**Giovanni da Verrazzano**

Achievement:

In his account of his 1524 voyage to the North American continent, and exploration of the coast from Florida to Newfoundland, Verrazzano recorded details unknown to European mapmakers. His discoveries altered the construction and details of maps that would be used by explorers who came after him.

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**The Mystery of his Early Life**

There is very little known about the birth or early life of Giovanni da Verrazzano. What we do know is that he was well educated and employed in the maritime service of France. Some accounts claim Tuscany, near Florence, Italy, as his birthplace, but support for that cannot be found in any of the family records.

The only mention of Verrazzano before his 1524 voyage of exploration is a statement placing him among those on the Thomas Aubert expedition to New France in 1508. Identified as Jean Verasen, captain of an unnamed vessel who accompanied Aubert on his 1508 voyage to Newfoundland, it is likely that this was, in fact, Verrazzano. The 1508 adventure also provides a basis for Verrazzano’s continued interest in the exploration of the Americas.

He is also reported to have been in Portugal in 1517 at which time he followed Magellan to Spain as Magellan began his circumnavigation of the globe.

**Planning the Expedition**

The expedition that eventually got under way on January 17, 1524 was one of the most significant events in the exploration of North America. His voyage along the North American coast lasted six months, and while he failed in his primary goal to find a passage to China and the Far East, he completely changed his contemporaries’ view of the New World.

John Cabot’s 1497 voyage was well known and would have been discussed by Verrazano and others interested in similar pursuits. With the accumulated knowledge and information gathered by Cabot and other explorers who went before him, Verrazano made his plans and preparations for his own expedition.

In 1523, letters were written concerning the efforts of a group of Florentine bankers and merchants, living in Lyons, to organize financial support for a voyage led by Verrazano. Interested in finding a source for silk for the textile factories of Lyon, these backers were among the wealthiest and most influential families in France, and are among those linked by marriage to Verrazano. The support of the king, Francois I, was also necessary for the venture, but there are no written records of a royal commission. It must have been given in some form however, because on returning from the first voyage, Verrazano made his report directly to the king.

**The Voyage**

Verrazano left France on January 1, 1524 with a fleet of four ships. Almost immediately a storm sank two of the ships, and forced both remaining ships, *Normanda* and *Dauphine* to return to Brittany. Both ships were refitted for war and sent to Spain to harass coastal shipping and participate in conflicts between the two countries. Very soon, one of the ships was recalled from Spain and redirected toward Verrazano’s voyage of exploration.

On January 17, 1524 the caravel *Dauphine* left from the island of Madeira and began the journey. Also on the voyage was Gerolamo de Verrazzano, mapmaker and brother of Giovanni. While the French king may have been glad that he was only sacrificing one ship to the adventure rather than the original four, the Lyons bankers and merchants who had invested in the expedition were disappointed that the large fleet of ships destined to return with riches from the east was now reduced to one small vessel.

Through the writings, maps and globes of the time, Verrazzano knew he had to approach the land to the west with caution. Spain had laid claim to the islands south of the main landmass and, thanks to Ponce de León, Spanish power had been extended north to the Florida peninsula. Verrzano chose a mid-Atlantic destination for two reasons. He hoped the route would take him safely away from Spanish-held regions and still leave him close to the point at which the available maps told him the land would turn sharply away toward the west. He hoped to sail over this shoulder of the continent and gain passage to the Pacific Ocean and the riches of Asia.

Setting a course for a stretch of coast at around 34° N, Verrazzano quickly found that the information available to him was incorrect. He kept a logbook, his “little book,” with details of his continuous reckoning of latitude and longitude and his daily sun observations. He had available to him the compass, lead line, astrolabe, cross staff, quadrant, traverse board and a tide calculator to help in navigation. Some of those instruments could assist in interpreting latitude, but the ship’s east-west movements could only be calculated by a process called dead reckoning. The disappearance of Verrazano’s “little book” in which he recorded the progress of his voyage is a loss to the history of navigation.

As they navigated the coast, he recorded that as they sailed he was “hoping all the time to find some strait or real promontory where the land might end to the north, and we could reach those blessed shores of Cathay.” Without making landfall, he sailed south looking for a port, then reversed his course and sailed back to the point of his initial sighting of land. Here he made his first landing on American shores. Verrazzano was to develop the habit of going ashore in a small boat to explore and greet the natives, while most of his crew remained behind on the ship. It was a practice that would ultimately prove fatal.

Piloting the *Dauphine* was Antoine de Conflans, who successfully steered the little ship for thousands of miles, through storms and along an uncharted coast, with only one mishap. The exact sight of the first landfall could possibly have been Cape Fear. Verrazano was aware that the land he had reached was not the coast of Asia. He described it as a “new land, which had never been seen before by any man, either ancient or modern.” He was not sure just how close his position put him in relation to Spanish possessions and wanted to be sure not to venture into their territory. Aware of Spanish discoveries to the south, but unclear of his exact position, Verrazano’s calculations vastly reduced the distance to the Spanish regions of Mexico and the Yucatan.

A gift for observing and describing the people and sights he encountered as he made his coastal voyage from the Carolinas to the Cape Breton-Newfoundland area was one of Verrazano’s most important contributions. He devoted almost one-third of his report of the voyage to descriptions of the appearance, customs, and character of the various Indian tribes he encountered. He made distinctions between the various tribes and their physical characteristics, commenting on differences in the angular faces of some versus the broad faces of others. He noted their speed at running, their agility, and craftiness. He is credited with being the first commander of an American exploration to create a detailed account of the natives of North America.

His descriptions of the landscapes were also very important. He noted how some areas were heavily forested and whether there were dunes or hills. By naming various stretches of the coastline according to the trees and geological features there, he provided a descriptive and informative narrative of the sights he saw. This proved more helpful than the usual practice of naming locations based on saints’ days or dates related to the Church calendar, although some of those types of names were also given. Examples of the natural naming are “Field of Laurels” and “Field of Cedars,” while Cape Lookout at the opening of both Pamlico and Albemarle Sound was originally named “Annunciata.” A description of the Chesapeake Bay is one of the unexplained omissions of Verrazano’s report. There is no indication of it in his narrative or in the maps drawn by cartographers Vesconte de Maggiolo or Gerolamo Verrazano, Giovanni’s brother.

As Verrazano traveled the coastline north, he named the Virginia/Maryland coastline after a popular poem of the day, calling the area “Arcadia on account of the beauty of the trees.” They stayed in the area for three days, traveling inland for two leagues and kidnapping an eight-year-old boy. They also met a native who seemed as curious about the strange visitors as they were about him. As the native offered them what may have been a pipe to smoke, they terrified him by firing a musket.

Leaving Arcadia, the ship sailed north and east, past areas “very green and forested, but without harbors,” and hugging the shores of Delaware, Maryland, and New Jersey. As the ship neared “S. Polo,” the Navesink Highlands south of Sandy Hook, New Jersey, Verrazano and his crew were approaching the next important area they would visit: New York. Verrazano called the land “Angoulême” because the king, Francois I was count of Angoulême and called the bay enclosing the land “Santa Margarita” after the king’s beloved sister, Maruerite, Countess d’Alençon and later Queen of Navarre. His report is the first written description of New York Harbor. The following is an excerpt from his report:

*After a hundred leagues we found a very agreeable place between two small but prominent hills; between them a very wide river, deep at its mouth, flowed out into the sea; and with the help of the tide, which rises eight feet, any laden ship could have passed from the sea into the river estuary. Since we were anchored off the coast and well sheltered, we did not want to run any risks without knowing anything about the river mouth. So we took the small boat up this river to land, which we found densely populated. The people were almost the same as others, dressed in birds’ feathers of various colors, and they came toward us joyfully, uttering loud cries of wonderment, and showing us the safest place to beach the boat. We went up the river for about half a league, where we saw that it formed a beautiful lake, about three leagues in circumference. About XXX (30) of their small boats ran to and fro across the lake with innumerable people aboard who were crossing from one side to the other to see us. Suddenly, as often happens in sailing, a violent unfavorable wind blew in from the sea, and we were forced to return to the ship, leaving the land with much regret on account of its favorable conditions and beauty; we think it was not without some properties of value, since all the hills showed signs of minerals.*

Setting sail again, Verrazano and party sailed along the coast of Long Island, which they thought was the mainland, until they came to an island, which has been difficult to identify. It could have been Block Island. He continued to “Refugio,” Narragansett Bay where he found a beautiful port and a sheltered harbor, later known as Newport, Rhode Island. Here the ship and crew stayed for 15 days, becoming the first to use the pleasant surroundings as a spring/summer resort. It was here that Verrazano and company spent the happiest time of the expedition and where he recorded the most important descriptions of the natives he encountered. Verrazano wrote about all the Indians he encountered, but at Narragansett he made his most extensive study of the native tribes. He dealt with the specifics of their physical appearance and way of life. Of the people he found in “Refugio” he wrote,

*These people are the most beautiful and have the most civil customs that we have found on this voyage. They are taller than we are; they are a bronze color, some tending more toward whiteness, others to a tawny color; the face is clear-cut, the hair long and black.*

Leaving Narragansett Bay, the *Dauphine* continued on an easterly course, observing the shoals east of Nantucket that still prove dangerous to mariners today. Verrazzano found the shoals so dangerous he named them after a hated tax collector in service to the Pope. The expedition rounded Cape Cod and sailed west to the mainland shadowing the Massachusetts coast before turning northeast once more and sailing along the coast of Maine. Here along the island-strewn coast he landed, probably near Portland, encountering unfriendly natives who attacked the landing party. Verrazzano provided less detail in his narrative of this region of the coast, possibly because something of the area was known through previous Portuguese and English voyages. As supplies dwindled, Verrazano reflected on the new lands he had discovered and explored, and made the decision to return home. The ship departed from Newfoundland and upon reaching Dieppe, France, Verrazano prepared his report to Francois I. While he had not found the long sought passage to Cathay and the Far East, his voyage of discovery had completed the picture of the east coast of the Americas from Labrador, in Canada, to Patagonia in South America. The letter, dated July 8, 1524, reported his six-month voyage and described one of the most important chapters in the exploration of America