

The Spanish Borderlands

In both Mexico and Peru, conquistadors found gold and silver riches beyond their wildest dreams. Hoping for still more, they pushed north into lands that are now part of the United States. Because these lands were located on the far edges of Spain's North American empire, they were known as the Spanish borderlands.

Florida One of the first Spanish expeditions into North America was led by a man named Juan Ponce de León (wahn PAHN-suh day lee-OHN). He had sailed with Columbus to the Caribbean and made his fortune by discovering gold on the island of Puerto Rico. Despite his wealth, Ponce de León couldn't stop thinking about Indian rumors of a "fountain of youth" that made old people young again. Restless for more adventure, he set off to find the truth about these tales of everlasting youth.

Ponce de León landed on a sunny peninsula of North America in April 1513. Because he had sighted this lush new land on Easter Sunday, he called it La Florida, meaning "flowery." (The name is short for "flowery Easter.") Eight years later, he returned to Florida with 200 men to establish a Spanish settlement, or colony. American Indians in the area used poisoned arrows to drive off the invaders. Instead of finding a fountain of youth, Ponce de León died from a poisoned arrow in his stomach.



The "Seven Cities of

Cíbola" Another legend sparked new Spanish expeditions into North America. An old European tale told of the "Seven Cities of Cíbola" (SEE-buh-luh). These cities were said to be so fabulously rich that the streets and houses were decorated with gold and jewels. When the Spanish heard Indians tell similar tales, they became convinced that the Seven Cities of

Cíbola were somewhere in North America.

Spanish explorers first looked for the seven cities in Florida and present day Texas. They found plenty of adventure, but no golden cities. Then a Spanish priest named Marcos de

Niza claimed to have seen a shimmering golden city in what is now New Mexico. He raced back to Mexico City with the news.

The Coronado Expedition In 1540, a famed conquistador named Francisco Vázquez de Coronado (VAHS-kehz day kohr-uh-NAH-doh) set out from Mexico City with a large expedition and de Niza as his guide. Their goal was to find the legendary golden cities. After traveling north more than 7,000 miles, the expedition found an American Indian *pueblo*. A pueblo is a village of apartment-like buildings made of stone and adobe rising four and five stories high. To de Niza, this might have looked like a golden city. But to Coronado, it was a “little, crowded village . . . crumpled all up together.” The enraged expedition leader sent the priest back to Mexico City.

The Coronado expedition continued north onto the Great Plains before giving up the search for golden cities. Disappointed, Coronado reported to Spain, “Everything is the reverse of what he said, except the name of the cities and the large stone houses . . . The Seven Cities are seven little villages.”



Settling the Borderlands As

conquistadors explored new territories, they claimed the areas for Spain. By 1600, the Spanish borderlands extended west from Florida across present-day Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California. At first, Spain did little to encourage

settlement in these far-flung areas. But when rival European nations also began to show an interest in the land, small bands of soldiers were sent to these regions to protect the claims. The soldiers lived in walled forts called *presidios* (preh-SEE-dee-ohs).

In 1565, for example, a Spanish naval officer named Pedro Menéndez de Avilés (muh-NEN-dez day ah-vuh-LACE) was sent to Florida to protect the area from French explorers. Menéndez successfully drove the French out of their Florida base and built a fort on the peninsula’s Atlantic coast. Menéndez named the fort St. Augustine. Over the years, Spanish soldiers based at St. Augustine successfully defended the fort—and Spanish claims to Florida—from both French and English rivals. Today, St. Augustine is the oldest permanent settlement founded by Europeans in the United States.

Catholic [missionaries](#) accompanied the soldiers to the borderlands. Missionaries are religious people, like priests, who try to persuade people to [convert](#) to their religion. The missionaries built settlements, called missions, where they taught local Indians new skills and preached the Christian faith. Each mission grew its own food and produced most of what the inhabitants of the missions needed to survive far from towns and trading centers. Hardy bands of settlers also moved into the borderlands, where they established towns and farms. Juan de Oñate (own-YAH-tay), who had made a fortune mining silver in Mexico, led the settlement of New Mexico. In 1598, Oñate brought 400 settlers and 7,000 animals from Mexico to New Mexico. The long overland journey took a year and a half to complete. At first, the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico welcomed the newcomers. Unfortunately, the Spanish repaid the Indians' kindness with cruelty. Indians were made to work for the settlers as slaves. Catholic priests ordered the whipping of Pueblo religious leaders who continued to practice their traditional rituals. Such treatment led the Pueblo people to rise up in [revolt](#) and drive the Spanish out. Twelve years would pass before Spanish settlers returned to New Mexico.

During the 1600s and 1700s, settlement of the Spanish borderlands proceeded slowly. But in time, the language, religion, and culture of Spain spread across much of the American Southwest.

Impact on American Indians The arrival of Spanish settlers had a great [impact](#) on the native peoples of the borderlands. The Pueblo people, for example, learned from the Spanish how to use new tools, grow new foods, and raise sheep for wool. In turn, the Indians introduced the Spanish to new [techniques](#) for growing crops in the desert soil. From Florida to California, some American Indians converted to the Catholic faith. The converts often lived and worked in and around the missions, growing crops and helping to maintain the churches and other buildings. However, even converts often continued to practice their traditional religious rituals as well.

Unfortunately, wherever the Spanish settled, they brought with them diseases to which native peoples had no resistance. Smallpox, measles, and influenza often wiped out entire villages. Before Coronado's expedition, there had been more than 100 thriving Indian pueblos in New Mexico. By 1700, only 19 remained.