

- article
- discussion
- edit this page
- history



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navigation

- [Main page](#)
- [Contents](#)
- [Featured content](#)
- [Current events](#)
- [Random article](#)

search

interaction

- [About Wikipedia](#)
- [Community portal](#)
- [Recent changes](#)
- [Contact Wikipedia](#)
- [Donate to Wikipedia](#)
- [Help](#)

toolbox

- [What links here](#)
- [Related changes](#)
- [Upload file](#)
- [Special pages](#)
- [Permanent link](#)
- [Cite this page](#)

print/export

- [Create a book](#)
- [Download as PDF](#)
- [Printable version](#)

# Drake's Plate of Brass

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(Redirected from [Plate of Brass](#))

The so-called Drake's Plate of Brass is a **forgery** that purports to be the **brass** plaque that **Francis Drake** posted upon landing in **Northern California** in 1579. The **hoax** was successful for forty years, despite early doubts. After the plate came to public attention in 1936, **historians** immediately raised questions regarding the plate's **wording**, **spelling**, and **manufacture**. The hoax's perpetrators even tried to tip off the plate's finders as to its origins. But many presumed the plate to be real after an early **metallurgical** study concluded it was **genuine**. Then, in the late 1970s, **scientists** determined that the plate was a modern creation after it failed a battery of physical and chemical tests. Much of the mystery surrounding the plate continued until 2003, when historians finally advanced a theory about who created the plate and why, showing the plate to be a **practical joke** by local historians gone very awry. The plate was acquired by – and until 2005 was on display at – The **Bancroft Library** of the **University of California, Berkeley**.



The so-called Drake's Plate of Brass. Note the hole in the lower right. The real plate was described as displaying the queen's portrait on a sixpence coin through a hole in the plate.

Contents [hide]

- 1 [The historical plate](#)
- 2 [The found plate: description and text](#)
- 3 [Origins: a practical joke gone awry](#)
  - 3.1 [Creation](#)
  - 3.2 [Discovery and loss](#)
  - 3.3 [Re-discovery and publicity](#)
  - 3.4 [Early doubts](#)
  - 3.5 [The conspirators' warnings](#)
  - 3.6 ['Confirmation'](#)
- 4 [Forty years later, science sheds new light](#)
- 5 [See also](#)
- 6 [External links](#)



Sir Francis Drake, by [Nicholas Hilliard](#), 1581

## The historical plate

[\[edit\]](#)

*Main article: [New Albion](#)*

It is known that Drake landed somewhere north of the [Golden Gate](#) and [San Francisco Bay](#) in 1579. According to a contemporary account by Francis Pretty, a member of Drake's party, Drake left behind "a plate of brasse" as "a monument of our being there" that claimed "her maiesties, and successors right and title to that kingdome." The memoirs also say that the plate included the date of the landing, Drake's name, and the queen's portrait on a sixpence coin, showing through a hole in the plate.

Pretty's detailed description of the plate became the recipe for the prank that became the Drake Plate hoax.

## The found plate: description and text [edit]

The plate that came to light in the 1930s matched the description in historical record in many ways. It was made of brass, with lettering that appeared to have been chiseled into its face. There was the hole for a sixpence coin, and the text contained all the content that Pretty described:

BEE IT KNOWNE VNTO ALL MEN BY THESE PRESENTS.  
 IVNE.17.1579  
 BY THE GRACE OF GOD AND IN THE NAME OF HERR  
 MAIESTYQVEEN ELIZABETH OF ENGLAND AND HERR  
 SVCCCESSORS FOREVER, I TAKE POSSESSION OF THIS  
 KINGDOME WHOSE KING AND PEOPLE FREELY RESIGNE  
 THEIR RIGHT AND TITLE IN THE WHOLE LAND VNTO HERR  
 MAIESTIEES KEEPEING. NOW NAMED BY ME AN TO BEE  
 KNOWNE V(N) TO ALL MEN AS NOVA ALBION.  
 G. FRANCIS DRAKE  
 (Hole for sixpence)

## Origins: a practical joke gone awry [edit]

The origins of the found plate have been a matter of debate and rumor for much of its history. Historians have only recently painted a clear picture of the beginning of the hoax. Over the space of a decade, a team of four researchers pieced together a complete narrative of the out-of-hand joke. The four – Edward Von der Porten, Raymond Aker, Robert W. Allen, and James M. Spitze – published their account in *California History* in 2002.

## Creation [edit]

According to this account, the plate was intended to be a joke among members of a playful fraternity of California history enthusiasts, the Ancient and Honorable Order of **E Clampus Vitus** ("ECV"). G. Ezra Dane, an ECV leader, initiated the hoax as a joke intended for fellow "Clamper" George Bolton to find. Dane's fellow conspirators in creating the plate, George Barron, George Clark, Lorenz Noll, and Albert Dressler, were not members of ECV, but were all active in the California history community.

Dane was the leading figure in reviving ECV as a fraternity of (exclusively male) historians and Western lore enthusiasts. ECV describes itself as "dedicated to the erection of historical plaques, the protection of widows and orphans, especially the widows, and having a grand time while accomplishing these purposes." Pranks at fellow Clampers' expense were a regular part of the group's activities.

The target of the hoax, **Herbert Eugene Bolton**, had a special interest in the plate. Bolton was a distinguished professor of California history and director of the Bancroft Library at the University of California. Over his long career, he was known to have exhorted generations of students to look for the plate – and contact him if they ever heard of an artifact matching the historical description.

According to the 2002 account, Dane initiated the plot. Barron, a former curator of American history at the **De Young Museum** in **San Francisco**, designed the plate and bought the brass at a nearby shipyard, where a worker cut the plate from modern brass with a modern guillotine shear. George Clark, an inventor and art critic and appraiser, hammered the letters into the plate with a simple cold chisel. Clark told his wife that the "C.G." – interpreted later to stand for 'Captain General' – before Drake's name was essentially his signature. And, as a final mark of the gag, Noll and Dressler painted "ECV" on the back of the plate in paint visible only under ultraviolet light.

## Discovery and loss [edit]

Von der Porten, Aker, and Allen surmise that the conspirators probably planted the plate in Marin in

1933, not far from the supposed location of Drake's landing. William Caldeira, a chauffeur, found the plate while his employer, Leon Bocqueraz, was hunting near the shores of [Drake's Bay](#) with a companion, [Anson Stiles Blake](#). Bocqueraz was a banker, while Blake was a prominent and active Berkeley alumnus. Both were members of the California Historical Society.

Caldeira showed the dirt-covered plate to Bocqueraz, then stowed the plate in the car to investigate later and then forgot about it. Some weeks later, he found it again while cleaning the car on the San Rafael Ferry and threw it away on the side of the road in [San Rafael](#) – several miles from its original location, but still in the [Marin](#) area. This was the first of a series of events that ultimately spun the joke out of the conspirators' control.

## Re-discovery and publicity

[\[edit\]](#)

The plate was found again three years later in 1936 by Beryle Shinn, a shop clerk. Shinn showed it to a friend, a Berkeley student, who suggested he take the plate to [Bolton](#). In February 1937, Shinn brought it to Bolton, which to Bolton was fulfillment of a decades-old professional dream. Bolton compared it to Francis Pretty's contemporaneous description of the plate. He alerted [Robert Gordon Sproul](#), the University of California president, and Allen L. Chickering, the president of the [California Historical Society](#), to the possibility of a major find. Chickering and Bolton negotiated to buy the plate, offering to pay \$2,500 and to assume all risk regarding the authenticity of the plate.

Then another series of events took the hoax to the next level. One day after agreeing in principle to sell the plate, Shinn took it back from Bolton, saying he wanted to show it to his uncle and then return it. Bolton and Chickering did not hear from Shinn again for four days. Apparently frightened that they might lose this major opportunity, Chickering moved to quickly buy the plate for \$3,500. The plate was then donated to the University's Bancroft Library.

Bolton soon announced at a California Historical Society meeting on April 6, 1937, "One of the world's long-lost historical treasures apparently has been found! . . . The authenticity of the tablet seems to me beyond all reasonable doubt." Now, having only minimally investigated the plate, Bolton and Chickering had publicly committed themselves, personally and professionally, and their institutions to the authenticity of the plate.

## Early doubts

[\[edit\]](#)

Skeptics pointed out many suspicious elements of the plate. Reginald B. Haselden, a specialist in Elizabethan literature, published a critique of the plate in the September 1937 issue of *California History*, outlining a list of problems. The spelling seemed modern. The wording did not match normal Elizabethan forms; for example, the plate reads "Queen Elizabeth", not "Elizabeth, by grace of God, Queen of England". Physically, the plate seemed too uniform and the [patina](#) suspect. Yet none of these elements by itself seemed to determine the matter, alternative interpretations of each being available. Haselden's points were immediately disputed. Chickering published a defense of the plate in the same issue of *California Monthly*.

## The conspirators' warnings

[\[edit\]](#)

The joke, originally intended as an internal Clamper affair, had quickly and suddenly broken out into the public eye. Rather than unveiling their prank at an ECV dinner among friends, revealing the hoax would now be a very public and painful proposition for all involved. As Von der Porten and others wrote: "Private confession could not be kept private, and public confession was fraught with great peril."

The conspirators found a number of ways of trying to tip off Bolton without actually coming forward themselves. V. L. VanderHoof, a fellow Clamper and Berkeley professor, actually created a spoof of the plate only a few weeks after the announcement of the find, hoping to show Bolton that modern tools could make a plate that looked remarkably like the "real" plate. Clamper Edwin Grabhorn, a Western history publisher, published a spoof letter from the "Consolidated Brasse and Novelty Company"

offering a "special line of brass plates" guaranteed to "make your home-town famous."

Finally, ECV produced a small press run of a book, *Ye Preposterous Booke of Brasse*, detailing problems with the metal content, wording and spelling. The book even instructed the reader to look for the "ECV" in fluorescent paint on the back and stated outright "we should now re-claim [the plate] as the rightful property of our ancient Order", meaning ECV.

## 'Confirmation'

[[edit](#)]

While [Bolton](#) and Chickering continued to defend the plate, doubts and rumors continued to circulate. Sproul, the University president, had become concerned as well. Bolton selected Professor Cohn Fink, chair of the Division of Electrochemistry of [Columbia University](#), to authenticate the plate. While the California history community, and certainly Bolton, would have been aware of the Clampers' book of clues, Fink may not have been. In any case, in 1938 Fink and his colleague E. P. Polushkin confirmed the plate as genuine in no uncertain terms: "[I]t is our opinion that the brass plate examined by us is the genuine Drake Plate."

For most observers – and certainly for Bolton and Chickering – this was the definitive statement on the plate's origins. Photos of the plate appeared in textbooks. Copies were sold as souvenirs, and a copy was also displayed in the library of [Sir Francis Drake High School](#) in [San Anselmo](#) (the only high school named after the explorer). On several ceremonial occasions, copies of the plate were presented to [Queen Elizabeth II](#). Yet rumors of E Clampus Vitus involvement in the plate continued to circulate.

## Forty years later, science sheds new light

[[edit](#)]

In the early 1970s, physics caught up to Haselden's original findings. Professor James D. Hart, director of the Bancroft Library, assembled a re-testing plan in preparation for the 400th anniversary of Drake's landing. Hart reached out to Research Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art at [Oxford University](#) and at the [Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory](#) for a detailed analysis. The tests included [x-ray diffraction](#), [stereo microscopy](#), and additional metallurgical analysis. X-ray diffraction and gamma-ray absorption tests revealed the plate to be too smooth, made by modern rolling equipment, not hammered flat by a sixteenth century hammer. The brass contained far too much zinc, while containing trace metals that corresponded to modern American brass, not Elizabethan English brass. Prof. [Cyril Stanley Smith](#) of [MIT](#) examined the plate under a stereo microscope and found the edges to be consistent with modern cutting equipment.

No paint visible under ultraviolet light has been detected on the back of the plaque.

## See also

[[edit](#)]

- [Hoax](#)
- [E Clampus Vitus](#)
- [Forgery](#)
- [Francis Drake](#)
- [Drake's Bay, California](#)
- [Marin County, California](#)
- [University of California, Berkeley](#)
- [New Albion](#)

## External links

[[edit](#)]

- Edward von der Porten, Raymond Aker, Robert W. Allen, and James M. Spitze, "Who made Drake's plate of brass? Hint: it wasn't Francis Drake", *California Monthly*, March 22, 2002. ([Subscription required](#)) ↗
- [Pretty's account of Drake's landing and the real plate](#) ↗

- [University press release, including a Flash animation of the story](#) ↗
- [Cyril Stanley Smith's 1976 Metallurgical Report on Francis Drake's Brass Plate](#) ↗

Categories: [In-jokes](#) | [History of the San Francisco Bay Area](#) | [Hoaxes in the United States](#)



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