



# God, Gold and Glory: Spanish Exploration of the Great Plains



Motivated by “God, Gold and Glory” Spain sent military expeditions to explore the Great Plains beginning in 1541. Converting Indians would bring glory to the converter in an age that related everything to religion, but the real draw was finding wealth in the fantastic, mythical kingdoms that always seemed to lie just beyond the currently explored territory.

## Opening a Future Trade Route

Because they followed the Arkansas River, many of these Spanish expeditions came through this area of Kansas. Their journeys also pioneered the route William Becknell would later use in 1821 to open trade with Santa Fe Trade.

They started out from the area now known as New Mexico and by 1821, the year Becknell made his first trip to Santa Fe, there was hardly a place on the Great Plains that had not been explored by the Spanish.

## 1541 Vasquez de Coronado

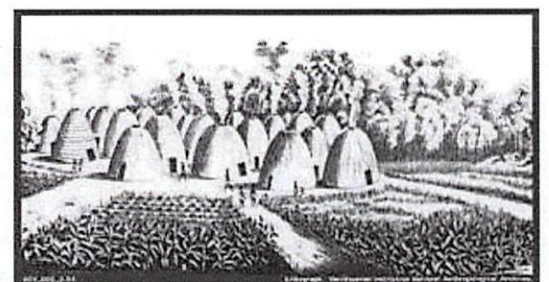
*Now we will speak of the plains. The country is spacious and level, and is more than 400 leagues wide in the part between the two mountain ranges...The country is like a bowl, so that when a man sits down, the horizon surrounds him all around at the distance of a musket shot.*

- Pedro de Castañeda, Chronicler of the Coronado Expedition

Inspired by the stories of an Indian named Turk, Coronado set out from the area of New Mexico with 350 soldiers searching for the Seven Cities of Cibola, a legendary place of amazing wealth. After marching about 650 miles without finding anything, Coronado realized the Turk had misled them. He sent back all but 30 of his men and used Texas Indians as guides from that point on. They would eventually reach a village of grass covered huts near Lyons, Kansas, which Coronado named Quivira. Most of the route Coronado used on his return to New Mexico would later become the Santa Fe Trail.

Although he planned to continue the search for gold, he was seriously injured after falling from his horse and had to return to New Spain. The Spanish government halted any further exploration into new territory so they could consolidate their hold on presently held lands and concentrate on mining silver in Mexico.

Eventually others were interested in returning to the area around New Mexico. Although Coronado didn't find any gold, many people believed it was still there to discover. There was also an interest in converting the Indians, as well as establishing a more permanent presence in order to use it as a base for further explorations.



A sketch of a Wichita Indian village in the 19th century. Both the houses and surrounding cornfields appear similar to what Coronado described in 1541.



**1595**  
**Francisco Leyva de Bonilla**  
**and Antonio Guitierrez**

Leyva and Guitierrez led an unauthorized expedition looking to make a name for themselves and possibly become governors of new Spanish provinces in New Mexico. Their journey took them near present-day Wichita, Kansas before tragedy struck the group. The two leaders fought with each, with Guitierrez murdering Leyva. Shortly after that the remaining soldiers were attacked by Plains Indians who killed everyone but one Indian servant.

By 1595, Leyva and Guitierrez's expedition, along with others, finally prompted the viceroy in Mexico City to authorize Juan de Oñate to start a settlement in New Mexico. Oñate

would eventually set out in 1598, leading 129 soldiers and their families, 83 wagons and 700 head of livestock.

He established a settlement at a place he named San Juan de los Caballeros, then spent the time between 1600 and 1604 sending other expeditions out to explore the region. He led one trip himself in 1601 that went as far as present-day Wichita, Kansas. Although Oñate did not cover any new territory, his was the largest expedition to venture into the plains up to that time. It was also the first time wagons crossed the great plains.

**1601**  
**Juan de Oñate**  
**1601**

**1634**  
**Alonso Baca**

Baca, along with "some men" left Santa Fe and traveled as far as Quivira, mostly using the route of the future Santa Fe Trail. Hostile

Indians forced him to return but not before reaching a large river that some people believe was the Mississippi.

During the 1700s the Spanish were increasingly threatened by foreign competitors in North America. Stories reached them about other white men on the plains and it soon became apparent that the French were moving in on their territory. By 1700 the French



The Pawnee and their French allies surrounded and defeated the Villasur expedition.

were settling into the area of Illinois and the Mississippi River Valley, as well as along the Missouri River.

New Mexico governor Antonio Valverde y Cosio sent Villasur to "make a reconnaissance of the settlements which they say those of the French nation have established." He took 43 soldiers, 3 settlers and 60 Pueblo Indians to look for the French. Although they found no Frenchmen, they were ambushed by Indians using French weapons. Only 13 Spaniards survived the attack and made it back to Santa Fe.

**1720**  
**Pedro de Villasur**

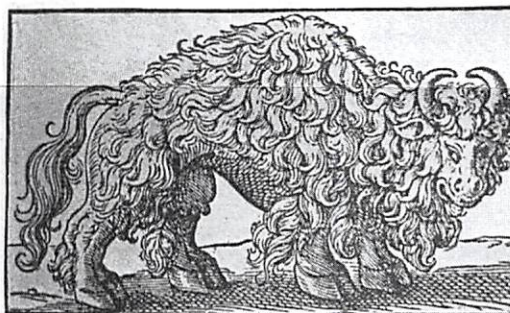
**1792**  
**Pedro Vial**

The Spanish put their explorations on hold for the next 60 years while they fought the Comanche. When they were ready to look beyond New Mexico, they went in search of trading opportunities with their neighbors.

France had handed Louisiana over to Spain in 1763. In 1792 Governor Fernando de la Concha sent Vial, a Frenchman from New Orleans who became Spanish citizen to lead a trip to St. Louis to open trade and communications with the French in Louisiana. Vial had only two other companions who made the trip with him. They were captured by Indians on the way who took them in the direction they were going anyway. Their return trip was uneventful.

In 1800, Spain gave Louisiana back to the French, who immediately turned around

and sold the territory to the U.S. in 1803. By 1805, Americans began arriving in Santa Fe and in the following year Zebulon Pike led an expedition to the San Luis valley in New Mexico mostly following the route of the Santa Fe Trail. He arrived in the valley in January of 1807, where New Mexican soldiers briefly detained him for trespassing.



From Thevet's *Les Singularitez*  
THE EARLIEST KNOWN PICTURE OF A BUFFALO

In 1806, Melgares went with 105 soldiers, 400 militiamen and 100 Indians to search the plains for these foreign intruders into New Mexico. At one point he left 240 of his troops camped along the Arkansas River a few miles southwest of present-day Larned,

Kansas. Although he traveled widely through the plains, going as far as the Republican River in Nebraska, he did not encounter any foreigners, apparently missing Pike's expedition by a month.

**1806**  
**Facundo Melgares**