

# The Spanish Colonies in the Americas

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## New Spain

Paying for Columbus's four voyages gave Spain a big head start in the exploration of North America. From islands in the Caribbean Sea, Spanish explorers and conquerors fanned out to various parts of the mainland. One of the conquerors was Hernando Cortés. Between 1519 and 1521, he and his army conquered the Aztec empire in Mexico. On the ruins of the Aztec capital, the Spanish built Mexico City. In 1535, Spain named its vast conquered territories New Spain. Mexico City became the capital. But claiming land was only the beginning. The Spanish built settlements to protect their claims and to govern the people there. Without settlements, other European countries might move into the land that Spain had claimed.



▲ **THE LANDS ON THE** edge of Spain's claims were called the borderlands. They included what are now northern Mexico and most of the southern U.S. from Florida

to California. Spain was worried about English and Russian exploration of California and French exploration of the lower Mississippi Valley. To guard against

claims on the borderlands by other countries, Spanish soldiers were sent into these lands. The soldiers built forts, called presidios. Eventually settlers arrived.

▼ **AT FIRST, FEW** Spaniards came to colonize New Spain. Then gold was discovered near Mexico City in 1521. In 1546, silver was found near Zacatecas,

about 300 miles north of Mexico City. These discoveries brought fortune hunters in search of quick riches. Eventually, settlers came who were content to

build their wealth more slowly. They established plantations, or large farms, and became the permanent residents of New Spain.





◀ **THE CAPITAL OF** the Aztec empire was Tenochtitlán. This grand city was located on a series of natural and artificial islands in a marshy lake. In 1519, it had a population of

around 400,000. Cortés and his army completely destroyed the city in 1521. On the ruins, the Spanish built Mexico City (below). Mexico City was the capital of New Spain, a vast territory. New

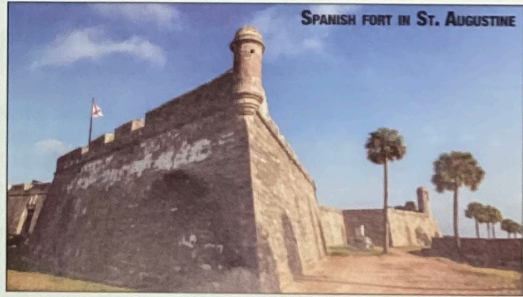
Spain stretched as far south as Panama and as far north as California and Texas. To the west it extended as far as the Philippines across the Pacific Ocean.



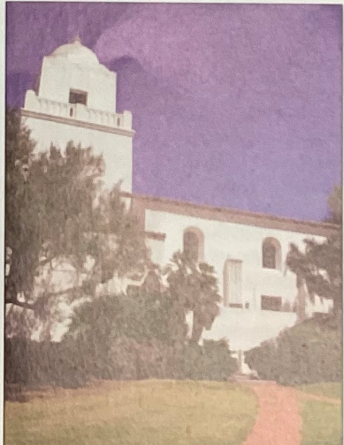
▲ **THE SETTLERS** who went to the borderlands built large estates called haciendas. There, they raised sheep and cattle to provide New Spain with meat and wool for clothing. Haciendas were huge tracts of land. Since there were few towns, the

landowners made what they needed on their haciendas. American Indians did most of the hard labor on the haciendas. Although not enslaved, they were kept in debt to the landowners, making it hard for them to leave the hacienda where they worked.

► **IN 1564, A** group of French Protestants built a settlement in Florida near what is now Jacksonville. The Spanish crown would not let this threat to their land claims go unanswered. In 1565, Pedro Menéndez de Avilés sailed from Spain with settlers. Arriving on the Florida coast, he established the settlement of Saint Augustine. It was the first permanent, or long-lasting, European settlement in what is now the United States. Menéndez de Avilés later destroyed the French settlement.



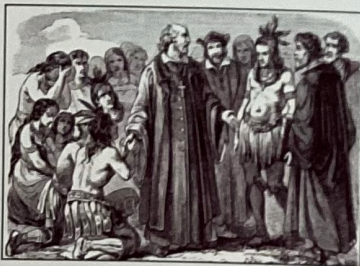
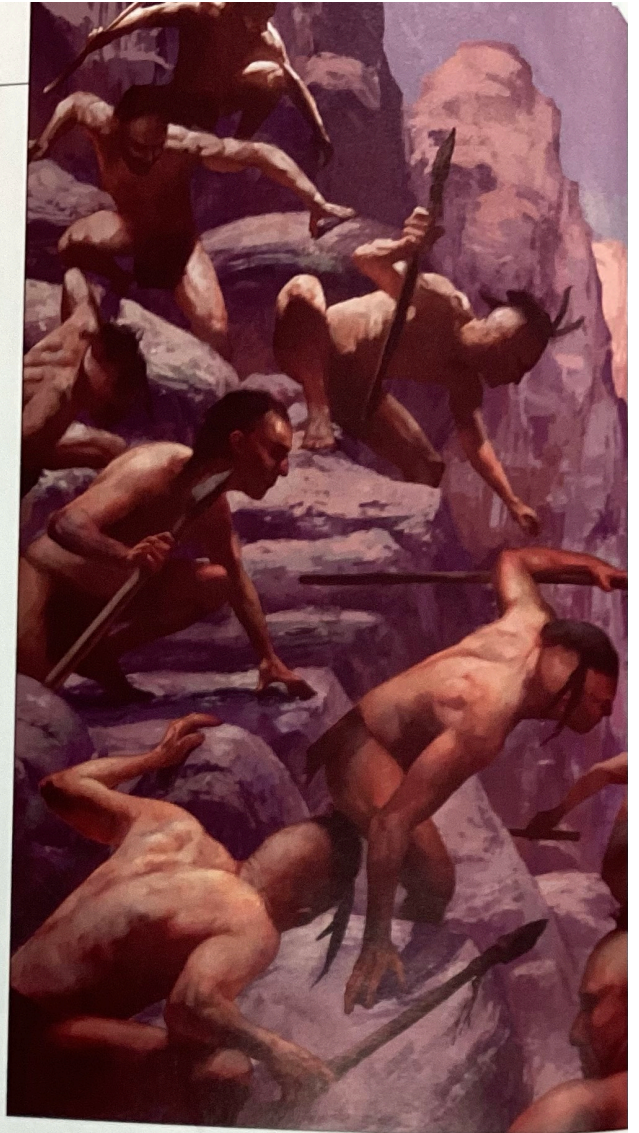
SPANISH FORT IN ST. AUGUSTINE



◀ **THE SPANISH** began exploring the coast of Alta California, or Upper California, in the 1500s. For 200 years, various plans were drawn up to settle the land. But it wasn't until 1769 that the first mission and presidio were built in what is now the city of San Diego.

# American Indians and Spanish Missionaries

The first Spaniards to come to New Spain were soldiers. They knew a lot about fighting, but they were not inclined to toil in mines or farm for food. For that kind of hard work, the early settlers of New Spain turned to the American Indian population. Under a system called the *encomienda*, the Spanish king gave the labor of specific groups of American Indians to individual settlers for life. In effect, this meant that many of the American Indians of New Spain were held in slavery. Slavery is the practice of forcing people to work against their will without pay. Many of these enslaved American Indians were overworked. They were not fed enough. They were exposed to new diseases that settlers unknowingly brought from Europe. Not surprisingly, they died in large numbers. In New Spain's first 100 years, the American Indian population went from about 25 million to 1 million.

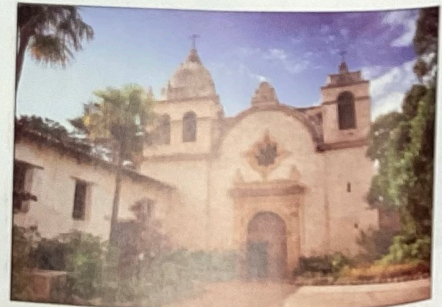


▲ **A FEW SETTLERS** of New Spain spoke out for better treatment of American Indians. One of them was Bartolomé de Las Casas. After arriving in New Spain in 1502, Las Casas took part in the *encomienda* system. For 12 years, he

owned enslaved American Indians. Eventually, he became a priest and came to see the injustice of the system. He spent the rest of his life writing about the unfair treatment of American Indians and trying without success to change the system.

▼ **AS MANY** enslaved American Indians died from mistreatment, the settlers of New Spain looked elsewhere for free labor. In 1518, they began to bring enslaved Africans to New Spain. At

first, Bartolomé de Las Casas accepted this. He saw it as a way of stopping the mistreatment of American Indians. Eventually, he spoke up for the just treatment of all human beings.



▲ **THE MAIN PURPOSE** of the missions was to convert American Indians to Christianity and the Spanish way of life. But another important goal was to use the free labor of the Indians. Mission residents had to learn Spanish. They

were expected to give up their old beliefs. Many were forced to work on the mission farms and ranches. Most missions had Spanish soldiers attached to them to guard against rebellion.



◀ **SOME AMERICAN** Indians were content to live and work at the missions. Others were not. In 1654, a priest in Durango, Mexico, reported that there had been many uprisings over a period of 50 years. He wrote, "...they are

destroying the mining and stock-raising industries while eluding capture. The Indians divide themselves into squadrons and stage ambushes along desolate stretches of road. . . ."



▲ **In 1680, a** religious leader named Popé organized a revolt against the Spanish in what is now the state of New Mexico. About 400

settlers were killed and the remaining 2,000 were driven from the province. Twelve years later, Spanish soldiers reconquered the area.



◀ **AT THE SAME TIME** that some Spanish settlers were enslaving American Indians, the Spanish king also wanted them converted to Christianity. He sent priests to establish missions, or religious settlements. At many of these missions, American Indians and missionaries lived together. Some of the missions became major population centers. Santa Fe, in the colony of New Mexico, was one of them. A system of roads tied the missions to Mexico City. It was called El Camino Real, The Royal Road.



▲ **HORSES HAD LONG** been extinct in the Americas. Spanish settlers brought them back to the continent. They also brought sheep. The presence of these animals affected the lives of many

American Indians. Horses changed the way the Plains Indians hunted and made war. The Navajo learned to raise sheep and make blankets from their wool.

