

PROCEEDINGS

First San Salvador Conference Columbus And His World

Compiled by Donald T. Gerace



held
October 30 — November 3, 1986

at
The College Center of the Finger Lakes
Bahamian Field Station
San Salvador Island, Bahamas

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Second Printing March, 1991

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 87-70948

ISBN 0-935909-23-0

*Typeset by Summit Technical Associates, Inc.
Coral Springs, Florida*

*Printed by Technical Communications Services
North Kansas City, Missouri*

*Published by College Center of the Finger Lakes
Bahamian Field Station
270 Southwest 34 Street
Fort Lauderdale, Florida 33315*

Additional Comments Relating Watlings Island to Columbus' San Salvador

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Having resided on San Salvador, formerly Watlings Island, for the past sixteen years, I have learned certain facts from the local residents and observed certain features of the island which relate to the Columbus land-fall issue. The following discussion will reveal that some of the criticisms of the Watlings Island as Columbus' San Salvador theory are based on imprecise knowledge and not on known facts and experiences of people who live on San Salvador and sail its waters.

Watlings Island generally fits the features of Guanahani as described by Columbus in his Journal, except for a few discrepancies. One of these, believed by some, is that Columbus could not have made the exploration expedition with the ships' small boats on October 14, starting at dawn and rowing to a harbor or port that would hold all the ships of Christendom and returning in time for the fleets departure in mid-afternoon.

The problem begins with defining the location of where Columbus first began this rowing expedition. Unfortunately Columbus did not describe in his Journal exactly where his first anchorage was located. Nor did he describe how he got to this anchorage on the morning of October 12th.

If the present San Salvador is Guanahani the general location of this first anchorage can be found, since there is a fringing reef that surrounds the island and there are only a few anchorages available.

Captain Bernie Storr, a second generation seaman and pilot for all large vessels approaching anchorages off San Salvador, states there are only four suitable anchorages off the island: Grahams Harbor at the north can accommodate seven foot draft vessels; Pigeon Creek at the southeast is adequate for vessels of four foot draft or less; French Bay at the south is a coral anchorage used only during a northwest storm; and the anchorage in the area from Bamboo Point to Riding Rock Point off the northwest coast of the island.¹

Anthony Leichester very adequately describes why the landing could not be on the east side of San Salvador in these words, "... no seaman in his

senses would have anchored off a lee-shore with a sea running, nor could the ship's boats have got over the reef."²

The entrance to French Bay would have been very difficult for a mariner to locate without prior knowledge that a passage is there. Also, a coral anchorage would not be preferable, especially in a bay that would be untenable in a strong east or southeast wind.

The only anchorage possible is where present day deep draft vessels anchor, that area from just south of Bamboo Point north to Riding Rock Point. It would have been impossible for a vessel of over four foot draft to moor further south along the west coast of San Salvador because of the massive back reef area. While students at the CCFL Bahamian Field Station and divers at the Riding Rock Inn have enjoyed these spectacular back reefs for the past sixteen years, I have never seen a vessel of any size (with a draft of four feet or more) anchored in this area. The limits of the Bamboo Point to Riding Rock Point anchorage can be clearly seen in the areal photograph of Figure 1.

Paul Tappan saw the treacherous reefs south of Bamboo Point when he arrived with his yacht *Heloise*. The anchorage at Bamboo Point, where Mr. Tappan erected a monument in 1951 to indicate Columbus' first landing place, would have had merits for the first island explorer.³ Located on the lee shore, it has good holding ground and adequate depth close to shore. This would allow the vessels to protect any landing party with their bombardas and be readily accessible if the natives proved unfriendly.

To be as thorough as possible with this report, I must mention that there are two locations south of Bamboo Point where sisal was loaded aboard shallow draft sailing vessels during the early part of this century, Hall's Landing and Strachan's Landing. Because of the poor roads at that time, sisal was loaded at the closest landing available to the fields. A very shallow draft sailing vessel was used with expert native mariners to pick their way through the corals.⁴

One may question at this point, did the corals of 500 years ago have the same general location as they do today? We know that they were there 200 years ago, during the Loyalist period, and from scientific evidence we know that the water level has only risen about 2 or 3 cm and there has been no great change in the wind and wave patterns. We can therefore state that the present corals would be similar to those seen 500 years ago.⁵

From this information it seems likely that Columbus would have had his first anchorage somewhere near Bamboo Point, and it would have been somewhere near this point that the ships' small boats set out for their expedition of exploration of the island on October 14th. To quote Eugene Lyon's translation:

"At dawn, I ordered the ship's boats and the caravels' small boats readied and went along the island on a north-northeast course in order to see the other part, which was the eastern part, and also in

order to see the settlements. And I saw then two or three, and the people who all came to the beach calling us and giving thanks to God. Some brought us water, others other things to eat. Others, when they saw that I did not bother to go ashore, threw themselves into the sea and came swimming. . . .”⁶

From this it is obvious that Columbus must have rowed his boats very close to shore, since the Indians swam out to meet him.

To continue Lyon’s translation:

“. . . I was alarmed at seeing a large reef of rocks which surrounded that entire island. And in between, it remained deep and a port for as many ships as there are in all Christendom, and the entrance of it very narrow. It is true that within this belt there are some shallows, but the sea does not move more than within a well. And, in order to see all this, I moved forward this morning so that I might know how to give a report of everything to Your Highnesses, and also where one could build a fort. And I saw one piece of land that is made like an island even though it is not, on which there were six houses, which one could cut into an island in two days. . . .”⁷

If the present San Salvador is Guanahani, then it is Grahams Harbor, at the north of San Salvador, which is the port Columbus describes, and it is Cut Cay, an island at the end of North Point, which is the island he felt would be suitable for a fort (see Fig. 1).

Although there have been many critics of the possibility of rowing this distance along the shore of San Salvador, the local San Salvadorians have never doubted that it could be done. Max Ferguson mentioned that before outboard motors were available he used to scull from Sue Point to Green Cay or Gaulin Cay, fish all day, and return home.⁸ Finally, after many requests, Max Ferguson agreed to row from Grahams Harbor to Bamboo Point. This was done in a wooden row boat owned by the CCFL Bahamian Field Station. He departed from the dock located at the foot of North Point on the Eastern end of Grahams Harbor, rowed northward until he could see the channel between North Point and Cut Cay, and then rowed westward and southwestward to Bamboo Point. The trip was monitored and timed by the Commissioner of San Salvador, G. Hasting Strachen, and other members of the Kiwanis Club of San Salvador.

I established this trial rowing trip to determine the average speed of one person rowing this distance in a wooden boat, and to learn how fatiguing a trip of this nature would be. Mr. Ferguson started out at 10:51 AM and arrived at Bamboo Point at 2:11 PM, a distance of approximately 9 miles covered in 3 hours and 20 minutes (see Fig. 2). The important fact here is that Mr. Ferguson rowed at an average speed of 2.70 miles per hour, and looked and felt that he had enough energy to make a return trip. If the total round trip distance had been 20 miles, it would have taken him 7.4 hours. If the distance was as much as 25 miles, as expressed by Dunn,⁹ it would have

taken 9.26 hours. Using the greatest distance of 25 miles, Columbus could have started out at dawn as described in the log (6:00 AM), made the round trip, and returned to the ships in the mid-afternoon (3:30 PM).

Personally, I think a man with the intellect of Columbus would certainly not plan on retracing his exploration trip, and therefore, I suggest what has been previously expressed by other scholars, and although it is conjecture, Columbus had his fleet follow him northward, staying seaward off the fringing reef. Reading Lyons' translation further convinces me that this was indeed the case in this statement, "I was alarmed at seeing a large reef of rocks which surrounded the entire island."¹⁰ Was he alarmed because after finding his way blocked from going to the East by North Point, he would not be able to return to the ships because of the reefs without rowing back to Bamboo Point the way he came? Further, I feel he would not have been able to find the narrow channel he mentions, which lies just south of Green Cay, if he did not leave the harbor through that channel with his small boats. For what other reason did he go to Green Cay, 3 miles from Cut Cay and at least one mile from the nearest shore in Grahams Harbor? A good reason he would have gone in this direction was to look for an opening in the reef in order to meet the fleet which was waiting for him. This possibility, and we will probably never know if this really happened, would have given Columbus even more time for his exploration trip.

In summary, if the present San Salvador was Guanahani, the first landing of Columbus was probably along a two mile anchorage from just south of Bamboo Point to Riding Rock Point. This anchorage shortens the rowing distance to 18 or 19 miles, round trip, which a boat going at the speed of Mr. Ferguson would cover in about seven hours. If the distance covered by Columbus' rowing expedition was a maximum of 25 miles (from the Wolper monument at Long Bay), and based on our determined rate of speed of one man rowing, he could have made the journey in time to meet the fleets departure from San Salvador in the mid-afternoon. However, if one man can make an average speed of 2.70 miles per hour, three men would be able to make much better time, and we are aware that the launches of the day had more than one man rowing.

This exercise proves, without a shadow of a doubt, that the rowing ordeal from his anchorage to Grahams Harbor and back could have been made within the time period Columbus indicated.

NOTES

1. Bernie Storr, personal communication.
2. L. Anthony Leichester, "Columbus's First Landfall," *Sea Frontiers*, 26, 5 (September-October, 1980), pp. 276-278.
3. W. R. (Dick) Tappan, *Cooking with the Tappans* (New York, 1986), pp. 47-48.
4. Samuel Edgecomb, personal communication.

5. Dr. Philip Dustan, Department of Biology, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC, personal communication.
6. Eugene Lyon, "The Diario of Christopher Columbus," *A Columbus Casebook*, A Supplement to "Where Columbus Found the New World", *National Geographic Magazine* (November, 1986), p. 17.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Maxwell Ferguson, personal communication.
9. Oliver Dunn, "Columbus's First Landing Place: The Evidence of the *Journal*," *In the Wake of Columbus* (Detroit, 1985), p. 42.
10. Lyons, op. cit.

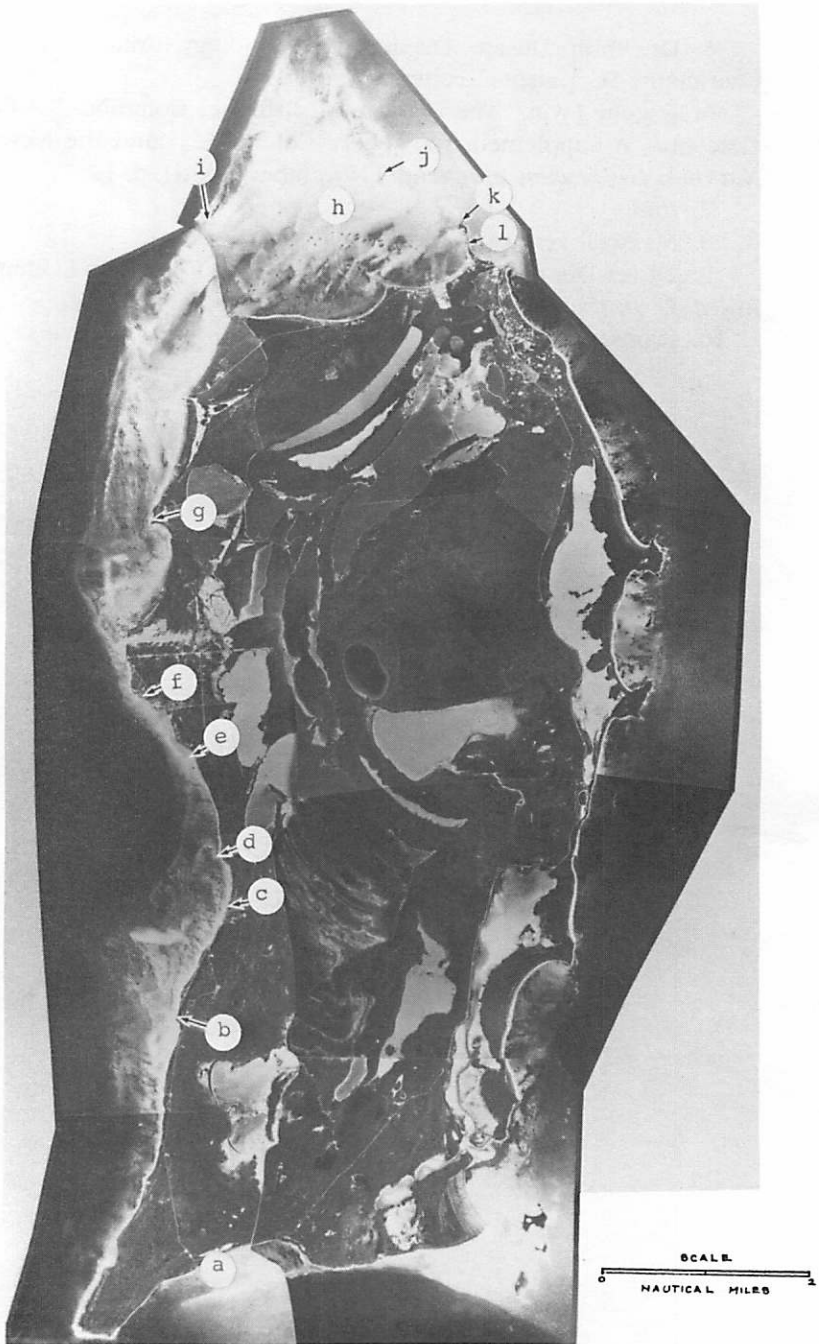


Fig. 1. Aerial photograph of San Salvador Island. a. French Bay; b. Strachan's Landing; c. Wolper Monument; d. Hall's Landing; e. Bamboo Point; f. Riding Rock point; g. Sue Point; h. Grahams Harbor; i. Green Cay; j. Gaulin Cay; k. Cut Cay; l. North Point.



MEMORANDUM

DEPARTMENT OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

COMMISSIONER'S OFFICE,

COCKBURN TOWN,

San Salvador, Bahamas.

Your Reference

Our Reference

To:

Date:

This Certificate dated this 28th day of October in the year of Our Lord One Thousand Nine Hundred and Eighty-Six witnesseth that I, the undersigned, G. Hasting Strachan Commissioner of the District of San Salvador and Rum Cay, in the Commonwealth of The Bahamas, was present and witnessed:

1. That on the 28th day of October, 1986 A.D., Mr. Maxwell Stephen Ferguson, a resident of North Victoria Hill, in the Island of San Salvador, one of the Islands of the Commonwealth of the Bahamas, left Graham's Harbour in San Salvador, by Row Boat.
2. That the name of the said Row Boat was the Columbus I.
3. That the time of departure from Graham's Harbour was 10.51 a.m. on October 28th, 1986.
4. That the said Maxwell Stephen Ferguson rowed the said Boat, from Graham's Harbour to Bamboo Point in San Salvador where Yawl Heloise Monument is located.
5. That the time of arrival of Mr. Maxwell Stephen Ferguson at the said Monument was 2.11 p.m. on the 28th day of October, 1986 A.D.
6. That to the best of my knowledge and belief the foregoing is correct and true.
7. In witness whereof I, the said G. Hasting Strachan place my Hand and Seal of Office

This 28th day of October,
1986 A.D.

G. Hasting Strachan
Commissioner
District of San Salvador and Rum Cay.

Fig. 2.