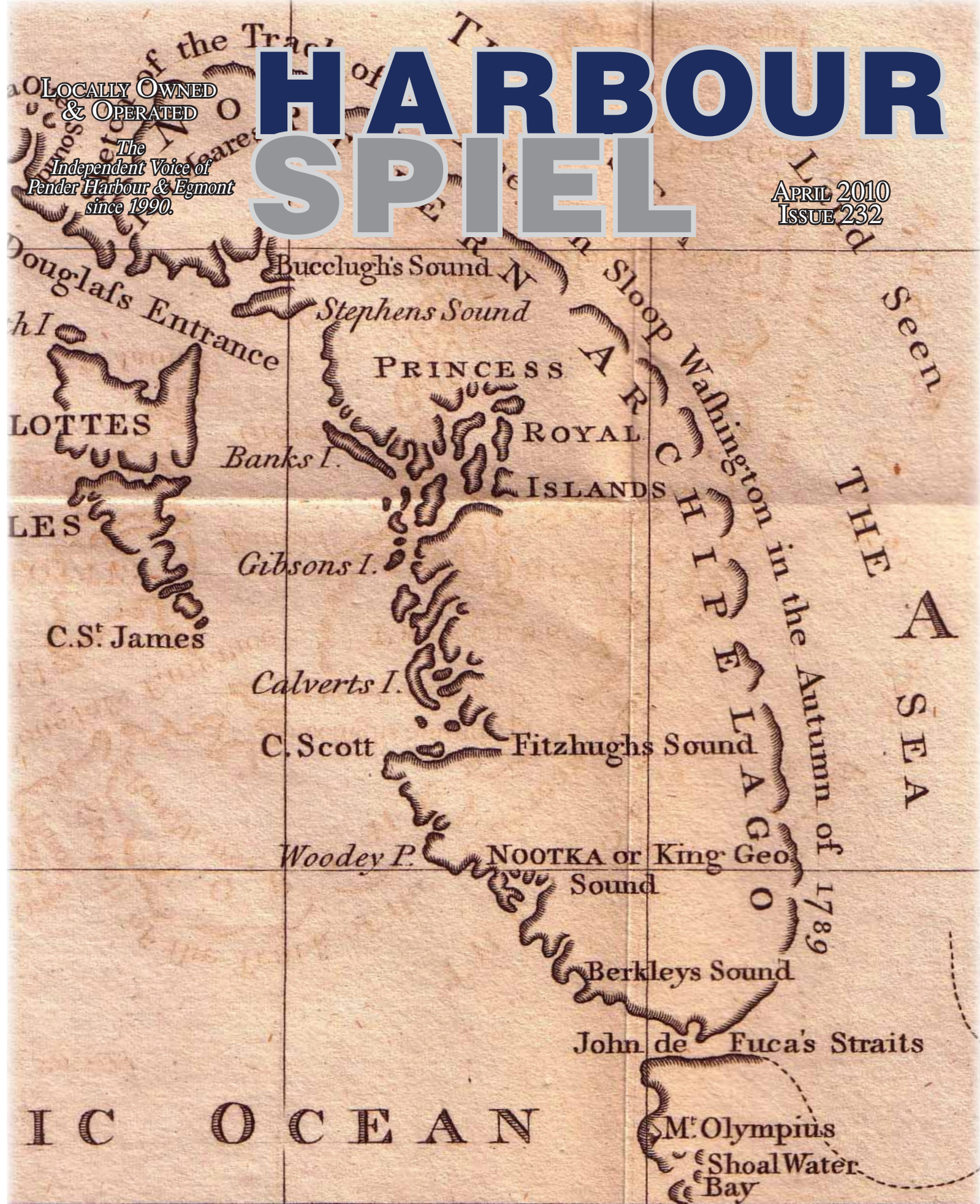


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Were Americans the first to visit the Sunshine Coast?

Could the first visitors to the Sunshine Coast have been American?



By Gary Little

Although it seems well established that the Spanish were the first Europeans to sail along our coast in 1791 — they even went ashore near Mission Point in Davis Bay — an intriguing chart from a 1790 book by John Meares hints that a merchant ship from Boston, Mass. may have been the first in the neighbourhood.

John Meares, a former Royal Navy lieutenant, was an entrepreneurial fur trader and part-time explorer on the northwest coast of America in the late 18th century.

He was seeking his fortune after reading the official account of Capt. James Cook’s third voyage (published in 1784), noting the high prices fetched in China for sea otter pelts acquired inexpensively during Cook’s one-month stay at Nootka Sound on Vancouver Island in 1778.

Meares’s activities brought him to Alaska over the winter of 1786-87 (a harsh season he barely survived) and then to the west coast of Vancouver Island in 1788.

In 1790, following his return to England, he wrote a popular book



Gordon Miller painting

The American fur trading ships the *Columbia Rediviva* and the *Lady Washington* leaving Boston in 1787.

about his adventures titled *Voyages Made in the Years 1788 and 1789, from China to the North West Coast of America*.

The book would later be carried to the northwest coast as a reference by none other than George Vancouver who left England in 1791 with orders to chart the “backside of America” in detail from California to Alaska.

Meares’s book included the chart shown (facing page): *A Chart of the Interior Part of North America Demonstrating the very great probability*

of an Inland Navigation from Hudsons Bay to the West Coast.

This chart is interesting for two reasons:

It shows a possible navigable water route between Hudson Bay and Alaska. (This concept was borrowed from a map by Peter Pond, a North West Company fur trader, published in England in March 1790. Meares himself did not explore inland.)

It shows “the sea” surrounding most of present-day British Columbia with a path marked “Sketch of the Track of the American Sloop Washington in the Autumn of 1789.”

It is this latter feature that’s most interesting to us here on the Sunshine Coast because it shows a great sea behind Vancouver Island accessed via Juan de Fuca Strait and extending to the north of Haida Gwaii.

We now know, of course, there is no sea of enormous size and extent indicated on this chart, but perhaps this was simply a crude approximation of the first voyage ever into Georgia

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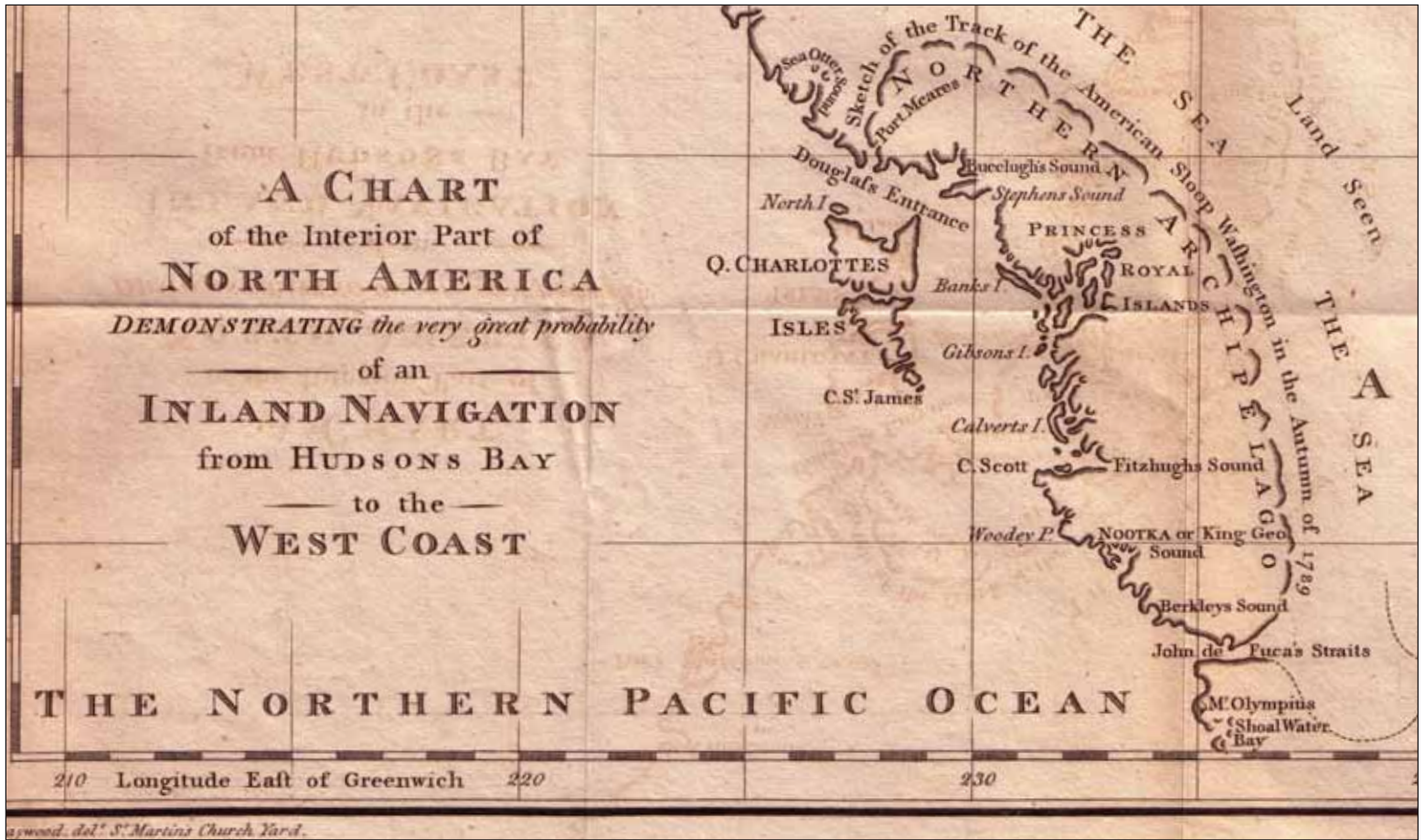
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map courtesy of Gary Little

From a 1790 book by explorer John Meares, this chart entitled 'A Chart of the Interior Part of North America Demonstrating the very great probability of an Inland Navigation from Hudsons Bay to the West Coast,' might fuel speculation about the first non-native visitors to the Sunshine Coast.

Strait and around Vancouver Island — a voyage that predates the well-documented visits of Narváez in 1791 and George Vancouver in 1792.

Understand how this unusual track showed up on the Meares map requires us to go back to Boston in 1787. In that year, only 11 years after the United States Declaration of Independence, several wealthy New England merchants launched a joint venture to tap the same lucrative northwest fur trade market that attracted Meares and others.

They outfitted two ships, the *Columbia Rediviva* and the sloop *Lady Washington* and put them under the command of Capt. John Kendrick and Capt. Robert Gray, respectively.

The plan was to go to Nootka, trade with the natives for sea otter pelts, then head to China to sell them at the high prices Cook had reported.

The two ships left Boston on October 1, 1787 to much excitement and fanfare.

They later separated in bad weather as they rounded the Horn of South America, but both ended up making it to Nootka Sound in September 1788 within a week of one another, with Gray in the *Lady Washington* arriving first.

Here Gray and Kendrick found John Meares and his ship the *Felice Adventurer* but they would have little



Robert Gray 1755 - 1806

continued next page

First visitors (cont.)

(continued from page 15)
 opportunity to get to know him because he departed for China a few days later.

The Americans wintered at Nootka and accumulated furs until the following summer.

Then, in July 1789, the two captains exchanged ships.

Gray sailed immediately for China aboard the *Columbia Rediviva* while Kendrick stayed behind in the *Lady Washington*, presumably to acquire more furs before departing.

But the full scope of his activities during that summer and autumn is not completely known.

Gray arrived in Macao in November 1789 followed by Kendrick in January 1790.

Gray then left for Boston the following month and successfully returned on Aug. 9, 1790, making the *Columbia Rediviva* the first American ship to circumnavigate the globe.

Kendrick stayed behind in the *Lady Washington* and never did return to Boston although he continued trad-

ing on the northwest coast until his death in Hawaii in December 1794.

John Meares spent the whole of 1789 in Canton managing the affairs of his trading business and, presumably, writing a good portion of the book he would publish the following year.

In December 1789 he left for England to personally complain to the government about seizures by the Spanish of his company's ships and land at Nootka. (This precipitated the Nootka Crisis and nearly led to war between Britain and Spain.)

Meares' book was a monumental work. It was over 400 pages and included 28 copper-engraved plates and maps, including the map shown here.

However, the book was savaged by George Dixon, a rival northwest fur trader of the day (Dixon Entrance north of Haida Gwaii is named for him). He ridiculed Meares for several statements made in his book and alleged that Meares was fraudulently attempting to take credit for discover-



John Meares 1756-1809

ies made by others.

As for the purported track of the *Lady Washington*, Dixon said it resembled nothing "so much as the mould of a good old housewife's butter pat" and was a complete fabrication.

In a public exchange of pamphlets with Dixon (an 18th-century version of an e-mail flame war) Meares defended himself by saying that he had obtained his information from "Mr. Neville, a gentleman of the most respectable character, who came home in the *Chesterfield*, a ship in the service of the East India Company," and that Mr. Neville had "received the particulars of the track" from Captain Kendrick.

Capt. George Vancouver had the Meares book with him when he left Britain on April 1, 1791 to perform a detailed survey of the northwest coast to Alaska and he was also well aware of Dixon's criticisms.

He mentions the book several times in his own book and was obviously interested in confirming what lay beyond Juan de Fuca Strait.

Like finding a needle in a haystack, Vancouver encountered Robert Gray at sea, off the Washington State

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coast, in April 1792.

Gray was on his second trip to Nootka from Boston and Vancouver had just arrived on the northwest coast to begin his survey.

Vancouver specifically questioned Gray about the Meares chart and in his book *A Voyage of Discovery* (1798), he records Gray's reaction:

"It is not possible to conceive any one to be more astonished than was Mr. Gray, on his being made acquainted, that his authority had been quoted, and the track pointed out that he had been said to have made in the sloop *Washington*.

"In contradiction to which, he assured the officers, that he had penetrated only 50 miles into the straits in question, in an E.S.E. direction; that he found the passage five leagues wide; and that he understood, from the natives, that the opening extended a considerable distance to the northward; that this was all the information he had acquired respecting this inland sea, and that he returned into the ocean by the same way he had entered at."

Two weeks later, on May 11, 1792, Gray would achieve enduring fame as the first to sail into the great river which he named for his ship — the *Columbia*.

This act of discovery was the key to recognition of U.S. claims to the river and to the area north to the 49th parallel in 1846.

An important point that seems to have escaped everyone's attention, however, is that in the autumn of 1789, the time when the *Washington* was said to have sailed the inland sea, Gray was not its captain.

He had transferred to the *Columbia* in late July and sailed her back to



Medal minted for the Columbia-Washington Voyage of 1787.

China leaving John Kendrick in command of the *Washington*.

Kendrick did more trading, then eventually ended up in Macao in early 1790 after a stopover in Hawaii.

Could he have circumnavigated Vancouver Island in the interim?

It seems unlikely for a couple of reasons.

First, he probably would not have had enough time to do so.

Second, such an important achievement would surely have been communicated to many others by Kendrick, who remained an active trader in the north Pacific until his death five years later, but it wasn't.

Nevertheless, the possibility of a 1789 voyage around Vancouver Island, however faint, still lingers.

As J. Richard Nokes, author of *Almost a Hero* (a biography of John Meares) says,

"It is conceivable that Kendrick

may have sailed from Clayoquot Sound through the Strait of Juan de Fuca and then north behind Vancouver Island perhaps to trade with natives near the Queen Charlotte Islands.

"The truth will never be known, because Kendrick died in Hawaii in 1794 without ever returning to Boston and any record concerning this incident was lost or has never been found."

One thing is certain: If Meares's assertion was correct — and if Kendrick had a better publicist — most of present-day British Columbia would have become American territory faster than you can say "Fifty-four forty or fight!"

Gary Little is a realtor with Royal LePage Sunshine Coast and is well known for his interactive maps of the area — real estate for sale, waterfalls, and exploration. Find out more about him at www.GaryLittle.ca.

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