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EARLY HISTORY OF HUMBOLDT COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

The early history of Humboldt County is identified with the search for a safe harbor on the California coast. The early Spanish navigators, Cabrillo and Ferrelo, failed to see the land as far north as Cape Mendocino. Sir Francis Drake merely indicated a receding shore north of that cape. Vizcaino placed a "Great Bay" just north of Cape Mendocino without the peculiar landlocked characteristics of Humboldt Bay. Bruno de Heceta and Juan de la Bodega Cuadra entered Trinidad Bay on Trinity Sunday, June 9, 1755 -- this is the first record of a landing having been made in this county. Trinity Head is now marked by a granite cross erected in memory of those early explorers.

The Colonial Documents of the Great Russian American Company record that a sea-otter party, under command of American Jonathan Winship of the "O'Cain", entered Humboldt Bay in 1806, naming it "Bay of Resenof". With over two score of small boats manned by Aleut. Indians, the "O'Cain" anchored about twenty-five miles north of Eureka and the men spread out after the much hunted sea-otter.

It was during this search that Captain Winship and some of his men discovered Humboldt Bay and found the obscure entrance to it. Later the "O'Cain" sailed into the bay and hove anchor opposite where Eureka now stands. At that time, there was only fifteen feet of water on the bar or entrance compared to the present 40 foot level. Indian villages were everywhere on the shores of the bay and the little party named it Indian Bay. Other Russian vessels may have visited Humboldt Bay, but nevertheless it remained practically unknown until California became a possession of the United States.

Prior to that time the "Great Bay" on this coast was supposed to be the mouth of what is now known as the Klamath River (but then designated as the Trinity) and thought to be within the boundary of the Oregon Territory. This would have given the United States a good harbor with ample anchorage within the boundaries of the territory known as Oregon and Washington. The Trinity River was thought to pass through both the Cascade and Coast Range Mountains, which shows that the Klamath River was actually in mind. When the Territory of California was ceded to the United States, it became all the more advantageous to command a good harbor between the Columbia River and the Golden Gate.

In 1848, news of the discovery of gold in California began to spread to the utmost parts of the world. At that time, a party of forty miners, headed by Dr. Josiah Gregg of Missouri, explorer, author, trader, and employee of the Federal Government, set out over the mountains endeavoring to discover the reported harbor. At the direction of the Government they proceeded north to find the Trinity River and to follow it to its mouth. In November, 1849, they had arrived at a point on the Trinity River near what is now known as Weaverville in Trinity County. The party, after many hardships,

re-discovered the bay and named it Trinity, not knowing of its earlier name of Indian Bay.

In 1850, ships from San Francisco were making a search of the coast and Captain Ottinger of the "Laura Virginia" discovered the entrance to the bay and the ship anchored therein. On board was Second Officer Buhne. This party named the bay Humboldt, after the great naturalist and traveler, Baron Alexander von Humboldt.

On April 14, 1850, the "Laura Virginia" group organized the first site of white habitation on Humboldt Bay known as Humboldt City at Buhne Point. Eureka was established May 13, 1850.

In the winter of 1852-53, Fort Humboldt, a military post, was established on Humboldt Heights in Eureka to protect the residents from Indian attacks. Captain U. S. Grant, later famous as a Civil War General and President of the United States, was stationed here in 1854. Due to Humboldt County's moderate climate, the fort was not constructed of hardy materials and gradually fell into ruins. By 1911, Fort Humboldt was all but obliterated with the exception of one building. This building has been restored and is the offices of the California State Division of Beaches and Parks, District #1.

Eureka, the county seat of Humboldt, is the largest city in northern California with a population of 28,137. Eureka is situated on Humboldt Bay and is the center of a vast recreational area.
