

California Explorer Series

Gaspar de Portola



By Jody Payne & LeAnn Leyden

Gaspar de Portolá (1716-1784)

Can you imagine being a California explorer famous for being lost? That would be embarrassing! The only thing worse than being lost would be finding the exact spot you were seeking...and still thinking you were lost. That is what happened to Gaspar de Portolá and it happened to him twice! Thankfully, he finally got it all figured out. Now he is recognized and honored as the first European to find an overland route from Baja California to Monterey and San Francisco Bay.



Unlike other Spanish explorers of California, Gaspar was a nobleman. Born in Catalonia, Spain, Gaspar joined the military where he proved to be a courageous and able leader. Eventually he was sent to New Spain (Mexico) by the government and was made governor of Baja California.

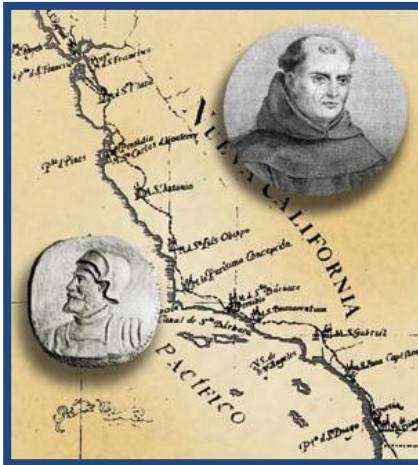
At the same time, the King of Spain, Carlos III, was getting very worried about New Spain. He had a fear of losing territory in North America and figured there were two ways it could happen. Luckily for Spain, Gaspar de Portola was in the right place to solve both problems...and keep the riches coming to Spain from its outposts.

**King
Carlos III
Of Spain**



First, King Carlos was afraid the Jesuit missionaries in Baja California were getting too rich and powerful. He felt threatened, so he decided to force them back to Spain and replace them with Franciscan missionaries who were more willing to work with the government. He ordered the missionaries arrested and deported. Guess who he put in charge? That's right. Gaspar de Portolá. Gaspar forced the Jesuits out, and if they resisted, he ordered them hanged. The Franciscans were brought in to fill up the missions and the king was happy. Problem #1 was solved.

Problem #2 still lingered. King Carlos knew that Spain had not paid any attention to Alta (upper) California in over 150 years. But that didn't mean the area wasn't getting noticed. Russia and England had their eyes on colonizing the territory. That meant Spain had to get in there first and lay claim to ports, build forts or presidios, and plan missions to convert the native Indian population to Catholicism. Guess who volunteered to lead an expedition to do just that? You got it! Gaspar de Portolá.



It was called The Sacred Expedition, and the plan was to send four separate groups to meet in San Diego, all taking different routes. Two ships and two overland groups totaling 219 people would make the difficult journey from La Paz. Everyone eventually arrived in San Diego although 119 died along the way. One ship overshot San Diego and didn't realize it until they got to Los Angeles and had to turn around.

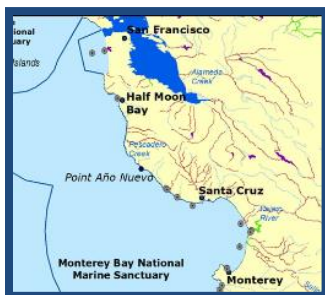
Portolá led one of the overland groups with Father Junipero Serra by his side. Father Serra had a swollen and infected foot which made travel slow and painful. Portolá urged his friend to stay home. But Father Serra insisted on joining the expedition and never once complained.

By the end of June 1769, everyone had reached San Diego and was camped in the area now known as Old Town. Many were too sick with scurvy to travel any further. Father Serra stayed in San Diego to establish Mission San Diego De Alcala. By mid-July Portola was ready to head north in search of Monterey Bay.



Gaspar traveled with sixty-four men and 100 mules. All of the men survived the trip, but the mules weren't so lucky. Extreme hunger forced the soldiers to kill some mules for meat. A lack of food was only one of their problems. They also experienced earthquakes, terrible storms, steep mountain passes, even grizzly bears in their trek up the coast. They were helped by local California Indian tribes like the Chumash who shared acorn meal, fish, and water. It wouldn't be the only time the native population saved the explorers from starvation.

If you know anything about the earlier Spanish explorer Sebastian Vizcaino, you probably remember this: Vizcaino exaggerated his descriptions of Monterey Bay in order to make himself look more successful. Portolá was counting on Vizcaino's words to lead him to Monterey Bay where they would begin to build a mission. He expected to find "a fine harbor, sheltered from winds." But when he arrived in Monterey, all he saw was rough water, a lot of fog, and no safe natural harbor. Like any smart guy, Portolá figured there was a problem. He must be in the wrong place! This could not be Monterey. So even though his men were sick, hungry, and tired, they packed up and continued north.



They walked for three more weeks, but the expedition was in very bad shape. It was time to start eating mules or starve. Ten of the men had scurvy so bad, they could not walk and had to be carried. Finally they made camp on the San Francisco peninsula. Portolá's scout explored the area and reported a large body of water to the east. Portolá wasn't interested in exploring further. It turned out that body of water was the best and biggest natural harbor on the west coast, the port every explorer kept missing for hundreds of years, San Francisco Bay.

By this time, Portolá realized he was too far north for Monterey. On November 11th, the expedition turned back south, hoping to spot the Monterey Bay that Vizcaino described in such glowing terms. They stopped to camp at the same spots they had visited earlier. Are you thinking that they must have stopped in Monterey? Yes, they did. Unfortunately, Portolá didn't recognize it from this direction either. He accepted that he had failed.



They could explore no longer. Food was so scarce, the men were forced to eat seagulls and pelicans. Winter was setting in. It was getting cold and the men could see snow on the foothills they would have to cross. It was time to return to San Diego in defeat. They headed south, and encountered a dozen men from the Ohlone tribe who gave them gifts of food to help in their journey. On January 24th, 1770 the entire expedition reached San Diego.

When Portolá sadly told his story of how they failed to find Monterey, he got an unexpected response from the priests and officers at San Diego. They told him he was wrong, and convinced him that he had indeed found Monterey! He just didn't know it.

That was great news. The only problem was there were no supplies to mount another expedition. Right when Portolá was ready to give up for good and go back to Mexico, a ship arrived full of fresh supplies. Now he had what he needed to head back up to Monterey.

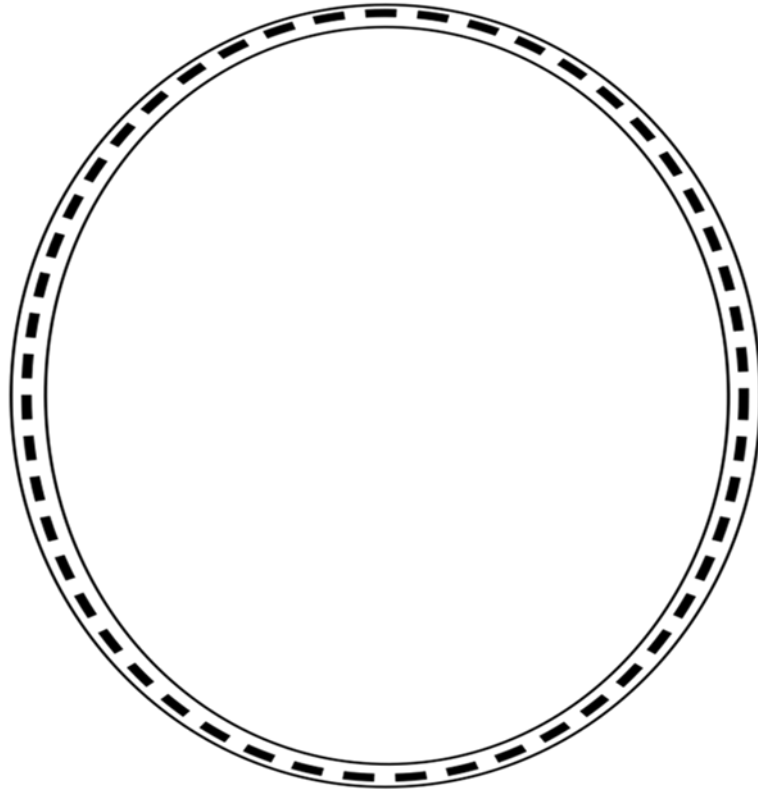


In April 1770, Portolá's new colonization expedition set out. Better weather made this trip much easier than last time. They arrived in Monterey within five weeks. A few days later Father Serra arrived by ship and began planning the construction of Mission San Carlos de Borromeo. Portolá left men in charge of building a new settlement which was called California Nueva or New California. Father Serra remained in Monterey while Portolá headed back to Mexico, never to see California again. He returned to Spain in 1784 to serve as a commander in the military. He died in October of that same year.



There are several schools, towns, parks, and streets in California named in honor of Gaspar de Portolá. If you drive on Portolá Parkway in Orange County, Highway 101 in Santa Barbara or San Diego, or Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles, you are traveling in the historic footsteps of legendary explorer Gaspar de Portolá, a man who didn't let failure keep him from success.

Name _____

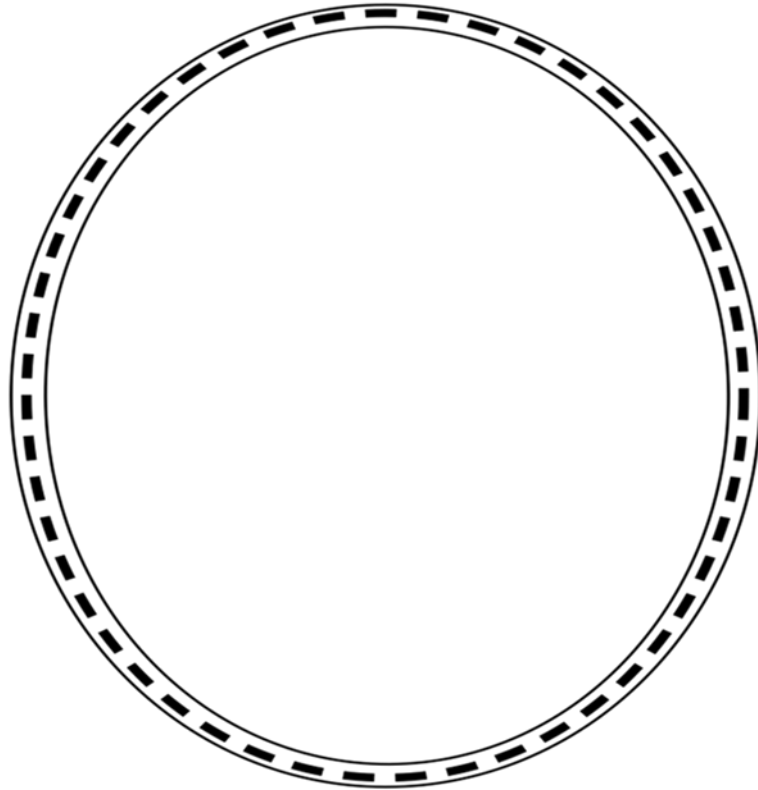


Explorer

Birth-Death

Country

Name _____



Explorer

Birth-Death

Country

Name _____

Explorer Name :

Goals _____

Accomplishments: _____

Interesting Facts:

One word that describes this explorer:

Name _____

Explorer Name :

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Interesting Facts:

One word that describes this explorer:

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