

Brief History of Cabrillo National Monument

BY Jesus Benayas—UPDATED August 2025

This is a brief outline of the history of the Cabrillo National Monument.

The first European sailing vessel to reach the California coast was the Spanish vessel the San Salvador. The captain and owner of the San Salvador was Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo. He was the first European or non-American native, to sail and chart the California coast, anchoring in San Diego Bay on September 28, 1542.

Over a Hundred years ago, on Friday, September 26, 1913, San Diego's foremost citizens together with military officers, United States senators, a representative of the President of the United States, the Spanish ambassador (Señor Juan Riano y Gayangos), and the lieutenant governor of California all gathered at the site of an abandoned lighthouse on Point Loma to honor Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, the Spanish explorer credited with the discovery of California.

Three weeks later; On October 14, 1913, President Woodrow Wilson issued a proclamation establishing Cabrillo National Monument. This action came at the behest of a statewide group known as the Order of Panama, that wished to erect a “monument statue” to Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo. The Spanish explorer, who had visited the area in 1542, was considered by Californians to be the discoverer of the state. The proclamation described the parcel of land situated on Point Loma within the limits of the military reservation of **Fort Rosecrans**.

The Order of Panama however disbanded before the statue was built, but the Cabrillo National Monument was established.

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On May 12, 1926, President Calvin Coolidge, by Executive Order authorized a statewide group known as the Native Sons of the Golden West to “erect at Point Loma upon the site above described a suitable monument in commemoration of the discovery of California by Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo.”

On June 10, 1933, under the authority of a bill passed by Congress the previous March which authorized the reorganization of the executive and administrative agencies of the government. President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order No. 6166. By virtue of this order, the administration of national parks, monuments, cemeteries, public buildings, and reservations, for the first time, under one central office, that of the National Park Service.

Until 1934 when the National Park Service became responsible for the Cabrillo National Monument, the explorer Cabrillo usually had been grouped together with other Spanish historical figures such as Balboa and Father Junipero Serra. The change of emphasis from Spanish to Portuguese received a great deal of impetus when Superintendent White, the first administrator of Cabrillo National Monument, became aware that while there was virtually no Spanish community in San Diego, there were a sizable number of Portuguese.

The first reference to Cabrillo being a Portuguese as it relates to the Cabrillo National Monument occurred in a meeting held on January 19, 1934 when a member of the new Cabrillo National Monument committee Ms. Lois Kimball, stated she was “very much interested in having a Portuguese or at least a combination of Portuguese and Spanish motif to the projected memorial.”

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Interestingly, Ms. Kimball's husband was the principal of a Point Loma school located near the Cabrillo National Monument.

In addition, the Portuguese Grand Council of Cabrillo Civic Clubs Inc. had been formed in December 1934 at San Francisco to “recognize Portuguese contribution to California and to civilization in general.” Manuel Silva, the group's president, took an active interest in assuring that the Cabrillo National Monument acknowledges Cabrillo as a Portuguese hero.

On September 28, 1935, a plaque dedicated to Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo was unveiled by the Portuguese Minister to the United States. The ceremony was held at the newly restored lighthouse at Cabrillo National Monument. **NOTE: The name on the plaque is “Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo”.**

The first mention of the name João Rodrigues Cabrilho is found in 1935 in the context of a planned bronze plaque. Manuel Sylva, president of the Portuguese Cabrillo Civic Club, wanted Cabrillo's name on a plaque to be listed as João Rodrigues Cabrilho. **There is no reference to the source of the name João Rodrigues Cabrilho except the obvious translation from Spanish to Portuguese.**

On August 22, 1935, Malcolm Gardner of the Branch of Historic Sites and Buildings rendered his opinion:

Quote: “... Cabrillo comes to the notice of history as a servant of the crown of Spain, and history refers to him by the Spanish form of his name.

I would recommend therefore, that the present Spanish spelling on the memorial be retained...” End of quote

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At the same time, Associate Director Arthur E. Demaray concurred that the Spanish spelling should stand and added a practical note: **Quote, “to adopt the Portuguese spelling Cabrilho would change the name of the National Monument.” End of quote.**

By the way, according to Portuguese historian, Celestino Soares, in 1939 admitted “the name Cabrillo or Cabrilho is not known in Portugal.” Nevertheless, Mr. Soares continued to insist this great explorer was Portuguese.

Also, in 1939, the Portuguese Secretariat of National Propaganda commissioned sculptor Alvaro de Bree to create a statue of Cabrillo to be displayed at the New York World’s Fair. That same year, in March 1939, Mr. Lawrence Oliver, in San Diego, received a letter from Mr. J. C. Valim, Secretary of the House Committee of Portugal, asking Oliver to raise funds to defray expenses for Portugal. Oliver complied and requested that the statue eventually reside in San Diego.

Historian Maurice Holmes in 1955 tried to locate information on Cabrillo in the Portuguese National Archives. He found nothing and concluded there was no proof Cabrillo was Portuguese.

In 1966, Joan M. Jensen, a member of the Cabrillo Historical Association of San Diego, travelled through Portugal in a determined effort to find evidence that Cabrillo was born in Portugal, visiting every village named Cabril. She failed to discover any valid evidence about the origin of Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo. But so strong was the Portuguese tradition that she came home “much more convince that Cabrillo was Portuguese”.

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In 1973, historian W. Michael Mathes, after searching historical and genealogical sources concluded “there exists considerable doubt as to the nationality of Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo and, in fact, there is much to indicate he was not Portuguese but Castilian.”

In 1985, Dr. Harry Kelsey the former chief curator of history at the National History Museum of Los Angeles County and research scholar at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. His book Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo is generally regarded as the seminal work on the life of Cabrillo, stated that most historians now accept that Herrera or printer made an error putting the word Portugués to fall into line behind the name Cabrillo instead of Correa.

To know the history of how the statue got to San Diego, you must read **“A TALE OF THE CABRILLO STATUES” by John Martin published by – The Journal of San Diego History, Fall 2014.** The twists and turns by politicians, including California U.S Senator, California Governor, California Mayors, California Assemblymen, Portuguese government, Portuguese diplomats, and California Portuguese Civic Clubs all were involved in bringing the “statue” to San Diego.

In 2015, Dr. Wendy Kramer, a renowned historian, and research expert on 16th century Central America, while conducting archival research discovered several thousand pages of manuscripts with legal documents written by scribes and signed by Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo stating that he was a native of the Spanish village of Palma de Micer Gilio now known as Palma del Rio, Cordoba, Spain. Dr. Kramer was researching information about Guatemala in the 1520s and 1530s.

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It might seem astonishing to some of you that there is still anything left to discuss about the matter of Cabrillo's country of birth or his name being Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, Spanish explorer from Palma del Rio, Cordoba, Spain.

Why is the National Park Service and Cabrillo National Monument refuses to update the information at their website, wayside, brochure, and plaques? Why do they keep the name Joao Rodrigues Cabrilho when that person does not exist in the history of California? It is an impostor, a fake created by the Government of Portugal and the Portuguese in California. Look and read the History of California.

1) Please add this to the end of your video (show the pictures below, and read the text I added here)

Portugal is rightfully proud of its history of exploration. The Portuguese memorialized its seafaring history with a magnificent **Monument of the Discoveries** (*Padrão dos Descobrimentos*) celebrating all its brave explorers in a promenade along the Tagus River in Lisbon. Cabrillo is rightfully not one of the explorers listed since he was not Portuguese, nor is the name João Rodrigues Cabrilho, since that person did not exist."

Why does the United States of America, National Park Service at the Cabrillo National Monument promote inaccurate history that not even Portugal recognizes in their **Monument of the Discoveries** (*Padrão dos Descobrimentos*)? The statute incorrectly identifies Cabrillo as João Rodrigues Cabrilho which is a fictitious name created by the Portuguese in an effort to claim Cabrillo as a native Portuguese. There is no explanation at the monument as to why Cabrillo's name is written in Portuguese.

The National Park Service needs to be honest in telling the story, TRUTH and TRUST for all visitors.

Please, put this plaque where it belongs, underneath the statue.

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13. Letter from Mr. José (Joe) A. Baptista to illustrious Professor Ricardo Vasconcelos, SDSU, Department of Spanish and Portuguese Languages and Literature. Sun, Sep 22, 2024.

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14. Who was Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, Explorer of San Diego Bay?” by Dr. Carla Rahn Phillips – Union Pacific Professor (Emerita) – University of Minnesota – Twin Cities at the 7th Annual Naval History Symposium of the Western Naval History Association Onboard USS Midway Museum Saturday, Feb. 1, 2025 & Sunday Feb. 2, 2025 (<https://juanrodriguezcabrillo.com/who-was-juan-rodriguez-cabrillo-explorer-of-san-diego-bay-by-dr-carla-rahn-phillips/>). Also, letter to Superintendent Rodriguez at Cabrillo National Monument dated January 12, 2025.