The Mediterranean and around Africa to India. Their two galleys rowed proudly through the straits of Hercules (Gibraltar), altered course to port and were never heard from again.

T-O maps were not the products of a society one might predict would someday establish worldwide seaborne empires. In the middle of the fourteenth century, for instance (the time of the Hereford Map), one might have thought China the most likely candidate for such an enterprise. China was the wealthiest and most powerful society on earth for most of the preceding twenty centuries and possessed a well-developed maritime capacity, expansive oceanic trading networks, and a systematic approach to gathering knowledge. In keeping, the spectacular fifteenth-century voyages of Zheng He might have begun a cycle of seaborne empire had they uncovered anything the Chinese felt was really worth the trouble.
By comparison to the Hereford map, the al-Idrisi map composed for Roger II of Sicily in 1154 from the compilations of Arab seafarers reveals a rational and useable cartography largely devoid of religious narrative. The map contains lines of latitude and depicts bodies of ocean as elements of a functional geography rather than as a symbolic barrier separating planes of existence. This too is understandable given the extensive Arab maritime trading networks which spanned the Indian Ocean and eastern Mediterranean. The Islamic world of that time also contained many libraries, medical schools, and astronomical observatories known to the West. By contrast with an Arab world that was relatively cohesive in acceptance of other belief systems, Europe was deeply religious, fractious, violent, involved in failed crusades, and in retreat. By the middle of the fifteenth century that retreat was beginning to look like a rout when the Ottomans took Constantinople, the city which had stood as a European bastion in Asia for a thousand years and, perhaps as ominously, the Venetians and Genoese began to gradually lose to the Ottomans their options as intermediaries in the spice trade as well as their access to the forest resources that underpinned their naval power.

To what then, can we attribute what seems at this distance like a metahistorical role reversal? How was it that, by 1530, less than a century after the fall of Constantinople, the maritime empires of Spain and Portugal controlled most of the world’s strategic maritime choke points: Gibraltar, Calais, Malagasy, Hormuz, Aden, Malacca, the Isthmus of Darien, and had licensed all of the maritime trade of the Indian ocean, and sat astride the American continent poised for a potential Pacific route to the Indies and return? Even more amazing, how was it that the combined worldwide enterprise of both Spain and Portugal in the mid-sixteenth century was achieved with such breathtaking economy of force; an institutional establishment of soldiers, sailors, factors, functionaries, and political leadership that seldom numbered more than 10,000 men?
As many historians have argued, with varying degrees of willingness to invoke a deterministic model, the advent of the European oceanic sailing ship at the beginning of the sixteenth century constituted a far-reaching technological revolution that conveyed to Europeans an unprecedented advantage, perhaps the most consequential technological revolution of history. It allowed Europeans the means to reverse their long decline and then to parlay that advantage by incorporating the wealth of new territories and trade routes into oceanic empires of worldwide reach. The first large-scale technological system (with the possible exception of the chariot in antiquity), the oceanic sailing ship was also the last transportation and communication system in which people, treasure, commodities, ideas, and power all moved in the same system instead of, as today, in different specialized channels. The oceanic sailing ship was comprised of three
attributes combined effectively for the first time: a heavy commodious hull capable of standing up to heavy seas for months at a time while carrying enormous weights in cargo, provisions and armament; sufficient artillery to destroy any other type of vessel and to deter attack from other European ships; and a rational system of navigation which fixed positions in absolute rather than relative systems of reference, facilitated depiction of wind systems, and was recognized as a means to substantiate claims of ownership. The system was more than just the ships. It relied on interlinked support institutions such as shipyards and ordnance foundries, systems for procurement of timber and naval stores, victualling depots, boards of trade, navigation institutions which codified practice and collated, produced, and protected secret geographic information, and which along with military engineering, artillery, and mining institutionalized the role of mathematics and instrumentation in investigating and manipulating the natural world for gain. These ships and their supporting institutions were not simply the machinery of profit-seeking ventures, they were essential components of modern states. Going beyond the hardware, the requirements of navigation for oceanic trade and empire imposed across these institutions a rational view of the
world which affected and reinforced change in the larger paradigm. At the very moment when Cabrillo's ships sailed into the bay they named San Miguel, a Polish astronomer on the other side of the world was completing work on a treatise that dispensed with an overly elaborate theocratic version of the universe that had prevailed since antiquity and proposed instead a far simpler arrangement based on quantified observation that placed the sun at the center of our planetary system. Copernicus's *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* would become the founding work of the scientific revolution. While the voyage of the *San Salvador* was certainly not the first early modern expedition, it may have been the last such voyage of the medieval world.

Copernicus's world system challenged the traditional view of the solar system by placing the sun at the center with the earth, moon and other planets revolving around it.
As the galleon and her consorts made their way up the Baja California coast, *San Salvador* represented the furthest salient of this technological revolution into unknown regions of persisting medieval fantasies. The first wave of this revolution had carried Cabrillo as a young man across the Atlantic to the West Indies and then to Vera Cruz with Pánfilo de Narváez to join with Cortés' army. He contributed to its momentum with the boats he constructed for the amphibious attack across Lake Texcoco, which took the Aztec capital, and again when he built Alvarado’s fleet of ships for the discovery of a new route to China, *San Salvador* among them. And the surge was cresting still in 1542, when she carried Cabrillo to his final destination and starring role in California’s origin story.

As the episodes of Cabrillo’s life and the Voyage of Discovery he made are the subject of other papers within this issue of *Mains’l Haul*, we will pick up the story of his career as it continues after his death. Though it failed in its primary objectives, Cabrillo and his voyage enjoyed an immediate but brief afterlife in cartography and in the litigations over his estate in Guatemala. The geographical information gleaned from the voyage, including the harbor of San Miguel, found its way into European maps in subsequent decades, though examples such as Paolo Forlani’s map of 1566 persisted with the notion that China lay at the end of a manageable coastal voyage to the northwest bisected by a strait that connected the Pacific to the Atlantic via an all-water route across the top of North America. Perhaps more importantly, information concerning the prevailing westerly winds that stymied their attempts to follow the coast may have helped crack the code of Pacific wind patterns necessary for development of a two-way transpacific route between New Spain and the Indies. This route became practical in 1565 when the Spanish established themselves in the western Pacific with a base in Manila. The voyage itself was the longest regular trade route of the age and its eastbound leg was one of the most dangerous routes of maritime history. In an effort to locate harbors of refuge for the eastbound galleons making their way to Acapulco after months at sea, the merchant explorer Sebastián Vizcaíno in 1602 conducted the second survey of the coastline Cabrillo had explored. It was Vizcaíno who took advantage of Cabrillo’s faded presence in the records, and lack of precision in his descriptions and latitudes, to rename the prominent islands, headlands, and bays, including Cabrillo’s first harbor in Alta California, San Miguel, which he renamed San Diego. Vizcaíno’s voyage also produced the earliest large scale maps to survive in which we can recognize familiar geographic features of California’s coast depicted in rational form. In overwriting Cabrillo’s geography and place names, Vizcaíno nearly succeeded in erasing him from history.
Many years later when the ships of other nations roamed the Pacific at will, Spain seized upon the colonization of California as a strategy for the defense of its Pacific monopoly by denying the use of it as a base to other European sea powers. In the end, it proved to be a futile defense. The exploration, classification, interpretation, and exploitation of the Pacific became a primary objective for the entire European Enlightenment, led by Britain, France, and Russia. Following the age of great Pacific voyages of exploration, the distant Spanish outpost became Mexican and then American, as succeeding waves of immigrants from around the world poured into California searching for gold, land, and livelihoods. Until late in the nineteenth century, most of those immigrants came by sea and many of them were of seafaring stock.
By the late nineteenth century California’s teeming offshore waters and expanding demand for protein made fishing seem an especially attractive livelihood to immigrants from traditional fishing communities with similar climates and topography, such as mainland Portugal and the Azores. Given the insecurities of immigrating to a new land from half-way around the world, it’s hardly surprising that some of them should find a special connection, identity, and sense of ownership in the heroic exploits of a great seaman explorer who not only made the first claim on their new homeland, but was a countryman from their storied past. The mystery and ambiguity of Cabrillo now was an advantage, a figure who could be claimed both as Spanish and Portuguese. Moreover, for an entire state filled with hopeful newcomers, Cabrillo as hero-navigator and self-made man embodied the ultimate newcomer, legitimized by the patina of distant history. Even better, Cabrillo’s voyage gave an upstart California its origin story, older than New England’s, older than Virginia’s, older than almost anywhere in the United States.

If Cabrillo made any maps, none have survived. It is ironic that his return to prominence is portended in a unique 1886 U.S. Coast Survey chart. Through most of U.S. history, the country’s foremost scientific institution was the U.S. Coast Survey, now known as the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Among the first and most important contributions of the Coast Survey were detailed maps and nautical charts, and like the maps of all hydrographic offices of this period, each one was a tool of surpassing precision and a masterpiece of rationalism, its unassailable authority presumed in the spare rendering of the facts: no baroque cartouches, pictograms of ships and sea monsters, foliated compass roses, or portraits of explorers associated with national claims of territory.

In 1886 the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey produced this unique chart marking landfalls of earlier discovery voyages.

Courtesy the author
It is noteworthy that in 1886 the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey produced a chart by George Davidson called “Landfalls of Cabrillo and Ferro [sic] on the Pacific Coast” (Bartolomé Ferrer was San Salvador’s chief pilot and Cabrillo’s successor in command of the expedition). This was no ordinary nautical chart with notations reporting reefs and changes in magnetic variation. Rather, through a succession of notes and stories associated with the places they had explored during the voyage, all carefully arranged in proper coordinates, Davidson filled his geography with signifying narrative, in principle not unlike what the T-O maps had once done in depicting a medieval world centered on Jerusalem and ringed by a sea of death. At one stroke Davidson had reversed Vizcaíno’s notations and through the offices of the U.S. Coast Survey, Cabrillo claimed the territory once more, precisely at the moment in California’s history when the first wave of Portuguese immigrants were pouring into California and ranging its bays, coastlines, and offshore waters in search of fish. San Salvador had begun her voyage back to life.
In 1892, Cabrillo landed once again in San Diego to commemorate the 350th anniversary of his first landfall in what was now the United States. Though there was no San Salvador to debark from when Cabrillo stepped ashore from a launch rowed to the foot of Grape Street, the moment served as the grand finale of a celebration that included a military parade down Broadway, speeches by civic leaders and throngs of spectators at the landing site. Two years later, it was deemed necessary to dignify the proceedings by the inclusion of Cabrillo’s flagship. Since no galleons were readily available the organizers chose the most exotic watercraft at their disposal to portray San Salvador, so the Chinese abalone junk Alta was pressed into service. In subsequent years Alta became progressively more “galleonized” with the addition of a fo’c’sle, stern castle, and yards. Eventually, many of the great period sailing vessels on the West Coast portrayed San Salvador in landing reenactments: Rendezvous, Swift of Ipswitch, Bagherra, Argus, California, Pilgrim (now Spirit of Dana Point), Red Witch, Lynx, and Californian.

San Salvador also materialized as a focal point in historic narrative art. A sculpture of the ship was proposed by Alan Hutchinson in 1913 (the year Cabrillo National Monument was established) to accompany a monumental statue of Cabrillo, which was to have been erected on the spot of the old 1854 Point Loma Lighthouse after that superannuated structure was demolished. Fortunately for the career of what is now one of San Diego’s most beloved structures, the plans to destroy the lighthouse were rescinded and neither the heroic monument nor the ship sculpture came to be. Today, if one goes to Cabrillo National Monument, one finds the heroic nature of the explorer conveyed by a Padrão (the stelae once erected on prominent headlands by Portuguese navigators to mark both the furthest extent of their explorations and their ownership of the route) sculpted by Alvaro de Bree and contributed by Portugal to the Pan American Exposition at Treasure Island in 1939 and installed at its Point Loma location in 1949. Not far away is the iconic (and wildly fanciful) bronze sculpture of the San Salvador, which has been a fixture at Cabrillo National Monument since 1935 and the basis of its logo. In the decades to follow, a number of West Coast artists from Duncan Gleason to Richard DeRosset have found San Salvador’s voyage an apt subject for their narrative art. More recently, the San Salvador has even served as the basis for narrative forms of architecture, as in the children’s media center at the Point Loma branch library. In the accumulation and distribution of such representations in public art, in public performances and landing reenactments, in the telling of the Cabrillo story as part of the California curriculum standards, and in the assignment of Cabrillo to place and business names from national monuments to strip malls, the San Salvador has grown to become the ubiquitous, if subliminal avatar of the California and especially the San Diego origin story. We have been building the San Salvador in our imaginations for generations. Now it is time for her to materialize in tangible form.

This fanciful bronze sculpture of the San Salvador can be viewed at the Cabrillo National Monument and is the basis of their logo. It is one of many iconographic interpretations of the ship – a ship we have been conjuring in our imaginations for centuries.

Courtesy Cabrillo National Monument