

# Holy Ground

Exploring Catholic history in the Pacific Northwest

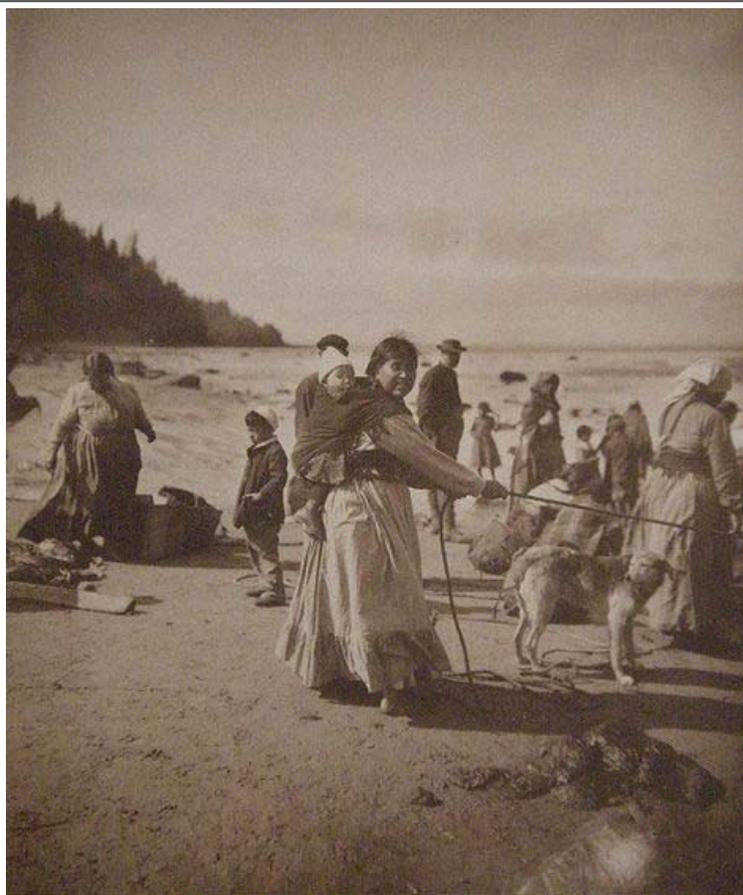
## PART 1: CATHOLICS AT NEAH BAY

SEPTEMBER 8, 2019

In this new monthly series, we'll explore the history of the Catholic Church in the Pacific Northwest from pioneer beginnings to the present day. The series will highlight important places of faith in the Northwest, the "holy ground" where the seeds of faith have been planted in our midst.

The Christian faith first came to this part of the world more than four hundred years ago. If the stories are to be believed (and not all scholars do believe them), a Greek sailor employed by the King of Spain, and best known by his Spanish name, Juan de Fuca, entered Puget Sound in 1592. It was a small exploratory expedition—just one caravel and a pinnace—and no soldiers accompanied them. De Fuca later told his story to an English sailor named John Douglas, who told the writer Samuel Purchas, who in turn included De Fuca's voyage in his famous book *Purchas His Pilgrimes*. According to Purchas, Juan de Fuca "came to the Latitude of fortie seven degrees, and that there finding that the Land trended North and North-east, with a broad Inlet of Sea, between 47 and 48 degrees of Latitude: hee entred thereinto, and sayling therein more than twentee days... Also, hee said that hee went on land in divers places." Having gone thus far, Juan de Fuca returned to Mexico, expecting to be richly rewarded for having discovered what he was sure was the fabled Northwest Passage. He never got his reward—but, thanks to an English trader who sailed into Puget Sound in 1787, Juan de Fuca's name was given to the strait which he may (or may not!) have visited.

It was not until the eighteenth century, when Spain's dominance of the Pacific was challenged by Britain and Russia, that Spain made a serious effort to lay claim to the Pacific Northwest. In 1774, the brig *Santiago* sailed north out of Monterey. This time, the expedition was accompanied by two Franciscan priests—Father Juan Crespi and Father Thomas de la Perra, both companions of St. Junipero Serra, father of the California Missions. On board ship, off the coast of what is now Oregon and Washington, the priests offered Mass, gave communion, heard confessions, and led the crew in rosaries and novenas—the dawn of Catholic liturgical life in the Northwest. Meanwhile, the crew prepared a cross to be placed in the ground when the expedition reached 60 degrees north latitude. "The carpenters constructed a wooden cross about five *varas* [fourteen feet] in height," wrote Father Crespi in his diary. "The inscription on the upper part was *I. N. R. I.*; along the body of the cross between the arms and the foot, *Carolus Tertius, Rex Hispaniarum*, and on the arms, *Año de 1774.*" The cross was the perfect emblem of Spanish exploratory missions in the New World: political and



Neah Bay. A Makah mother smiles in this 1910 photo by Asahel Curtis (Wikimedia Commons).

religious motivations were inseparably, and problematically, intertwined.

As it happened, the cross was never planted. The expedition traveled as far north as present-day British Columbia, but a sick crew and contrary weather prevented the expedition from landing. They did, however, interact with the indigenous people of the Pacific Northwest, both men and women, who came to the ship in canoes in order to barter with the newcomers. These people showed "not the least distrust," wrote Father Crespi. "They sang and played upon instruments of wood fashioned like drums or timbrels... They had coverlets of otter skins sewn together so well that the best tailor could not sew them better."

The *Santiago* returned to Monterey without achieving its objective, but other expeditions followed. In 1779, the Arteaga expedition made it as far north as Bucareli Bay in present-day Alaska. They landed, planted a cross, and celebrated Mass, the first in the Northwest (on land, at any rate!). In 1790, Alferéz Manuel Quimper, captain of the

*Princesa Royal*, explored the strait of Juan de Fuca. On August 1, he entered what is now Neah Bay, landed, and with great ceremony took possession. Again, the mixing of sacred and secular, religious and military motivations is striking: “Immediately taking a large cross on their shoulders, the men of the vessel, being arranged in martial order, with their muskets and other arms, they carried this in procession, chanting a litany with all responding. The procession being concluded, the commander placed the cross and erected a pile of stones at the foot of it as a memorial and sign of possession of all these seas and lands and their districts, continuous and contiguous.” In all of this, the Spanish of course ignored the prior claims of the native peoples living in the region, the Makah.

The men stayed on shore about three days, and then the *Princesa Royal* departed. Two years later, however, under the command of Lieutenant Salvador Fidalgo, the ship returned with instructions to establish a fort. The *Princesa* anchored in Neah Bay on May 29, 1792, renaming it *Bahía de Núñez Gaona* in honor of the viceroy of New Spain. Within a few weeks, the crew—sailors, soldiers, and colonists, numbering about 90—had cleared trees and built a bakehouse, a blacksmith shop, barracks, and pens for livestock. They also planted gardens and set up six guns, aimed towards the water and the British, who were also laying claim to the Northwest at the time. An American sailor, traveling through the Strait of Juan de Fuca, observed that “the Spaniards had erected a cross upon the beach, and had about ten houses and several good gardens.” There is no indication that any priest accompanied the colonists and no chapel was built; nevertheless, this small Spanish fort was the first Catholic settlement in the Pacific Northwest.

The settlement at Neah Bay was short-lived. Relations with the Makah, at first quite positive, soured. There were reports of sexual assault of native women by the Spanish; a Spanish soldier was killed, and in retaliation the Spanish opened fire on a canoe full of Makah men, killing six. “It does not seem right to me that you should have taken vengeance on persons who might have been quite innocent

and when the assassin is not known,” Lieutenant Fidalgo’s superior wrote, ordering him to maintain good relations with the Makah.

The geopolitical landscape was in constant flux, and the new fort was abandoned after just a few months. By 1795, Spain had withdrawn from the Pacific

Northwest entirely. As for the Neah Bay settlement, the Makah burned what the Spanish left behind, and used the site as a rubbish heap.

In 2008, three unlikely partners joined forces to mark the site in a more permanent way: the Makah Tribe, the State of Washington, and the government of Spain. Today, a monument recalls the short-lived Spanish settlement as well as honoring Neah Bay area veterans. It can also claim to be the site of the first Catholic community in the Pacific Northwest: a rocky start, to say the least.

*Corinna Laughlin, Pastoral Assistant for Liturgy*

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE: *The extraordinary journey of the first missionary priests to the Pacific Northwest*

#### Sources consulted

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- <https://text-message.blogs.archives.gov/2017/10/19/establishing-and-disbanding-the-neath-bay-settlement-1792/>
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Lieutenant Salvador Fidalgo, who led the short-lived Spanish settlement at Neah Bay.

## MAKE A VISIT

Neah Bay is about 150 miles from St. James Cathedral (about 4.5 hours via car and ferry). It is located on the Makah Indian Reservation. The Makah Museum includes archaeological finds from the Ozette site, a Makah village destroyed in a landslide 300-500 years ago, and gives a glimpse of pre-contact Makah life. Fort Nunez Gaona-Diah Veterans Park marks the site of the Spanish settlement at Neah Bay and offers spectacular views.

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