

Reflections on Humboldt Bay in 2015

Ray Sumner
Long Beach City College

Prelude

IN THE YEAR 2000 I wondered about that famous German name when I attended the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers (APCG) meeting at Humboldt State University. It was so conspicuous throughout the region. Could I have missed knowing about a visit to California by Humboldt? Fifteen years later, when the California Geographical Society was to meet there, I needed to satisfy my curiosity about these eponymous places. Did Humboldt really visit this part of the world?

We geographers know Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), the Father of Geography; the man who ascended Mount Chimborazo, believed then to be the highest mountain on earth;¹ his influential ideas in biogeography introduced the concept of altitudinal zonation; he is commemorated in the Humboldt Current, a vital factor in the El Niño phenomenon. Though no Humboldt expert, I had long been an admirer. Humboldt's adventures in the New World tropics had resonated in my (less exciting) student years in tropical north Queensland. During graduate studies in Germany, I became fascinated by his impressive achievements in a productive, long, and much traveled life. Of course I photographed his statue at the entrance to the Humboldt University in Berlin, and found time to read an old leather-bound copy of *Cosmos*. In New York I located his bust at the edge of Central Park.

It was easy to ascertain that, indeed, Alexander von Humboldt never visited California.² He made only a brief sojourn in the eastern United States in 1804, to Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia (Mathewson 2006). There he met with Jefferson, whom he knew not only as President of the Republic he so admired, but as President of the American Philosophical Society. He also found time to sit for a portrait by Charles Wilson Peale (Figure 1). After his return to Germany,

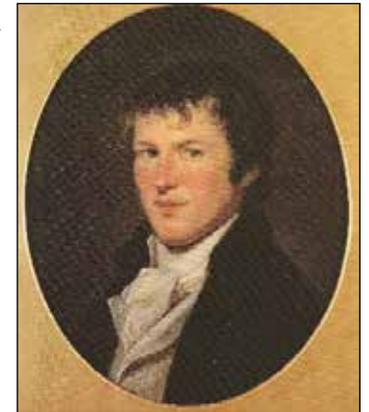


Figure 1.—Portrait of Alexander von Humboldt by Charles Wilson Peale, 1805–06 (Wikimedia Commons).

Humboldt maintained correspondence with many American men of science over the next half-century. His influence on American scientific thought persisted throughout the great period of nineteenth-century American westward expansion (Sachs 2006).

Now it was time to satisfy my curiosity about Humboldt in California. The name must have originated with some voyage of European “discovery,” when the name Humboldt Bay was bestowed and recorded for posterity. But who among the host of Spanish, English, Russian, and finally American voyagers on the northwest coast had chosen to honor a German? When did this happen? So it was back to the men who sailed the California coast to seek the answer.

Naming the Landscape—Indigenous Names and European Names

Reading the research of others regarding the complex sequence of European exploration along the California coast, we encounter a too-familiar conquest story, beginning with the original residents of the bay, the indigenous Wiyot people. California maps show very few indigenous names, and we often do not know their meaning, but the waters known as *Qual-a-wa-loo* formed the center of the Wiyot world (Davidson (1891).³ Nomland and Kroeber (1936) mapped forty-four villages between Eel River and Mad River, with an estimated population of 800 to 1000 people. Twelve Wiyot settlements were recorded around Humboldt Bay.

The whole quest to know who brought Humboldt to the bay highlights again the difference between indigenous place-naming practice and European naming conventions. Native peoples knew their environment intimately, regarding it with respect and gratitude. Their land sustained them, and it was also a landscape where they walked in the footsteps of their ancestors and felt their spirits. Yet personal names were never used for places; as with other indigenous and traditional cultures, the Wiyot never spoke the names of the deceased. Their toponyms came from creation stories, from animals, from experiences and feelings; place-names did imply a sense of ownership of the physical world, but more importantly demonstrated the sacred symbiotic bond between people and their inanimate world. I love their concept that *names speak the world into existence*. Few of these indigenous names can be seen or heard today.

Naming may be a basic human tendency, but the European practice of naming is different. It dates perhaps from Aristotle, and belongs not to the spirit

world but to a desire to construct a different sort of knowledge. One familiar and lasting legacy of European naming is the Linnaean binomial system, which constructs a fixed identity for every organism, and sets its place in a rigid and highly compartmentalized system. Through naming and classifying, all of Nature is organized into a world scheme. This process produces a special view of the natural world, and an implied value.⁴ Humboldt, in contrast, held an ecological belief that the multiplicity of natural life-forms represented a unity. His Cosmos was interconnected and interdependent, living and changing.

Power is implied in European toponyms. We still seek to imprint personal names on landscape features. For monetary consideration, a name can be recorded for a crater on our moon; more than one million people have names recorded on a microchip on Mars. In seeking to explain this aspiration of European settler societies, the United States Geological Society produced a Factsheet (1999) on commemorative naming. It states that: “Naming rivers, mountains, and valleys after individuals was one way *settlers marked the land*; it signified their *lives on these lands were important* and, in addition to being *a point of reference*, usually satisfied the *need for stability* and enhanced the general concept of *sense of place*” (emphasis mine). This seems so reasonable to us. The factsheet also notes that: “...what may be most significant about the present commemorative naming decisions is their *permanence*.” So the traditional oral name *Qual-a-wa-loo* was eventually replaced by Humboldt Bay, a name printed on a chart.

Imperial Naming-and-Claiming and Humboldt Bay

Naming to claim physical possession of territory represents a further step in the dispossession of indigenous peoples. There is no doubt who owns California now, but our current Californian place-names, multifarious and sometimes mysterious, reflect the imperial ambitions of several European nations and, finally, of young America. As the first European ships “discovered” these “new” lands, their captains made charts dotted with names, in a process that brought remote landscapes into existence in European consciousness. Familiar names of saints and famous personages turned unknown lands into knowable places. When we look now at maps of the New World, we are reading messages from the past, conjuring magical stories of geography.

The topography of *Qual-a-wa-loo* meant that it remained hidden from the view of European ships throughout some 250 years of sailing the coast. The long and low-relief coast of sand bars sheltering the lagoon meant it was not visible to Europeans. Frequent storms also forced ships to keep their distance

offshore. It was not seen in 1542, when Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo sailed as far north as the (now) Russian River, encountered indigenous peoples, and bestowed many now-forgotten Spanish place-names on islands and bays before his untimely death. The English buccaneer Francis Drake brought a new era when he landed in 1579, mapped a large bay on the coast, and claimed this new land for England under the name *Nova Albion*.⁵ He was followed by several more Spanish ships in the latter part of the eighteenth century. Vizcaino in 1603 mapped an unexplained *Bahia Grande*, but this does not resemble the physical reality of Humboldt Bay (Davidson).

After a long hiatus, Spanish exploration by land reached San Francisco in 1769, and several Spanish captains sailed the northern coast over the next decades. Notable among them is Juan Francisco de la Bodega y Quadra, who named Trinidad, and whose own name lives on at Bodega Bay. He met with George Vancouver, who sailed this coast in 1792–94 and wanted to name the great island where they met amicably the Island of Quadra and Vancouver. Twenty years earlier and further north, James Cook had made a symbolic claim for England, but Vancouver again formally claimed for England the whole West Coast north of 32 degrees south latitude (Sumner 2013). Still, the traditional lives of the undiscovered Wiyot people continued undisturbed.

“An American Captain, an American Ship and an American Crew”

This was how the enthusiastic narrator on the good ship *Madaket* in 2015 described the first discovery of Humboldt Bay, as geographers cruised there in 2015; but there is a backstory that deflates this patriotic claim. In the summer of 1806, the ship *O’Cain*, under command of Jonathan Winship of Boston, saw the bay but could only enter and explore it in ships’ boats and canoes. They were sailing, however, for the Russian-American Company, carrying indigenous Inuit and their canoes (*bidarkas*) south from New Archangelsk (Sitka) to hunt sea otter. Winship’s men mapped the bay, referring to it first as the Bay of Indians. On their map, however, *Qual-a-wa-loo* became Rezanov Bay.⁶ The name appears on a manuscript of the Winship chart (1807) in the St. Petersburg naval archives, and on updated printed Russian charts from 1848 and 1852 (Giesecke 1997). A second superseded Russian name was the nearby Bay of Rumyantsev,⁷ now Bodega Bay, where the Russian American Company took the daring step of founding in Spanish California a colony we know as Fort Ross.

Humboldt Comes to California—The Golden 1850s

We need not discuss here familiar events of the Mexican-American War, the annexation of California, the gold discoveries of 1849 when the *world rushed in*, and the rapid admission to statehood as the thirty-first member in 1850. That same year, the bay was again “found” and renamed twice. American miners on the rich Trinity and Klamath River diggings wanted to find a port closer than San Francisco to obtain their supplies. An enterprising group walked overland and in December came eventually to the bay, which they named Trinity Bay, believing it to be the mouth of the Trinity River. One member, in self-assured style, carved his name “David Buck” on a tree and claimed a large portion of land. The town of Bucksport (now Eureka) soon rose (Figure 2).



Figure 2.—The last reminder of Bucksport, now part of the city of Eureka (personal photograph).

At that same time, ships seeking northerly harbors were setting out from San Francisco. A hastily formed group of men chartered the schooner *Laura Virginia*, established the Laura Virginia Association, and set out with fifty passengers/ investors. In March 1850, Captain Douglas Ottinger saw from the masthead the waters of the bay, but a heavy-breaking swell hid the entrance, so they continued north. When they sailed south again, in early April, Second Officer Henry Hans Bühne and some of his men took a small boat through the breakers and into the “unnamed” bay, where they camped on the shore at what is today known as Bühne Point. Then he located the passage and took the *Laura Virginia* in on April 14. The first American ship had entered the bay. Most histories note merely that the bay was then named Humboldt “in honor of the great naturalist.”

A Deed Without a Name?

The informative and verbose Bledsoe (1885) wrote only that the name Humboldt was given “at the earnest solicitation of a member of the expedition whose enthusiastic admiration for the illustrious Prussian was as boundless

as the latter's knowledge." My suspicion that it was probably Bühne who chose that name lies in his own Danish-German origins, and even more in the naming of his second son, Alexander Humboldt Bühne. Another early writer stated confusingly: "Douglas Ottinger...gave to the bay the name of Humboldt, after the great German scientist and traveler; but it is also claimed that Major E. H. Howard, now of Eureka, gave this name to the bay" (Lewis Publishing 1891). But still further mysterious hints led to new details and revealed that the true namer of Humboldt Bay was "Mr. Shaw, now of San Francisco" (Elliott 1881). Further searching finally uncovered the story of this true protagonist.

Stephen William Shaw (1817–1900) was a portrait painter from Vermont who had joined a group of '49ers in Panama bound for California. Finding no gold, Shaw soon returned to portrait painting in Sacramento and San Francisco, where he then became a member of the Laura Virginian Company. On their vessel's return voyage, Shaw was chosen as one of a land party sent to walk south from Trinidad to scout for an entrance to that "nameless" lagoon sighted previously on the voyage north. With Wiyot's assistance they reached the end of the northern spit, camped, and returned to Trinidad with details of a favorable location. And so Bühne piloted the vessel into the bay. Pleased at the prospect of wealth from this new harbor, the men now claimed land for themselves. As Ottinger carefully sounded and charted the waters, Shaw's choice of Humboldt Bay was the name entered. But did Shaw really have a "boundless knowledge of the great man"? Or is it perhaps more likely that the name had been etched into his mind through his grim 102-day voyage from Panama to San Francisco, aboard a ship named *Alexander von Humboldt*? So arduous was this voyage that wealthy fellow-passenger Collis P. Huntington (soon one of the Big Four railroad magnates), established the Society of the Humboldters; survivors of the arduous Panama–San Francisco voyage met each year in San Francisco at a banquet on the anniversary of their arrival date.

Soon the "newly discovered" bay was the destination of official visits by the United States Coast Survey, and the name Humboldt Bay was entered onto their official charts for navigation.⁸ By 1852, Alexander Dallas Bache, Superintendent of the Coastal Survey and a long-time friend of Humboldt, issued the detailed *Official US Coast Survey Preliminary Survey of Humboldt Bay California* (Figure 3). Now the name Humboldt was permanently placed on this American landscape, supplanting all previous names.

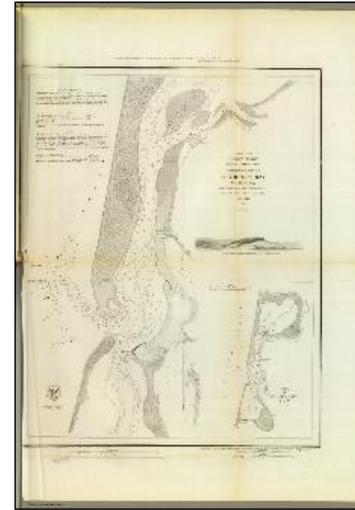


Figure 3.—Official US Coast Survey Preliminary Survey of Humboldt Bay California 1852 (David Rumsey Map Collection, used with permission).

What Remains?

The men of the Laura Virginia Association were, like others, namers-and-claimers. They thought their fortunes assured as they "took possession" of sufficient land to found the emergent Humboldt City, comprising about four miles of coastline and extending one mile inland. Blocks were roughly measured and a tent city sprang into existence; buildings followed. S W Shaw and his brother S Lewis Shaw farmed on table Bluff in the 1850s, but the former sold up and returned to a successful career in San Francisco.⁹ The latter established a village—which took the name of his own house, "Ferndale"—and became the first Postmaster.

In 1853 came both the establishment of Fort Humboldt and the incorporation of Humboldt County. Today the Fort is a State Park with a number of restored or reconstructed buildings. It now pays tribute to the unconscionable mistreatment of the decimated indigenous peoples. Though its charter ironically stated that it was set up to *provide protection for inhabitants from Indian hostiles* (my emphasis), the reality was quite the opposite.¹⁰

Humboldt City was situated in the southern part of the bay. The land party members had founded their cities to the north, and a road to the mines soon led to the ascendancy of Union (Arcata), and the rapid decline of Humboldt City. Elliott referred to it as an "imaginary city" where only one house remained, while the prolix Bledsoe wrote: "... the city faded from the visionary projects of the adventurers' dream. Humboldt City succumbed to the inexorable decrees of fate, and to-day the scene of its once bustling life is abandoned to its original pastoral simplicity" (Bledsoe 1885). As a final blow, the site of the former Humboldt City was later chosen by Pacific Gas and Electric for the Humboldt Bay Nuclear Power Plant, in operation 1963 to 1976 and now decommissioned (Par Environmental Services Inc. 2003).

Gold has long ceased to be important in this region, but it was the stimulus for the first four Californian "Humboldts"—the Bay, the City, the Fort, and

the County. Subsequently it was attached to forests, parks, and a peak, together with many commercial uses of the name seen today.

Coda

My enjoyable quest is over, but there remains a new adventure for some other investigator. Alexander von Humboldt was, throughout his life, a prolific correspondent. When the Laura Virginians took up their land, they decided to “give the Baron Von Humboldt a choice lot in the city of his name; and a deed of the same was written and sent to him, with a full account of the adventures of the company, for which the Association in due season received his kind acknowledgements over his own signature” (Bledsoe). Where is the letter from the namesake of this part of California? Was it perhaps retained by HH Bühne, who stayed on to become the wealthy patriarch of a prominent Eureka family (Irvine 1915)? Perhaps it passed to the elder son (also HH Bühne)? Or perhaps it was kept by Ottinger? Or one of the members of Laura Virginia Association? This is a trail that might lead some future researcher to a splendid tangible relic of that intriguing spatial history linking Alexander von Humboldt with northern California.

Notes

1 Chimborazo truly deserves this honor, because the distance from its peak to the center of earth is considerably greater than that of Mount Everest. It can be argued that sea-level is an arbitrary and changing reference.

2 Just as Charles Darwin visited Australia, but never the place now known as Darwin.

3 This scientist-geographer was employed for fifty years by the US Coastal Survey, spending two long periods in California; after retirement he was the first Professor of Geography at UC Berkeley. The US Coastal Survey, founded by Jefferson in 1807, attracted some of the best scientists and artists of the nineteenth century.

4 For the young E. O. Wilson, learning Latin names of species was a childhood revelation. He recalled finding a “jelly-fish” on the shore: “...what a spectacle...but how inadequate, how demeaning the word used to label it. I should have been able to whisper its true name *scyphozoan*...The name would have been a more fitting monument to this discovery” (Wilson 1994).

5 Historians still disagree on the actual location of the bay Drake visited.

6 In honor of Count Nikolay Petrovich Rezanof, founder of the Russian-American Company, who was currently visiting the Alaskan settlement and had just been in San Francisco.

7 Honoring the Russian Minister of Commerce, Count Nikolai Rumyantsev, who had sponsored the first Russian global circumnavigation.

8 James Alden had charge of the Humboldt Bay survey, but George Davidson was surely acquainted with this work.

9 In 1852 Stephen William Shaw made the painting of Wiyot leader Kiwi-lat-tah. Back in San Francisco he painted many of the rich and famous men of the time.

10 The tragic stories of “when the Great Spirit died” are revealed in the title of one source consulted, *Indian Wars of the Northwest*, conspicuously dedicated to “The Pioneers of California” (Bledsoe 1885).

References

- Bledsoe, Anthony Jennings. 1885. *Indian Wars of the Northwest. A California Sketch*. San Francisco: Bacon & Co.
- Davidson, George. 1891. *The Discovery of Humboldt Bay*. San Francisco: Geographical Society of the Pacific.
- Elliott, Wallace W. 1881. *History of Humboldt County California, with Illustrations Descriptive of Its Scenery, Farms, Residences, Public Buildings, Factories, Hotels, Business Houses, Schools, Churches, Etc., From Original Drawings Including Biographical Sketches*. San Francisco: Wallace Elliott and Co. Publishers.
- Giesecke, E. W. 1997. Discovery of Humboldt Bay, California, in 1806 from the ship O’Cain, Jonathan Winship, Commander. An Episode in a Bostonian-Russian Contract Voyage of the Early American China Trade. *TERRAE INCOGNITAE*, XXIX: 51–71 (Courtesy of Fort Ross Conservancy).
- Irvine, Leigh Hadley. 1915. *History of Humboldt County California with Biographical Sketches Of The Leading Men and Women of the County who have been Identified with its Growth and Development from the Early Days to the Present*. Los Angeles: Historic Record Co. <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~cagha/history/humboldt/humb1915-ch3.txt>
- Mathewson, Kent. 2006. Alexander von Humboldt’s Image and Influence in North American Geography, 1804–2004. *Geographical Review* 96 (3):416–438.
- Nomland, Gladys Ayer, and Alfred Louis Kroeber. 1936. Wiyot Towns. *University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology* 35(5):39–48.

- Par Environmental Services, Inc. 2003. *Cultural Resources Study for the PG&E Humboldt Bay Power Plant, ISFSI Licensing Project. Final Report.* Prepared for: Pacific Gas and Electric. Revision 1. Sacramento.
- Sachs Aaron. 2006. *The Humboldt Current. Nineteenth-Century Exploration and the Roots of American Environmentalism.* New York: Viking Penguin.
- Sumner, Ray. 2013. The Far West Coast. Points and Sounds of Loyalty and Remembrance. *Yearbook of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers* 75:121–139.
- United States Geological Survey. 1999. *Commemorative Naming in the United States.* Fact Sheet 158-99, November 1999. Available at <http://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/1999/0158/>