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#### GENERAL SCIENCE

# San Salvador Seen First

Studies of climate, topography, botany and archaeology indicate that San Salvador was the first land sighted by Columbus in the New World—By Barbara Tufty

► THAT MYSTERIOUS LIGHT seen by Christopher Columbus "like a candle falling and rising" 472 years ago as he approached the New World the night of Oct. 11, was probably caused by natives burning fires to keep away annoying sand flies. The light was not a hallucination or a "spiritual light" as many men have thought.

The "white head of sand" which the famous navigator sighted at two o'clock the next morning was actually High Cay, a straight white rocky cliff rising 114 feet above sea level to the southeast of San Salvador Island.

These and other discoveries have led Ruth G. Durlacher Wolper, director of the New World Museum of San Salvador, to identify the first land sighted by Columbus and his crew as San Salvador. This land is the southeasternmost island of the Bahamian Archipelago above the Tropic of Cancer.

For almost 500 years, scholars and laymen have been trying to solve the mystery of Columbus's light and to define the exact island the men first saw and walked upon. Practically every island in the Bahamas has been nominated for one reason or another to hold the honor of being the first.

Mrs. Wolper recently released a monograph, published by the Smithsonian Institution, describing her research to prove that San Salvador is the island.

With the aid of scientists and historians, Mrs. Wolper followed Columbus's statements in his Journal word for word and spent seven years exploring San Salvador Island by plane, jeep, foot and boat, as well as making accurate measurements and excavations on land and sea.

Columbus approached the island at a dead reckoning at 23° 47' 24" North in October near the end of the rainy season. At this time, states Mrs. Wolper, the foliage on the trees and plants is green, the lakes are filled with fresh water and fires are necessary in the evenings after the rains to ward off sand flies.

By conducting an expedition on the 110-foot long M. V. Drake, at the same time of year and evening, Mrs. Wolper and her assistants found similar conditions described by Columbus and his men. "Rising and falling" lights glowed in the dark from fires built by the natives, following today some of the customs of their forefathers. They tended these fires by throwing on about three leaves of the waxy Sabal palmetto tree every half hour, a procedure that caused the light to rise and fall.

The light could be seen as far out at sea as 27 nautical miles, just the distance of the Santa Maria where Columbus was standing on the stern-castle.

Early in the morning, four hours after

spotting the light, land was sighted straight ahead, records the Journal. This "white head of sand" was glowing in the moonlight, six nights after the full moon.

Columbus then ordered his fleet of three ships to "jog off-and-on" near the southeastern reefs until daylight, when they sailed around a long ridge of connecting reefs searching for a place to land. They dropped anchor in a quiet lagoon that opens to the sea through what is now known as Gardiner's Reef.

Point by point, Mrs. Wolper examined the journal of Columbus and answered each fact to prove that San Salvador today is the island once called Guanahani by the Indians and renamed San Salvador by Columbus.

She backs her arguments with facts of climate, topography and botany. She cites artifacts identified from scientific archaeological excavations where Columbus described the Indians and villages he saw, and notes the links in the cultural development from the past to the older native folk of today.

During the scramble for the honor of being Columbus's first island, San Salvador has also been called Watling, and other islands have been named San Salvador.

• Science News Letter, 86:294 November 7, 1964

#### PUBLIC SAFETY

### Three Taillight Colors May Reduce Collisions

► YELLOW AND GREEN as well as red taillights would reduce rear-end collisions, the annual convention of the National Safety Council meeting in Chicago was told.

The green lights would automatically be switched on when the car traveled at speeds exceeding 40 miles an hour.

Yellow colors would automatically appear when the car began mild deceleration from high speeds, remaining on while it was traveling below 40 miles an hour.

Brake application would cause switching from either green or yellow to the red lights, which would stay on when the car was stopped.

K. A. Harkness, director of the department of agricultural engineering, Ohio State University, made this suggestion, which grew out of research into Ohio highway accidents involving slow-moving vehicles during 1961 and 1962.

One of the major accident factors, said Mr. Harkness, was found to be the failure of other motorists to recognize the slow ones soon enough to avoid rear-end collisions.

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