

A Few Key Facts About Francis Drake

by Duane Van Dieman

Francis Drake was born in Tavistock, England, 15 miles north of Plymouth, around the year 1541. He was the oldest of the twelve sons of Edmund and Mary Drake. The family owned a sheep farm and Edmund was also a part time Protestant preacher.

After his family had moved from Plymouth to Kent (southeast of London), from around the age of 12 until Drake was about 20, Drake served as an apprentice and assistant for an older gentleman aboard a very small merchant ship, moving food and other supplies across the English Channel to France and along England's coast.

Drake learned his craft well and decided to make a career of being a sailor. When the old man passed, he willed his small ship to Drake, who sold it to invest in and work aboard his cousin John Hawkins' merchant fleet. As a young man, it was his big chance to be successful in his chosen profession, with a chance of real promotion.

John Hawkins' decisions and actions were supported by the Queen herself. Along with Mathew Baker, Hawkins later became a key designer of the "race built galleon" (as was the Golden Hind). He also became the treasurer of the Queen's Navy.

Hawkins was one of the first "privateers" to strike out for England during their undeclared war against the dominant forces of King Phillip II that threatened the future of Protestant England. His many raiding voyages involved the taking of any and all valuables aboard Spanish and Portuguese ships. Hawkins' first voyage involving slaves was after raiding a Portuguese slave ship bound for the New World. Worth noting is that Queen Elizabeth I had loaned Hawkins her Carrack ship, *Jesus of Lubeck*.

Hawkins' fleet made three slaving voyages involving slaves (the first in England's history) along with his other raids. Drake might have refused to be involved with these actions, but he had heavily invested in the fleet and in his future with Hawkins. It was also considered patriotic to Queen and Country to hinder Spain and Portugal and to help England, at the time a third-rate power in the world. At this time, there was no African slavery within England and these were the only slaving expeditions by England during Queen Elizabeth's reign.

Note: Slavery had been going on since ancient times and was common in and around Africa. European slaving had been going on since 1441 (begun by the Portuguese). The ongoing tribal wars in Africa had produced most of the slaves that were used for farming in Portugal and later in the New World.

After Drake's two voyages for Hawkins, there was a parting of their ways. Because of the Spanish betrayal at San Juan De Ulua (near Vera Cruz) at the end of Drake's second and final voyage, Drake saw over 200 of his fellow sailors killed or enslaved. It was then when he began a "personal war" against Spanish tyranny (that included slavery) that would continue for the rest of his life.

Through personal maturity and an intense sense of purpose, Drake rose from his humble beginnings to become a great and inspiring leader throughout England.

Although Francis Drake did profit from his many difficult and dangerous voyages that were to follow, almost all of the valuable goods he took from the Spanish (who enslaved Native Americans) went to the Queen's efforts to balance the power in Europe and to defend the Protestant movement in England. Drake's Protestant family was directly affected by the brief and bloody reign of the Catholic Queen Mary and the knowledge that, after her reign, both Spain's King Phillip II and the Pope would do what was necessary to stop this new religious movement. Drake, himself, was a devout Protestant.

Within a few years, the circumstances that surrounded Drake's first raid in Nombre de Dios (the Spanish treasure port in what is now Panama) brought forth his meeting a man named Diego, a Black escaped Spanish slave. Drake was introduced by Diego to the Cimarrones, a large group of Black escaped former slaves, who aligned with Drake's crew to successfully raid a Spanish mule train of silver and gold.

Drake and Diego became close friends and would travel together on Drake's voyage of circumnavigation that brought him, along with 75 crew members (including three other freed Black slaves) to the shores of Marin for five weeks in 1579.

As is made clear in his well-researched article, "Up From Slavery; Diego And Francis Drake" by England's foremost Drake authority, author Dr. John Sugden (available on this webpage), Drake soon became a champion for the Black and Native American people, a very unusual and controversial position for his time.

This is a story about the power of personal redemption and finding one's true calling in life. I see it as an inspiration, reminding us that hurtful, negative actions in one's early life can develop to a turning point that can bring forth maturity, personal enlightenment and committed, positive actions.

It's also very important to note that during all the many shore and ship raids by Drake along the western coast of the Americas, no one was killed on either side. Francis Drake never used force unless absolutely necessary. His war was against Spanish rule, not those who had to follow their orders.

The only person seriously wounded during those many raids was a Spaniard aboard the treasure ship "Cacafuego". He was taken aboard the Golden Hind and invited to share Capt. Drake's table until he recovered.

On the island of Mocha, off the South American coast, Drake and 10 crewmembers were attacked by many natives who thought they were the Spanish, (who they knew were enslaving Native Americans). Two of Drake's crewmembers were captured and later killed and all were seriously wounded. Drake was shot in the face by an arrow, and his Black friend, Diego, later died from his wounds. After their escape, Drake refused to use the ship's cannons to counterattack.

He wanted the natives to understand that the English, under the flag of St. George, were not their enemies.

These are just a few of many examples of Drake's peaceful intentions towards Native American and fairness to all those serving under Spanish rule or those enslaved.

Capt. Francis Drake and his crew developed a very close friendship with the Coast Miwok people during their five-week stay here in Marin. Remarkably, it was the first time the English language was spoken and the first Protestant services held in what would become the United States of America. Drake was made an honorary chief and crowned with a headdress of sacred crow's feathers. He named the area "Nova Albion" (New Briton) and claimed it for England in hopes of defending the area against Spanish rule.

Thank you for taking the time to review the facts about Vice Admiral Sir Francis Drake. It is my sincere hope that, in this time of change and uncertain future, we can seize the opportunity to learn more about Francis Drake and all of our colorful Marin past.

