

Is 'Sasamat' The Aboriginal Name For 'Burrard Inlet'?

Researched and written by Ralph Drew, Belcarra, BC, March 2012.

One of the oldest place-names in the Lower Mainland is 'Sasamat'. When exploring the outlet of *Boca de Floridablanca* in June 1791, the Spanish pilot José María Narváez met some aboriginals who told him their name for the upper portion of Burrard Inlet (Indian Arm) was 'Sasamat'; likely derived from the Salishan word *Tsaa-tsmat* which means "cool place".⁽¹⁾ Captain Dionisio Alcalá Galiano told Captain George Vancouver in 1792 that the aboriginals applied the name 'Sasamat' to Burrard Inlet and its North Arm,⁽²⁾⁽³⁾ and on the Spanish map of 1802 Burrard Inlet and its North Arm was designated 'Canal de Sasamat'.⁽²⁾ However, Suttles⁽⁴⁾ argues that no name has been recorded for Burrard Inlet as a whole:

"It has long been supposed that the Native name for Burrard Inlet was 'Sasamat'. This supposition is based on a statement in the account of the Spanish exploration of 1793 [sic 1792] by Dionisio Alcalá Galiano and Cayento Valdés in the ships *Sutil* and *Mexicana* published in Spain in 1802, a translation of which appears in Wagner.⁽⁵⁾ The passage in the translation (p. 265) reads: "The North Arm [Indian Arm] of the channel [Burrard Inlet] which we called 'Floridablanca', and the natives name 'Sasamat', ends in a river..." The name 'Canal de Sasamat' also appears on a chart drawn after the voyage. However, Kendrick⁽⁶⁾ discovered good reasons to infer that the 1802 publication was put together after the voyage and 'contains distortions'. He has discovered and translated what he identifies as the 'definitive' account of the voyage. In this account, statements and whole paragraphs that appear in the 1802 publication are missing. These include the statement quoted above containing the name 'Sasamat'. However, this name does appear in a vocabulary that the explorers collected at Neah Bay in a short list of place names (not reproduced in Kendrick, but in Wagner, pp. 243–244). Some of these names are clearly those of Native groups, among them 'Chलयamat' for 'Puerto de Quadra' (Port Discovery).

This must be the Clallam **nəxʷsłáyəm** 'Clallam' plus the Makah suffix -atx 'people'. Several other names end with -at, -it, or -et, including 'Quinicamet' for 'Puerto de Nuñez Gaona' (Neah Bay), probably an attempt to represent the Makah self-designation

kʷidiččaʔatx̌. It seems very likely, therefore, that 'Sasamat' was a Makah name for some group to the east. In the list the name is identified as that of 'Boca de Floridablanca', which, at the time when the expedition was at Neah Bay, referred to a bay that was believed to exist between Point Roberts and Point Grey, actually the delta of the Fraser River. If the Spaniards and Makah were communicating well, the Makah name recorded may have been that of the people of the Fraser River. At any rate, there is no reason to suppose that it was a Coast Salish name for Burrard Inlet." – Wayne Suttles.

As an eminent Coast Salish ethnographer and linguist, Wayne Suttles (1918–2005) has provided an interesting re-examination of the aboriginal place-name 'Sasamat'. Regardless, the Spanish were the first Europeans to explore Indian Arm, and named Burrard Inlet and Indian Arm 'Canal de Sasamat' in the belief that 'Sasamat' was the aboriginal place-name. Today, 'Sasamat Lake' evokes this historic name.

References:

- (1) Major J.S. Matthews, 1955, "Conversations with Khahtsahlano, 1932–1954", Vancouver City Archives, page 74.
- (2) Henry R. Wagner, 1937, *The Cartography of the Northwest Coast of America to the Year 1800*, 2 volumes, University of California Press, Berkeley, California.
- (3) Homer G. Barnett, 1955, *The Coast Salish of BC*, University of Oregon Press, Eugene, Oregon.
- (4) Wayne Suttles, 1996, *Linguistic Evidence for Burrard Inlet as Former Halkomelem Territory*, In Working Papers for the 31st International Conference on Salish and Neighbouring Languages, Vancouver: ICSNL, pages 283–296.
- (5) Henry R. Wagner, 1933, *Spanish Explorations in the Strait of Juan de Fuca*, Santa Ana, CA, USA: Fine Arts Press, pages 228–299.
- (6) John Kendrick, 1991, "The Voyage of the Sutil and Mexicana, 1792: The last Spanish exploration of the Northwest Coast of America", Spokane, WA: Arthur H. Clark Co., pages 24–33.