George Davidson, whose name is indelibly connected with the survey of the West Coast of the United States, spent most of the sixty-one years between 1850 and 1911 in service to the citizens of California, Oregon, Washington, and Alaska. He was born in Nottingham, England, on 9 May 1825 and emigrated with his parents to the United States in 1832. They settled in Philadelphia where a few years later he became a student of Alexander Dallas Bache, then principal of the Philadelphia Central High School. In 1843, Bache was appointed second superintendent of the United States Coast Survey. Two years later he selected Davidson to become his personal clerk in the Washington, D.C. office of the Coast Survey. Davidson was not happy with such a sedentary existence as he modified his address on many letters home with the notation ‘Washington D(reary) C(ity)’. It was obvious he was ready to head for the field.

In 1846, Bache sent him to serve with Assistant Robert Fauntleroy on the Gulf Coast of the United States. Fauntleroy befriended the young man and taught him the techniques of geodesy in the field. During the winter months he took Davidson to his home in New Harmony, Indiana, a colony of intellectuals and social experimenters seeking a utopian society. Here Davidson met his future wife, Ellinor Fauntleroy, although they did not marry until 1858. In 1849, Fauntleroy died of yellow fever while working on the Texas coast leaving George grief-stricken for his mentor. The same year, the Coast Survey had sent survey crews to California. Because of the gold strike, no labour was to be found on the West Coast, and the first crews to arrive accomplished little work. Because of this, Superintendent Bache decided to send a crew of young men of great energy with ‘record to make’ to the West Coast. These men would undertake “for one year to do any duty, however hard or manual, incident to the survey on the western coast.” George Davidson, James Lawson, and two others volunteered for this arduous assignment.

They arrived in San Francisco on 19 June and within three weeks were headed back south to begin their work. Point Conception, known as ‘The Hatteras of the Pacific’ was selected as their first location for which to determine an accurate astronomic position. Over the next year, he made astronomic observations near Monterey and San Diego in California, then north to Cape Disappointment at the Columbia River entrance. On the return from Cape Disappointment, Davidson was left off at Port Orford, Oregon Territory, where he conducted observations and remained until January 1852. While there he was “living on lean salmon until you feel scaly, turn colour and wag your tail.” When returning to San Francisco he was assigned to the party of Lieutenant James Alden, USN, on the Coast Survey Steamer Active and proceeded south landing at nine locations to determine their astronomic positions. Upon return to San Francisco, he and Lawson, who had been working in the vicinity of San Diego, proceeded on the Active north to Neah Bay, near Cape Flattery in Washington Territory. The seeds of dissension between Davidson and Alden were sown on these trips and they came to hate each other over the next year, each heaping invective upon each other’s heads in letters to the Superintendent of the Coast Survey. This resulted in Davidson acquiring a vessel which he named the Robert H. Fauntleroy in 1854.

After the Active discharged Davidson and his party of nine men at Neah Bay, his survey party encountered hostility from the Makah tribe and their relatives across the Straits of Juan de Fuca on Vancouver Island. Although the Makahs were afraid of
the likes of which few of us will ever see in our lifetimes.

Davidson, Davidson Mountains, Davidson Inlet, Davidson Bank, and Davidson Glacier, Alaska. He was an extraordinary man, feature to be named with the generic term 'seamount'; Mount Davidson in San Francisco; Mount Davidson, Nevada; and Mount young.” His services to the western coast are commemorated by Davidson Seamount off the California coast, the first undersea

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hydrologist, historian, native American ethnographer and teacher for the citizens of his adopted land as well as the world

George Davidson combined the skills of hydrographer, geodesist, geographer, astronomer, seismologist, civil engineer, hydrologist, historian, native American ethnographer and teacher for the citizens of his adopted land as well as the world scientific community. In 1900, at the age of 75, he commented “… I continue ceaselessly to work because I love it, because I have the constitution to stand it, and because I believe that I can add something to human knowledge and especially benefit the young.” His services to the western coast are commemorated by Davidson Seamount off the California coast, the first undersea feature to be named with the generic term ‘seamount’; Mount Davidson in San Francisco; Mount Davidson, Nevada; and Mount Davidson, Davidson Mountains, Davidson Inlet, Davidson Bank, and Davidson Glacier, Alaska. He was an extraordinary man, the likes of which few of us will ever see in our lifetimes.

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