

Revising the History of San Miguel Island, California

Lois J. Roberts

24694 Upper Trail, Carmel, CA 93923

Introduction

Since 1979 when the National Park Service distributed the historical resource study of the Channel Islands National Monument and San Miguel Island (Roberts 1979) new research and interpretation have touched upon at least three important topics at San Miguel: the Cabrillo era, the B-24 bomber crash in 1943 and the sheep rancher William G. Waters. This paper will briefly update the findings on those topics. An expanded treatment of the history of San Miguel Island is found in Roberts (1992).

Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo

Kelsey (1986) published a definitive biography of Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo based upon meticulous research of his own and the research of other Cabrillo specialists. Significant to San Miguel Island, and as many scholars had suspected, he found Cabrillo was not Portuguese but was a Spaniard. Secondly, Kelsey determined that Cabrillo wintered and died on Santa Catalina Island in 1542-1543, not on San Miguel Island.

The revision of nationality fits logically into what we know of Spanish colonial policy. The State ordinarily withheld permission for foreigners to come to the New World; and when permission was given, they were denied the privileges afforded to Spaniards of pure blood. For example, the right to Indian labor, the *encomienda* grant, was reserved for Spain's own citizens. Cabrillo had several of these grants in Guatemala.

Cabrillo was rich, and court disputes after his death and in regard to inheritance lasted over three-quarters of a century. Kelsey (1986) examined thousands of pages of court records and other sources never before seriously

studied. He found evidence that Juan Rodríguez grew up around Seville, Spain. He speculates that Juan Rodríguez may have been an orphan, may have been taken in by a merchant and may have found his way to the New World as some kind of helper. While this is but a scholar's guess, Kelsey did find solid evidence showing that Juan Rodríguez was a very common name. Of the many men with that name, several went to Mexico with the official Panfilo de Narváez to discipline Hernan Cortés. As is well know, most of the Narváez faction joined Cortés instead, and our Juan Rodríguez was one of those. Kelsey quotes (1986:8) Cabrillo's grandson in sworn testimony as saying, "My paternal grandfather, Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, came from the Kingdoms of Spain in company with Panfilo de Narváez." Kelsey states that Juan Rodríguez was in the New World by 1510 and that he had no family connections. Rodríguez no doubt added Cabrillo to his name while in the New World to set himself apart from all the other adventurers named Juan Rodríguez.

Kelsey (1986:8) reports that the Portuguese archives contain nothing about any Cabrillo, and a Portuguese historian finally admitted that "the name Cabrillo is not known in Portugal."

Kelsey (1986) carefully researched the source of the so-called summary "log" of Cabrillo's famous voyage, which until now had provided the bulk of what has been accepted about exploration around the Santa Barbara Channel Islands. The California voyage was an economic disaster in Spanish eyes, and the Royal Audiencia sent out a notary, Juan León, to make a report on it. León gathered portions of the actual ship's log, interviews with the crew and other data. This summary was passed about, copied and incorporated in other works over the years. In

the late 17th century, when the royal historian Antonio de Herrera used this summary, he introduced the word "Portuguese" after Cabrillo's name for the first time. It was a mistake. He should have copied the word after the only Portuguese on the voyage, a pilot-Captain named Antonio Correa (Kelsey 1986:5).

As Kelsey (1986) explains León's summary it becomes clear that Cabrillo named the entire group of the California Islands the San Lucas Islands. This created considerable confusion because on reading the account individual islands are thought to be named San Lucas Island. Even more confusion resulted from the fact that Cabrillo used the name La Posesión for both Santa Catalina and San Miguel Islands. According to court testimony of crew members, Santa Catalina Island was Cabrillo's headquarters and he named it San Salvador after his own ship. The crewmen called Santa Catalina Island either Juan Rodríguez or Capitana. In reading about La Posesión near Point Conception in the "log" translators and readers have often transferred all of the Santa Catalina Island names and events to San

Miguel Island when it is under discussion.

Driven back by northwesterly winds when attempting to round Point Conception in November, 1542, Cabrillo's small armada found refuge on La Posesión. Obviously, this La Posesión was San Miguel Island. The small brigantine needed emergency repairs and probably stayed at Cuyler Harbor until it was made seaworthy. The two larger ships carrying most of the approximately 250 people would have sailed on to larger islands. This is where the summary begged for interpretation. Which island did Cabrillo go to? Kelsey cleared this up by using both Cabrillo's own map and the sworn testimony of two sailors, Lázaro de Cárdenas and Francisco de Vargas. Accordingly, Cabrillo sailed to "la Isla Capitana" today's Santa Catalina Island. This was where the Indians never stopped fighting the Spaniards. According to Kelsey (1986:158) this was where Cabrillo splintered a shin bone, died and was buried either on land or nearby at sea. It is for this reason the crew called the island Capitana (Kelsey 1986:159).

For those with an interest in Cabrillo, a reading of Kelsey's work is strongly recommended. Meanwhile we may ask, what is to be done about the memorial monument (Fig. 1) to the Portuguese Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo overlooking Cuyler Harbor on San Miguel Island?

The B-24 Bomber Crash

R.W. "Bob" Koch, a professional researcher from Long Beach, CA took an interest in the World War II B-24 bomber crash on San Miguel Island in 1984 (Koch, pers. comm. May 1984). By searching military archives Koch found that on 4 July 1943 a B-24 based at Salinas Army Air Force Base and returning from a long-range over water navigation mission ran low on fuel. Near the coastline of Santa Barbara the crew of 10 bailed out. The aircraft crashed near the Cameusa Peak Forest Lookout at 2 am. Cameusa Peak is about 10 mi inland from the City of Santa Barbara (Kelsey, pers. comm. October 1984). On 5 July another



Figure 1. The Cabrillo cross overlooking Cuyler Harbor, a monument to historical misunderstanding. Photograph courtesy Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History.



Figure 2. Wreckage of the B-24 bomber which crashed on Green Mountain in 1943. The plane was flying through low clouds on a heading for Point Conception. Photograph by W.E. Roberts, March 1978.

B-24 was ordered out to search for the missing crew members. This second B-24 carried 12 crew members, and its flight plan was as follows: Bakersfield, Santa Barbara, Point Conception and land at Salinas. It reported over Santa Barbara at 8 am and was never heard of again (Koch, pers. comm. September 1984).

On the morning of 5 July weather conditions around Santa Barbara were low clouds, a ceiling of 300-500 ft and cloud tops at 1,600 ft. The second plane had no radar. In reconstructing what happened it appears that the plane was descending through the clouds with a heading toward Point Conception. At about 500 ft it struck the rising slope of Green Mountain, an 831 ft hill on San Miguel Island, and disintegrated (Fig. 2). The usual search was made with no success. Meanwhile, eight of the ten crew members of the first B-24 were picked up and saved.

Government files indicate that several sailors based at the San Miguel Island's weather and radio station discovered the wreckage on 19 March 1944. However, it has been more

recently determined that Robert Brooks discovered the wreck (D. Butler, pers. comm. October 1989). The remains of the crew were removed and a wreck report filed away. Ironically, the incident was inadvertently to bring about two more deaths. This happened when the wreckage was rediscovered in 1954. Hikers came upon what appeared to be human bones nearby and assumed that the wreck never had been reported. They returned to the mainland where a quick military records check showed no crash at the site. The Coast Guard immediately sent out a boat which struck the sail boat, *Aloha*, off Point Mugu. The *Aloha* sank drowning two of the passengers. Shortly afterward military investigators uncovered the original crash record and brought the matter to an end (Koch, pers. comm. September 1984).

William G. Waters

Some new sources have turned up since I did my first research on sheep rancher William G. Waters (Roberts 1979; Fig. 3). The changes presented here also are based upon a new

interpretation of old data. Ten years ago I was too quick to accept what was actually hearsay (albeit printed hearsay). Sources I used in 1977 claimed that John Russell, Waters' resident manager, built the big ranch house which once stood above Cuyler Harbor. Since that time I have seen it referred to as the "Lester Ranch House," after another resident manager. Yet, in newspaper articles printed at the time of its construction it consistently was called the Waters' Ranch House. In addition, Waters described himself as the active builder when addressing the 18th Lighthouse District (Lighthouse Board Correspondence, 17 June 1911). His wife's diary recorded that he worked from dawn to dusk at building and ranching tasks (Waters 1888). Why would he not take a leading role in constructing the big ranch house? Upon rereading old sources and incorporating new data I reached new conclusions as are shown below.

As reported earlier (Roberts 1979), the sheep ranch passed from the hands of a man named Bruce in 1850 to George Nidever, from Nidever to the brothers Hiram and Warren Mills and from the Mills brothers to the joint "owners" William Waters and W.I. Nichols in 1888. By 1895 Waters was sole owner and regarded himself as the King of San Miguel Island. When he died in 1917 he had ranched there for almost 30 years. During all of that time he personally had done much of the hard work and developed sheep ranching to a point where it paid well (Waters 1888; Rouse 1977). He planted fields of hay and grain, kept poultry and pigs, and in the early years grew vegetables. He built the road down to Cuyler Harbor, and designed, built and lived in one of the largest ranch houses on the California Islands (Lighthouse Board Correspondence 1911).

Probably no other man put as much of his own physical labor into development of the island as did Waters. He was a Civil War veteran who came west, his wife supplied the \$10,000 capital to buy the sheep and the island improvements in 1887. On 1 January 1888 he sailed out to San Miguel with his small family



Figure 3. William G. Waters, former owner of San Miguel Island and architect of the ranch house. Photograph courtesy Santa Barbara Historical Museum.

and a hired man. Commencing from this date we can refer to Mrs. Waters' diary which documents his labors for the six months they initially lived on the island. Will, who was probably about 45 years of age, was a dawn to dusk, rain or shine worker. He must have known farm work as he immediately began planting and harvesting, oiling the cattle, putting rings in the pigs noses and shearing sheep like a man comfortable with his tasks. Utilizing ties and wood gathered at the beach, he built fences, a barn floor and a meat safe. On 16 March his wife wrote, "Will got boards up from the [Nidever] adobe house with Jamie and Devil [the horses]." Blasting out rocks to make way for the road to the dock at the beach was his greatest undertaking in 1888. Although he took time out for Sunday outings, his wife complained, "Will could not be inactive" (Waters 1888).

Based upon a prearrangement made with his co-owner, W.I. Nichols, Waters returned to Santa Barbara on 1 July 1888. Before leaving for

San Francisco with his ailing wife, Waters came to an agreement with Nichols about the share of profits that would go to a resident manager Nichols had already hired to temporarily replace Waters. Following his wife's death a year and a half later, Waters returned to live on San Miguel Island. At this time he was working so that he could buy out Nichols' share (Rouse 1977). He succeeded in doing this but was obliged to pay off a promissory note. This note fell into the hands of Elias Beckman, a Ventura financier. Beckman took Waters to court where it was revealed that San Miguel Island was public land that never had been surveyed, homesteaded or sold by the United States government (*San Francisco Call*, 18 November 1908). Arguing in support of his ownership Waters simply declared that the United States had no right to the island written into the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and that this made him, King Waters, the sovereign (Lighthouse Board Correspondence 1911: File 252).

San Miguel Island had few visitors in those days, but those who came and left a written account invariably found Waters on the island and doing ordinary labor. Second hand stories have appeared in print which depict the Waters' era as a period of disinterest and neglect. One account claimed that during Capt. Waters' tenure he leased the island, the lessees went abroad, and the sheep were left to die of thirst (Lester 1974). This is not credible. Between 1888 and 1895 Waters' great desire was to own the island outright, and he lived and worked on the island consistently (Rouse 1977; Lighthouse Board Correspondence 1911: File 252). In 1895, a newspaper reporter found Waters alone on the island except for a ranch hand Harland and his wife (*Los Angeles Times*, 21 January 1895). He was there the next year when United States Survey teams attempted to land on the island (Trask 1906; Lighthouse Board Correspondence 1896). In 1906 Mrs. Blanche Trask visited from Santa Catalina Island where she lived. She wrote that the pilot of her boat told her "of this man who has lived here for years and was regarded as somewhat peculiar in

claiming to own this island as a kingdom." Waters rode down to meet the Trask party, but he spent the whole day working with his shearers. Trask noted, "He is a gentleman of rare intellect and great capabilities who chooses San Miguel Island as his home." Waters told her, "Here with my sheep and cattle and dogs I am far happier than I would be anywhere else in the whole world" (Trask 1906).

At some point Waters hired John Russell to work with him and to manage the ranch when he was away. However, the concept of an absentee owner who did little of the ranching and building himself does not fit the Waters image. Waters' tremendous enthusiasm for ranch projects persisted as he filled in canyons with stone to prevent their being washed out and deepened. In 1908 newspaper reports began to appear about the eight bedroom ranch house he was building. Waters sailed into Santa Barbara to get materials and described the building progress to newsmen. He used the first person as if to say that he indeed designed and was building the house (*Santa Barbara Morning Press*, 8 October 1908 and 29 December 1909). Waters, who was in his mid-sixties by now, was able, and hardly the man to let John Russell do all the work. He had been gathering wood for buildings since 1888 at the west end of the island. This project was no doubt very exciting for him. In 1911 when he spelled out his improvements for the Lighthouse District Office he wrote, "I have built" when describing the ranch house and other structures (Lighthouse Board Correspondence, 17 June 1911). Waters wrote to President Taft on 9 February 1911 asking that Taft revoke the Executive Order he had issued in 1909 reserving the island for lighthouse purposes and that he instead allow him to stay on the island. In this letter he described his personal involvement in the house and other improvements. Taft refused to revoke his order, and Waters had to give up the idea of kingship and become an ordinary citizen. After that he leased the island from the United States government (Lighthouse Board Correspondence 1901-1911).

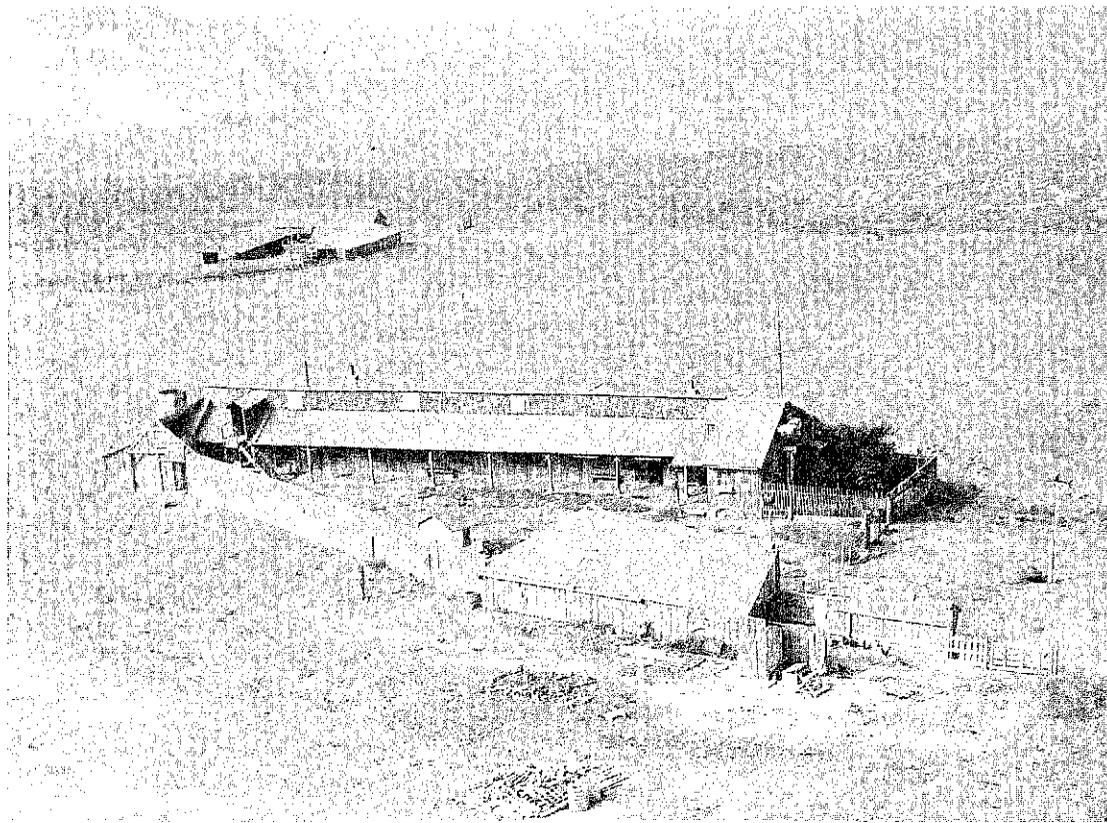


Figure 4. Waters ranch house and outbuildings, 1938. Photograph by Wide World Photos, courtesy Betsy Lester Roberts.

The subsequent lessee, Robert Brooks, built the angled fence for the ranch house (Fig. 4) and with the help of four different resident managers kept up the ranch house for 31 years after Waters died. Herbert Lester, for whom the San Miguel Ranch complex currently is named, was resident manager and lived in the house for 12 years of the Brooks tenure.

Why was the Waters name disassociated from the ranch house? I shall bear some of the responsibility. In my earlier study (Roberts, 1979) I was too quick to pick up the term, "John Russell's house." Without enough questioning, I used sources which apparently had relied upon old tales tilted to please the teller or the listener. Waters' long tenure and his devotion to improvements should be reassessed. National Park visitors might like to see the Waters name attached to the ranch house when they

understand more about the man who, over a span of 30 years, put so much of himself into the development of the ranch on San Miguel Island.

The ranch house served as shelter for ranch managers until 1948 when the Navy revoked the Brooks' grazing lease. Researchers and other people lived in it now and then. In 1965 when the roof caved in and two years later the house burned leaving only a fireplace and a cistern to mark its site (Roberts 1987).

San Miguel Island today has few extant cultural resources dating from the historic period (Post-Indian). Two of those are the chimney ruins of the Waters' ranch house and the Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo Monument. In light of the above information both of those deserve revised interpretation. In addition, now that we have more complete details about the B-24 plane crash, including

the names of the victims, this event can be incorporated in talks prepared for Park visitors. The most important conclusion derived from these revisions and Roberts (1992) is that the history of San Miguel Island periodically must be updated, and research programs to support this should be promoted.

Acknowledgments

The late C. Stanton provided support and encouragement during the preparation of this paper.

Literature Cited

Anon. 1895. Upheaval on San Miguel Island. *Los Angeles Times*, 14 April.
Kelsey, H. 1986. Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo. Huntington Library: San Marino, CA. 261 pp.

Koch, R.W. 1984. U.S. Army Air Corps B-24 'Liberator' bomber crash on San Miguel Island- July 5, 1943. Unpubl. Rep.
Lester, E.S. 1974. The Legendary King of San Miguel. McNally and Loftin: Santa Barbara, CA. 90 pp.
Roberts, L.J. 1979. Historic resource study. National Park Service: Ventura, CA.
_____. 1987. Sheep ranching on San Miguel Island. *So. Calif. Quart.* 69:103-132.
_____. 1992. San Miguel Island, Santa Barbara's Fourth Island West. Cal Rim Books: Carmel, CA. 224 pp.
Rouse, S.H. 1977. The Waters family on San Miguel. *Noticias* 23(3):43-51.
Trask, B. 1906. A visit to an American King and his possessions. *Los Angeles Times*, 21 January.
Waters, M. 1888. Mrs. Waters diary of her life on San Miguel Island (January-June 1888). Robert Brooks Collection, Hill Top Ranch, Carpenteria, CA.
Lighthouse Board Correspondence. 1896-1911. Record Group 26, National Archives, Washington, DC.