A Monument To An Event That Never Happened

By Roger Newton

La Punta de los Muertos is marked by State Registered Landmark No. 57 placed by the San Diego County Board of Supervisors and the Historical Markers Committee in 1954 at the southeast corner of Market Street and Pacific Highway facing San Diego Bay.

The plaque reads:

La Punta de los Muertos (Dead Men’s Point). Burial site of sailors and marines in 1782 when San Diego Bay was surveyed & charted by Don Juan Pantoja y Arriaga, pilot, and Don José Tovar, mate, of the royal frigates “La Princesa” and “La Favorita” under command of Don Agustín de Echeverria.¹

But according to the ships’ logs, this fleet was under the command of Esteban José Martínez with Juan Pantoja as second pilot on La Princesa. La Favorita sailed under first pilot Juan Agustín de Echeverría and Josef Tovar second pilot. Tovar did not participate in the survey even though he was a member of the party. These were supply ships; there were no marines, only sailors (marineros).²

Roger Newton is a former technical writer who enjoys research into diseases encountered by Spaniards coming to California by sea and land. He has studied the effects of scurvy vs. deaths from epidemic diseases on early voyages. He also has identified medicinal plants and their uses during the 18th century.
Contained in a folder for this Registered Landmark No. 57, *La Punta de los Muertos, San Diego County*, is a paper written by James Nebergall and edited by Clark Wing under the auspices of the Works Projects Administration and sponsored by the State of California, Department of Natural Resources, Division of Parks, in 1939. The writers were intent on proving that this location was a burial site of sailors who died in 1782, and who were there because the dead of the 1769 Exposition were also there. The graves of those who died aboard the two ships *San Carlos* and *San Antonio* in 1769 have never been located. Nebergall only mentions “the Pantoja Expedition” on pages 31-35, and names William Heath Davis, Jr. as his source. But Davis actually wrote:

Andrew B. Gray, the chief engineer and surveyor for the United States, who was with the commission, introduced himself to me one day at Old Town. In February, 1850, he explained to me the advantages of the locality known as “Punta de los Muertos” from the circumstance that in the year 1782 a Spanish squadron anchored... surveying the bay of San Diego for the first time, several sailors and marines died and were interred on a sand spit, adjacent to where my wharf stood, and was named as above. ... Messrs. José Antonio Aguirre, Miguel Pedrorena, Andrew B. Gray, T.D. Johns and myself were the projectors and original proprietors of what is now known as the City of San Diego.4

In 1852 Gray was recruited by the Texas Western Railroad to lead a survey from San Antonio to California; his journal reads like part travel log.5 Then, for no stated reason, he wrote out of context:

In 1782 it [the bay] was surveyed by Don Juan Pantoja, second pilot or navigator of the Spanish fleet. The Spanish fleet anchored seven miles above the entrance, and at a point where the channel lies close to the shore, which they named Punta de los Muertos, from burying
a number of the crew there, who had died from scurvy, contracted on the voyage.\textsuperscript{5}

This is the first time the word scurvy is used in connection with the 1782 expedition. Gray did not note his source. His 1850 map does not have a “Dead

\begin{center}
\textbf{Plano del Puerto de San Diego surveyed by Juan Pantoja, 1782. ©SDHC #2905.}
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Men’s Point.” Gray was one of the first to join the Confederacy and was one the first in the Civil War to die, April 16, 1862. He was the sole source of this “scurvy” tale.

In his Log, Juan Pantoja tells when he names a place and why, but he never mentions Punta de los Muertos only Punta de los Guijarros (Ballast Point). In the English translation the word “deadmen” is used, but that refers to a mooring log on shore to which the ship could be tied. Engineer Miguel Costansó, the 1769 expedition chief of cartography and surveying, does not mention Punta de los Muertos; it is not on his map. It is not on the 1792 Map of the Port of San Diego from the expedition of Juan Francisco de la Bodega y Quadra. It does appear on the 1839 map of the Port of San Diego made by English Captain John Hall.

The diaries of almost every California voyage, including these, tell of lost anchors. Those of Pantoja and Martínez tell that in ports, logs were buried upright on the beach where deep water was close to shore and to which ships tied up, as if docked. Those logs were called “deadmen” (muertos). The deeper water channel runs close to shore at Punta de los Muertos, where it drops off sharply to six fathoms (that is why the
piers are there now), so there could have been “deadmen” buried on that beach. The Point of those deadmen could be on the map to mark their location for other ships.\(^8\)

The word scurvy that is used for the deaths of seamen in San Diego in 1769 is incorrect; the illness was not caused by poor diet lacking in Vitamin C, it was caused by “mal de loanda,” a contagious intestinal disease.\(^9\) By the 1700s surgeons were taught medicine, and were considered doctors. While La Favorita’s surgeon treated the sick, La Princesa surgeon searched for medicinal and food plants, which he found. All except two of Princesa’s seamen recovered. The dead were buried on the beach. In the official reports the illness was not named, and may have been an endemic indigenous disease from the natives. It was not always the case that the Spaniards brought a disease that killed the natives; at times it was a native disease that killed the Spanish newcomers. But the Princesa dead were buried on a beach and an officer did use the word scurvy.

The Santiago made the 1779 supply trip under Esteban Martinez. In his Diario
de Navegación\textsuperscript{10} the only mention of scurvy is that he left a jar of pitahaya syrup\textsuperscript{11} to treat it at Monterey, and that there was no scurvy in San Diego. On September 9, after much maneuvering, they anchored (i.e. no “deadmen”) in San Diego. According to Martínez, it was two leagues, 5.26 miles, south of the presidio. \textit{Punta de los Muertos} is 4.6 miles south of the presidio, which raises the possibility that he unloaded there because La Playa (the Beach) at Point Loma is southwest of the presidio. Part of their load was 73 pine logs from Monterey, as the trees in San Diego provided poor building material. Some of these logs became “deadmen.”

In 1782 \textit{La Princesa} and \textit{La Favorita} had supply duty. As fleet commander, Esteban Martínez recorded in his diary certain details of the voyage, such as that the water at Monterey was not drinkable. As second in command, Pantoja was in charge of \textit{Princesa’s} navigation and the surveys. He records those details; there is no mention of scurvy in either. On May 13 at 4 pm, they anchored in San Diego; the next day they tied up to the “deadmen;” after rest for the crew, they unloaded cannons and supplies.

On September 12 at sunset, Pantoja anchored the launch off Otay Creek to start at the eastern shore; 14 natives came, sold fish, and stayed most of the night. In the morning, they went to fill their water barrels and took soundings; 90-100 natives from that ranchería came to see them. Anchoring at the next sunset, Pantoja wrote “south of ranchería de Choyas,” as if it had already been named. Twenty-five natives came out and sold them fish and chicken.\textsuperscript{12} On September 14, Saturday, Pantoja boarded the \textit{Princesa} at sunset. “No trouble of any kind had been experienced.” Sunday would have been spent ashore for mass and dinner. On September 19, Phelipe Bernal, master caulkier of \textit{La Favorita}, was buried at the mission church, taken there before Pantoja returned. Pantoja finished his map September 28.\textsuperscript{13} This part of the Martínez diary is missing, or may not have been written, since Martínez gave the men leave and nothing happened. Pantoja was charting, and the diaries of Echeverría and Tovar are unavailable, so this all happened in the week of September 7 to September 14. Fresh food would have been brought to them and if anyone had scurvy, they would have been taken to the presidio or to the mission. Bernal was the only one from these ships to die here.\textsuperscript{14}

Beginning with historians Hubert Howe Bancroft and San Diego Judge Benjamin Hayes, most historians assume that \textit{Punta de los Muertos} derived its name from being the 1769 burial site. Commander Vicente Vila of the \textit{San Carlos} wrote that it was “... on a small hill immediate to the beach and a gun shot from the boats.”\textsuperscript{15} The beach shown on the Pantoja map is now Pacific Highway. It turns west at Washington Street, which bows south where the river mouth was. The ships were as close as they could get to it, anchored at the north side of the deep-water channel according to the Pantoja map.
The map Costansó drew shows the ships about west of where the Lindbergh Field Air Traffic Control Tower is today. About a “gun shot” (1000 yards) due east of there, the ridge along the west face of the San Diego Mesa, caused by the Rose Canyon Fault, bows upward and crests in the 3300 block of India Street. It is the only hill between Washington Street and Punta de los Muertos. Fray Juan Crespi wrote that the dead were “buried on the shore where the camp was established.” It was most likely near Pacific Highway and Sassafras Street. Crespi wrote that “they were all transferred about a league to the north...” A league was 2.63 miles; from 3350 India Street to Presidio Park is 2.4 miles. All subsequent deaths were no doubt buried there.

On the 1845 Alcalde Captain Santiago Arguello-Captain Henry D. Fitch San Diego pueblo map, Punta de los Muertos is called Punta Verde (Green Point). “Muertos” is written at Midtown where the initial dead of 1769 were buried before the move to Presidio Hill. The word “Muertos” (map is deteriorated) originally said Playa de los Muertos; there is no record of Los Muertos (dead men) of 1769 being exhumed. Punta de Los Muertos was a sandbar that extended about 750 feet south from the corner of Market Street and Pacific Highway. And since La Playa extended from the San Diego River to the tip of la punta, it would only be natural for Pantoja to name it “La Punta de Los Muertos” and not take credit.

NOTES
1. The plaque is wrong on all counts. There is no burial site and no one died on the Pantoja voyage. See Geraldine V. Sahyun, translator, Richard S. Whitehead, editor, The Voyage of the Frigate Princesa to Southern California in 1782 as Recorded in the logs of Juan Pantoja y Arrúaga and Esteban José Martínez, Santa Barbara: Mission Archive-Library, 1982.
2. Ibid.
3. In 1931 Assembly Bill 171 authorized the Department of Natural Resources to establish a California Historical Landmark Registration Program providing for the designation of privately and publicly-owned properties. The State Chamber of Commerce was delegated the responsibility of establishing a committee of historians to review landmark applications and make designation recommendations to the State Park Commission. Nebergall says that on 3/6/1932 a bronze marker was dedicated by the Native Sons and Daughters of the Golden West at Punta de los Muertos; the registration date was 12/6/1932.
4. William Heath Davis, Jr., Sixty years in California, a history of events and life in California; personal, political and military, under the Mexican regime; during the quasi-military government of the territory by the United States, and after the admission of the state into the union, being a compilation by a witness of the events described. San Francisco: A.J. Leary, 1889; p. 552.
Hall got the name from a Pantoja map.

8. The dead men, these dead men, those dead men—all in Spanish are los muertos.

9. In all their documents of the 1769 expedition, Franciscan missionaries Fray Junipero Serra, Fray Juan Crespi, and the overall commander, Gaspar de Portolá y Rovira, wrote it was “mal de loanda.” The missionaries knew medicine; they had a duty to look after these men physically as well as spiritually. So while “mal de loanda” may have contributed to scurvy, it was not itself scurvy.


11. The pitahaya/pitaya saguaro cactus grows in Baja California Sur (South). The fruit is often as large as a peach (dragon fruit, seasonally available in Hispanic and farmers markets). The bright red juice has 4mg vitamin C per 100 grams; sugar added to preserve it makes pitahaya syrup.

12. The average amount of vitamin C in 100g of fish is 2mg raw; cooked in dry heat is 1mg. This rancheria had always been friendly. Probably the Choyas sold food to the presidio and were given chickens to breed. Many worked at or for the presidio, or sold goods or services to the men, or were married to them. In Richard F. Pourade, The Explorers, the 1786 revised 1782 Pantoja map is on p. 149. Rancheria Otay is missing, and Rancheria de Choyas is located where it was in 1782, although by then it had relocated to Florida Canyon. Lower left below the line is printed “Cardano lo grabó” (engraved it), on the lower right below the line is “Morata lo escri.” (wrote it).

13. San Diego burial records at the San Diego History Center and The Huntington Library, Early California Population Project Database, 2006, for both churches, August 21 to October 6, 1782. They also show five natives of the mission and the young son of Segundo Valenzuela buried there.

