

# Francis Drake

National Park Service  
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Point Reyes National Seashore



## Francis Drake's Harbourn

Perhaps no event in California's history has been as thoroughly debated as the landfall of Francis Drake's *Golden Hind* in 1579. His visit to a "convenient and fit harbourn" has been narrowed by conjecture and evidence to at least three locations near Point Reyes. The evidence, the chaplain's diary, and shards of delicate porcelain—part of Drake's treasure—leads most scholars to the estuary and bay along the southern coast of Point Reyes peninsula which bears his name today.

## Drake's Early Years

Drake's landing in California was part of a much larger trip—"The Voyage of Circumnavigation"—in which he sought the Strait of Anián, the fabled Northwest Passage linking Europe to the rich lands of the East Indies via a route to the north of the Americas. It was a time of empire building for England, which trailed the earlier explorations and colonial expansion of its chief rival, Spain. His early years among the ships of the Thames Estuary were marked by the intensely emotional turmoil of the

Protestant Reformation, which governed not only Europe's spiritual life, but also its political life.

Drake's quest for new lands and riches took him on many voyages across the Atlantic and into many battles against the Catholic Spanish. It was during his fourth trans-Atlantic voyage when Drake was said to have climbed a tree on the Isthmus of Panama and first glimpsed the Pacific. Captivated by this view, he swore to sail an English ship to those waters.

## The Start of the "The Voyage of Circumnavigation"

Drake made good on this oath when he sailed from Plymouth in 1577 with a fleet of five ships and headed west amidst storms and mutiny. He reached the Port of St. Julian on the Argentinean coast in mid-1578 and overwintered there before rounding South America. Ferdinand Magellan, the first explorer to circumnavigate the globe and whose global sailing record would be eclipsed by Drake, had similarly overwintered in the harbor in 1520.

Reaching the Pacific in September of 1578, Drake continued north, seeking the Northwest Passage and striking at ships and ports along the western coast of South America, a significant source of Spain's colonial wealth. His ship, the *Golden Hind* (which

had originally been named the *Pelican*), was soon bulging with gold and silver, chests of rare porcelains from China, spices, and silks. Drake continued sailing north, moving further and further from the familiar and charted waters of Panama and Mexico.

His northward search for the Northwest Passage is thought to have ended around 42 degrees north, near the current Oregon-California border, although some accounts have argued he may have reached what is now British Columbia. He then turned southward, the *Golden Hind* having sprung a leak that needed repair. By June 17, 1579, he had slipped southward to 38 degrees with the ailing ship, anchoring in the first calm waters he could find.

## Where was Nova Albion?

While Drake spent only six weeks in this harbor, repairing and preparing the *Golden Hind* for the long voyage west across the Pacific, healthy debate among history buffs as to the exact location of the harbor has lasted centuries. The log of the voyage, complete with Drake's own watercolors, was presented to Queen Elizabeth I and declared the Queen's secrets of the Realm. Drake and his crew were sworn to secrecy upon pain of death, lest the Spanish might learn of Drake's activities. The diary of the ship's chaplain, Francis Fletcher, and

interviews with Drake's cousin, John Drake, are the chief sources on what we now know about his visit to California. From their descriptions, it appears that the anchorage was the estuary that now carries Drake's name on the Point Reyes peninsula. Chaplain Fletcher noted the light colored cliffs near the estuary, which reminded the sailors of the white cliffs of Dover. He noted the "stinking fogges," which would be typical of summer weather on the Point Reyes peninsula.

## The Coast Miwok

The native inhabitants of the area greeted Drake's crew and, from examining the descriptions of these people, anthropologists have identified the Coast Miwok people of what is now Marin County as the people with whom Drake encountered. The Coast Miwok are thought to have believed these pale-

skinned people from the sea were the spirits of their dead ancestors. They came often to visit the small encampment Drake had built while he completed his repairs, and it is thought that Drake gifted them with Chinese porcelains.

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## The Plate of Brass

Once the repairs to the *Golden Hind* were completed, Drake claimed the land for England by setting up a stout post to which he nailed a metal plate engraved with his declaration and a sixpence and named the land Nova Albion. In 1936, a brass plate was found in Marin County at Limantour Beach. Historians believed that this plate, which carried a similar text as recorded from Chaplain Fletcher's diary, was final proof that Drake landed in Marin.

However, the plate did not withstand the tests of time or science. Modern testing confirmed that the plate could not have been manufactured with the technology available to sailors in the late 1500s and must have been created much later. It wasn't until 2002 that the origin of the fake plate was finally uncovered. Today, the plate can be found in the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley as an object lesson in how hoaxes can be accepted as fact.

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## Potsherds

While the original metal plate has yet to be found, the delicate blue and white Chinese porcelains given to the Miwok has provided modern scholars with additional evidence of the site of Drake's Nova Albion. Over the years, bits and pieces of porcelain have been recovered from the beaches of Drakes Bay and nearby Miwok archaeological sites. Close inspection by the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco in the 1990s found that some of the pieces were

scratched and worn as if tossed along sandy beaches. Other bits had sharp, unworn edges and had mostly been recovered from archeological sites. The worn pieces are believed to be from the San Agustin, a Spanish galleon that wrecked in Drakes Bay in 1595, while the sharp-edged, unworn shards are thought to be from Drake's earlier gifts to the Miwoks in that foggy June of 1579.

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## Completing "The Voyage of Circumnavigation"

Drake continued across the Pacific to Indonesia and then around Africa's Cape of Good Hope, completing the last leg "The Voyage of Circumnavigation" as he returned to England. The *Golden Hind*, bulging with treasures from the East Indies, arrived in Plymouth in September of 1580.

He was knighted as a result of this journey. Drake continued a career of service to his queen fighting the Spanish Armada and later serving as Mayor of Plymouth and a Member of Parliament. He died aboard ship in 1596 during an expedition in the Caribbean and was buried at sea.



Drake's landing in California, engraving published 1590 by Theodor de Bry