he exploration of North America was unlike he exploration of Industrial American other achievements of the age of European of the gultures and expansion. Even though many of the cultures and civilizations encountered in other continents had had little recent contact with Europeans, they were not all wholly alien. Moreover, many had dynamic economies willing to supply in bulk products that Europe lacked. Even in Mexico and Peru, whose cultures were entirely new to Europeans, strong centralized states, a relatively dense population and an available fund of gold and silver were familiar elements. Only the Caribbean islands and the vast. empty interior of South America provided a foretaste of what confronted the first explorers of North America. From the first landing of John Cabot in 1497 until the 18th century, North America remained enigmatic; its true scale was not appreciated for a long time, nor did it offer any immediate returns on the investments of explorers and their backers.

Explorers were driven by a number of pervasive myths, and dogged by a sense of disappointment once their lack of substance was revealed. The earliest chanced upon North America while seeking a route to China; Columbus died convinced that he had found an island off the Asian mainland. After Giovanni da Verrazano had explored the length of the Atlantic seaboard and the first colonial ventures had encountered a densely wooded interior and native peoples hostile to exploration inland, the search began for a route around the continent. A possible northern passage remained an English obsession: Hudson, Davis and Baffin endured hardships in the Canadian north to find a northwest sea passage to China. Even James Cook, mapping the Alaskan coast in 1778–79, felt compelled to explore major inlets in search of the elusive seaway.

French exploration of the St Lawrence river was stimulated by the idea of a sea passage through the heart of the continent. Cartier, Champlain, the Jesuit fathers, the de la Vérendryes and generations of fur trappers progressed down the St Lawrence and

1524 Giovanni da Verrazano

explores the Atlantic coastline

of North America for France

Cartier lead to the first

to settle the St Lawrence

1497 John Cabot makes

the first European landfall

of modern times in North

America, in Newfoundland

1513 Ponce de Léon begins

1550

Spanish exploration of Florida

1540-42 Coronado leads an

army northeast from Mexico

TIMELINE

1534-41 Voyages of Jacques

(unsuccessful) French attempt

1650

1608 Champlain refounds

Ouébec, then explores the

1613-15 First French

1607 Jamestown colony; first

permanent English settlement

arrive at Cape Cod

1650

1620 The Pilgrim colonists

1626 The Dutch settle New

Amsterdam (later New York)

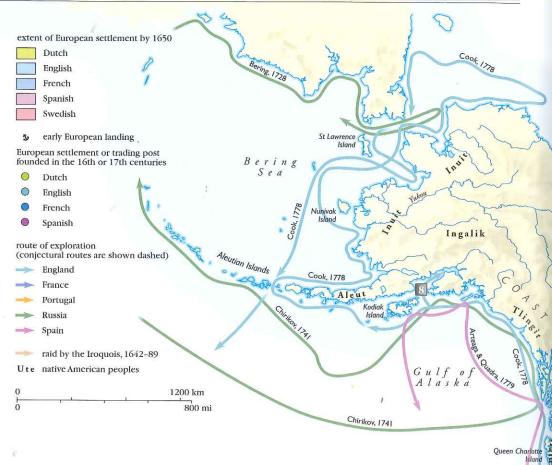
1584-90 Raleigh's Roanoke

colony fails

1630-70 French Jesuits

explore the Great Lakes

area around Lake Champlain



through the Great Lakes, fueling the myth of a route westward to the Pacific. This myth finally evaporated in the endless expanse of the Great Plains beyond Lake Manitoba. The supreme French achievement, La Salle's descent of the Mississippi in 1682, did reveal a north—south passage, yet his disappointment at finding the Gulf of Mexico, rather than the Pacific, at the mouth of the river was profound.

Initial Spanish exploration of North America from

1750

length of the Mississippi

1671 English explorers

cross the Appalachians

are the first Europeans to

1681-82 La Salle explores the

inaugurate the lower

1678-92 Henry Kelsey travels

1685-92 Fur traders reach

Great Lakes and Ohio valley

1741 Bering and his

1750

lieutenant, Chirikov, explore the south coast of Alaska

1778-79 James Cook

charts the Pacific coast

to western Canada for furs

Saskatchewan fur trade

1731-40 The de la Vérendryes

1739-40 The Mallet brothers

reach Santa Fé from the east

Mexico and the Caribbean under leaders such as de Soto and Coronado was mounted in a spirit of conquest, gold-lust and missionary zeal. Large military expeditions were equipped to build forts, establish missions and despoil the cities that reputedly lay to the north. After epic journeys, survivors of these expeditions returned exhausted and empty-handed. By the early 17th century, Spanish New Mexico was little more than a string of outposts in the pueblo villages around Santa Fé, surrounded by desert. Florida, which the Spaniards initially believed to be an island, was explored (and defended) for strategic reasons to protect the bullion fleet route to Europe. Similarly, the Spaniards began to venture up the Californian coast in the 17th century in response to a British and Russian threat,

By the 1650s the Caribbean and, to a lesser extent, the Atlantic seaboard had attracted settlers in number, but it was in the north that the true wealth of the American continent rich farmland - began to be exploited. From the outset, the Dutch New Netherland colony encouraged settlement by farmers, while the English colonies quickly developed a European-style agricultural economy. The native peoples welcomed settlers for the trade they brought, but they prevented expansion inland; the Appalachian mountains also remained a formidable barrier. It was 180 years after Cabot's landing before English traders and explorers penetrated the basin of the Ohio, after European diseases and the erosion of native cultures had weakened resistance. In the years following the British conquest of French America, the trickle of pioneers across the Appalachians and into the fertile lands of Kentucky and Tennessee became a flood, marking a new era of truly profitable exploration.

