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*Spanish explorers in the Americas conquered people and searched for gold. Spain became richer, while many Native Americans suffered from harsh treatment at the hands of the Spaniards.*

## European Explorers and Conquerors

### *What were the goals of early Spanish explorers?*

When Spanish explorers reached the Americas, natives told tales of gold, silver, and kingdoms wealthy beyond belief. The Spanish listened eagerly, and they traveled far and wide in search of these riches.

These explorers, known as conquistadors (kahn • KEES • tah • dohrz), got encouragement from Spanish rulers. The rulers gave conquistadors the right to explore and create settlements in the Americas. In return, the conquistadors agreed to give Spain one-fifth of any treasure they found. This deal allowed Spanish rulers to explore the Americas with little risk. If a conquistador failed, he lost his own fortune. If he succeeded, both he and Spain gained wealth and glory.

### The Conquest of Mexico and Peru

Although many of the tales of gold and riches proved to be false, some were true. Two wealthy empires—the Aztec in what is now Mexico and Central America and the Inca in South America—were among the richest prizes the conquistadors claimed.

In 1519 Hernán Cortés landed on the east coast of present-day Mexico. Within two years, Cortés conquered the Aztec Empire that had ruled the region. Huge amounts of Aztec gold made Cortés and Spain wealthy.

Cortés's success encouraged other conquistadors. Twelve years after the Aztec conquest, Francisco Pizarro led an army into the Inca capital in Cuzco, Peru. The Spanish arrested and later executed the Inca ruler. Without their leader, the Inca were not able to fight effectively. Pizarro soon controlled most of the vast and wealthy Inca Empire.

### Why Spain Won

The conquistadors' victories over the Aztec and Inca were quick and lasting. How did Cortés and Pizarro conquer such mighty empires with their small forces?

First, the Spanish had weapons and animals the Aztec and Inca had never seen. The Spanish had guns and cannons. They rode horses and had huge, ferocious dogs. To the Native Americans, the Spanish seemed almost like gods. One Aztec recalled the fear that spread at the soldiers' approach: "[T]heir weapons clashed and rattled. . . . [T]hey terrified everyone who saw them." Cortés received help from some native people who disliked their harsh rulers and were happy to help overthrow them. Finally, disease played a large role. For many native groups, **contact** with the Europeans was deadly. With no **immunity**, or resistance, to European diseases, the Aztec and the Inca suffered terrible epidemics. Illnesses weakened them in their struggle against the Spanish.

**Analyzing** How were the Spanish able to defeat Native American empires?

#### Thinking Like a **HISTORIAN**

##### Analyzing Primary Sources

In 1519 Hernán Cortés prepared to leave Cuba for Mexico with 11 ships carrying about 550 Spanish soldiers and 16 horses. Before setting off, Cortés said to his men:

*"I know in my heart that we shall take vast and wealthy lands, people such as have never before been seen. . . . If you do not abandon me, as I shall not abandon you, I shall make you in a very short time the richest of all men who have crossed the seas."*

—from *The Life of the Conqueror by His Secretary*,  
trans. Lesley Byrd Simpson

Based on this quote, what inspired the conquistadors?  
For more about analyzing primary sources, review *Thinking Like a Historian*.

## Spain in North America

### *What did Spain hope to find in the Americas?*

Mexico and Peru were lands rich in silver and gold. Hoping to find similar wealth to the north, conquistadors explored the southeastern and southwestern parts of what is today the United States.

Juan Ponce de León (pahn • suh day lee • OHN) made the first Spanish landing on the east coast of present-day Florida in 1513. According to legend, Ponce de León was not looking only for gold. He also hoped to find the legendary fountain of youth. This had been described by a historian of that time as, "a spring of running water of such marvelous virtue" that drinking it "makes old men young again." Ponce de León's exploration led to the first Spanish settlement in what is now the United States—a fort the Spanish built at St. Augustine, Florida, in 1565.

## The Seven Cities of Gold

Still other conquistadors searched for quick riches, and several lost their lives in the process. Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca (cuh • BAY • suh duh VAH • cuh) was part of a Spanish expedition to Florida in 1528. After coming into conflict with Native Americans in Florida, the expedition sailed south toward Mexico in November, led by Pánfilo de Narváez (nahr • VAH • ays). Three of its five boats were lost in a storm.

The two boats that made it through the storm became stuck on a beach on an island near present-day Texas. Within a few months, only a handful of the Spanish explorers were still alive. To survive among the Native Americans, de Vaca and an enslaved African named Estevanico (es • TAY • vahn • EE • koh) persuaded the Native Americans that they had healing powers. Cabeza de Vaca later wrote that their method of healing was "to bless the sick, breathing upon them," and to recite Latin prayers.

In 1533 the Spaniards set off on a long trek across the Southwest. While traveling, they often heard stories about seven rich cities in the region. When Cabeza de Vaca finally arrived in Mexico in 1536, he told eager listeners about the "Seven Cities of Cibola"—seven cities of gold.

## De Soto Searches for Gold

Excited by these stories, Hernando de Soto led an expedition to explore Florida and what is today the southeastern United States. For three years they traveled, following stories of gold. Their encounters with the native people often turned violent.

De Soto crossed the Mississippi River in 1541, describing it as "swift, and very deep." After traveling as far west as presentday Oklahoma, de Soto died of fever. His men buried him in the waters of the Mississippi.

## Coronado Takes Up the Search

Another conquistador who searched for the Seven Cities of Cibola was Francisco Vázquez de Coronado (kawr • oh • NAH • doh). His travels took him through northern Mexico and present-day Arizona and New Mexico, until his expedition reached a Zuni (ZOO • nee) settlement in 1540. Finally convinced that there was no gold, members of the expedition traveled west to the Colorado River and east into what is now Kansas. They found no gold—only "windswept plains" and strange "shaggy cows" (buffalo).

**Speculating** Why do you think that the encounters between de Soto's party and Native Americans were sometimes violent?

## Life Under Spanish Rule

### *What effect did Spanish rule have on society?*

Spanish law set up three kinds of settlements in the Americas—pueblos, missions, and presidios. Pueblos, or towns, were centers of trade. Missions were religious communities.

They included a church, a small town, and fields for crops. A presidio was a type of fort, and was usually built near a mission.

Juan de Oñate (day ohn • YAH • tay) traveled up from Mexico to establish a Spanish presence in the lands to the north. He was also assigned to convert the native people to Christianity.

In 1598 Oñate founded, or established, the province of New Mexico. He introduced cattle and horses to the Pueblo people. The first Spanish city in the southwest, Santa Fe, was established in 1607. Santa Fe became the capital of the province in 1610.

## Spanish Colonial Society

There was a very clear class system in Spanish colonial society. The highest level of society was made up of the *peninsulares*, people who were born in Spain. They were the landowners, leaders of government, and heads of the Catholic Church. Next in rank were the Creoles, people born in the Americas whose parents were Spanish. The next level below were the mestizos (meh • STEE • zohs), people with one Spanish and one Native American parent. Still lower were the Native Americans, most of whom lived in great poverty, and enslaved Africans.

The Spanish government granted conquistadors who settled in the Americas the right to demand either taxes or labor from Native Americans living on the land. This system forced the Native Americans into a form of slavery.

For example, in the 1540s, when the Spanish discovered silver ore in northern Mexico, they set up mining camps. They then forced Native Americans to dig for silver. The damp mineshafts were a grueling environment in which to work. Many Native Americans died there from malnutrition and disease.

A Spanish priest, Bartolomé de Las Casas, spoke out against such cruel treatment of Native Americans and pleaded for laws to protect them. He claimed that millions had died because the Spanish "made gold their ultimate aim, seeking to load themselves with riches in the shortest possible time."

Las Casas's reports convinced Spanish leaders to pass the New Laws in 1542. These laws forbade enslaving Native Americans. Unfortunately, the laws were not always enforced.

## The Plantation System

Not all Spaniards sought gold. Some found wealth shipping crops to Spain. In the West Indies, key exports were tobacco and sugarcane. The Spanish developed the plantation system to raise these crops. A plantation is a large farm.

The Spanish first used Native American labor to work their plantations. Las Casas suggested that they be replaced by enslaved Africans—a suggestion he bitterly regretted later. As a result, thousands of enslaved Africans were brought from West Africa to the Americas. Those who survived the brutal voyage were sold to plantation owners. By the late 1500s, slave labor was an essential part of the economy of the colonies.

## Spanish Settlement in the Southwest

In the 1600s and 1700s, the Spanish, with much help from Native Americans, settled the Southwest, including present-day New Mexico, Texas, and California.

The Spanish explorer Juan Cabrillo (kuh • BREE • yoh) first sighted what is now California in 1542. However, for 200 years the Spanish had left the area alone. Around 1769, that policy changed. California was the northern frontier of the Spanish Empire in North America, and Spain needed a large number of colonists to solidify its hold on the region. Spain also wanted to convert more Native Americans to Christianity.

Spanish settlement in California consisted mostly of mission building. The Spaniards trained Native Americans who lived on the mission as farmers. They learned how to grow crops, irrigate farmland, and perform other tasks usually carried out on a ranch. Eventually, the missions became economically profitable enough to sell some of their goods, such as wine, olive oil, and leather.

## Effect on Native American Life

California's many Native American groups had well-ordered societies before the Spanish arrived. They hunted, fished, and gathered plants for food. The arrival of the Spanish disrupted this way of life. The Spanish forced native peoples to convert to Christianity and to live and work at the missions.

**Summarizing** What kinds of settlements did the Spanish build in the Americas?

### Connections to **TODAY**

#### Our Spanish Heritage

The Spanish influence in the United States is strong. Many Spanish words have been incorporated into the language, such as fiesta and canyon. The Spanish, who were expert ranchers, introduced animals such as horses, sheep, pigs, and beef cattle into the American Southwest. Many place names in the United States today are Spanish in origin. Some examples in the text are Santa Fe and San Diego. Can you think of any others?

## LESSON 3 REVIEW

### Review Vocabulary

1. Use the following content vocabulary terms to write a short paragraph about Spanish settlement in the Americas.

- a. pueblo
- b. mission
- c. presidio
- d. plantation

### Answer the Guiding Questions

2. **Summarizing** What did most conquistadors hope to accomplish in the Americas?

3. **Explaining** Why was 1513 a significant year in the history of the United States?

4. **Making Generalizations** What effect do you think Spanish settlement had on Native Americans?

**5. INFORMATIVE/EXPLANATORY** The conquistadors are often described as possessing both good and bad qualities. Write a paragraph in which you express what you think were the qualities, both good and bad, of the Spanish conquistadors.