

The exploration of North America was unlike other achievements of the age of European 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

extent of European settlement by 1650

- Dutch
- English
- French
- Spanish
- Swedish

early European landing

European settlement or trading post founded in the 16th or 17th centuries

- Dutch
- English
- French
- Spanish

route of exploration (conjectural routes are shown dashed)

- England
- France
- Portugal
- Russia
- Spain

raid by the Iroquois, 1642–89

Ute native American peoples

0 1200 km
0 800 mi

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

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.

1 A French colony was established at Fort Caroline in 1564; it was destroyed as a potential threat to the silver fleet route by a Spanish expedition in 1565.

2 English privateer Francis Drake spent five weeks with the Miwok people near modern San Francisco in 1579; he claimed the land and named it New Albion.

3 An English colony was founded on Roanoke Island by Walter Raleigh in 1584. It was resettled in 1587, but by 1590 the colony had vanished without trace.

4 Dutch merchants purchased Manhattan Island from the native Americans in 1626; the New Netherland colony was established by Peter Minuit in 1621.

5 The English Hudson's Bay Company bases were established to trade for furs with the Cree after 1670; a French expedition captured them all in 1686.

6 Spanish settlement of New Mexico was limited in the 17th century and was set back by a major native uprising 1680–1710.

7 Much of modern Texas was explored by Spanish expeditions in 1686–90, determined to end French incursions into the region.

8 Briton James Cook's exploration of "Cook's Inlet" in 1779 was prompted by a contemporary map showing Alaska as an island.

TIMELINE

	1550	1650	1750
French North America	<p>1524 Giovanni da Verrazano explores the Atlantic coastline of North America for France</p> <p>1534–41 Voyages of Jacques Cartier lead to the first (unsuccessful) French attempt to settle the St Lawrence</p>	<p>1608 Champlain refounds Québec, then explores the area around Lake Champlain</p> <p>1613–15 First French fur trading route opens</p> <p>1630–70 French Jesuits explore the Great Lakes</p>	<p>1681–82 La Salle explores the length of the Mississippi</p> <p>1731–40 The de la Vérendryes inaugurate the lower Saskatchewan fur trade</p> <p>1739–40 The Mallet brothers reach Santa Fé from the east</p>
British North America	<p>1497 John Cabot makes the first European landfall of modern times in North America, in Newfoundland</p>	<p>1584–90 Raleigh's Roanoke colony fails</p> <p>1607 Jamestown colony; first permanent English settlement</p> <p>1620 The Pilgrim colonists arrive at Cape Cod</p> <p>1626 The Dutch settle New Amsterdam (later New York)</p>	<p>1671 English explorers are the first Europeans to cross the Appalachians</p> <p>1678–92 Henry Kelsey travels to western Canada for furs</p> <p>1685–92 Fur traders reach Great Lakes and Ohio valley</p>
Spanish/West coast	<p>1513 Ponce de León begins Spanish exploration of Florida</p> <p>1540–42 Coronado leads an army northeast from Mexico</p>		<p>1741 Bering and his lieutenant, Chirikov, explore the south coast of Alaska</p> <p>1778–79 James Cook charts the Pacific coast</p>

See also 3.26 (native peoples); 4.25 (Spanish American empire); 4.27 (European colonies)

