Central America, Mexico, and the southern part of what is now the United States.

The Spanish established three kinds of settlements in New Spain. Pueblos served as trading posts and sometimes as centers of government. Priests started missions where they converted local Native Americans to Catholicism. The Spanish also built presidios, or military bases, to protect towns and missions.

To connect some of the scattered communities of New Spain, Spanish settlers built El Camino Real, or “the Royal Road.” This network of roads ran for hundreds of miles, from Mexico City to Santa Fe. The roads later stretched to settlements in California.

**Exploring the Borderlands of New Spain**

Spain’s American empire was not limited to lands taken from the conquered Aztec and Inca empires. Many other Spanish explorers came to North America. They explored the borderlands of New Spain and claimed many new lands for the Spanish crown.

**Exploring the Southeast**

In 1508 explorer Juan Ponce de León landed on the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico. By 1511 he had conquered the island for Spain and founded the city of San Juan. De León also discovered gold on Puerto Rico. Spanish officials appointed him governor of the colony.

In 1512 de León discovered the coast of present-day Florida. The next year he searched Florida for a mythical Fountain of Youth. Though he never found the fabled fountain, Ponce de León acquired royal permission to colonize Florida. However, he failed in his quest to colonize the area.

Two decades later another explorer traveled through Florida. Royal officials gave Hernando de Soto permission to explore the coastal region of the Gulf of Mexico. In 1539 his expedition landed in an area near the present-day city of Tampa Bay, Florida.

De Soto then led his men north through what is now Georgia and the Carolinas. The expedition then turned west and crossed the Appalachian Mountains. De Soto discovered the Mississippi River in 1541. The explorers then traveled west into present-day Oklahoma. De Soto died in 1542 on this journey.

**Exploring the Southwest**

The Spanish also explored what is now the southwestern United States. In 1528 explorer Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca joined conquistador Pánfilo de Narváez on an expedition to North America. Their group of 300 men first landed on the Florida coast. They faced many severe problems, including a shortage of food.
The group built boats, which made it possible for them to travel around the Florida panhandle. The explorers continued along the Gulf Coast and eventually reached the Mississippi River. Severe weather hit this group hard, and many members of the expedition died. De Vaca’s boat shipwrecked on what is now Galveston Island in Texas. Only de Vaca and three other men survived. One survivor was a Moroccan-born slave named Estevanico. His Spanish slaveholder also survived.

Each of the four survivors was captured and enslaved by Native American groups living in the area. After six years of captivity, the men finally escaped. They journeyed on foot throughout the North American Southwest, receiving help from Native Americans they met along the way. In 1536, after turning south, the group reached Spanish settlements in Mexico.

Soon after their journey ended, Estevanico’s slaveholder sold him to a Spanish viceroy. The viceroy assigned Estevanico to serve as a guide for a new expedition he was sending into the Southwest. Native Americans killed the enslaved African in 1539.

De Vaca eventually returned to Spain, where he called for better treatment of Native Americans. De Vaca later wrote about his experiences in the first European book exclusively devoted to North America. De Vaca’s book increased Spanish interest in the New World. His writings fueled the rumors that riches could be found in North America.

“For two thousand leagues did we travel, on land, and by sea in barges, besides ten months more after our rescue from captivity; untiringly did we walk across the land, . . . During all that time we crossed from one ocean to the other, . . . We heard that on the shores of the South there are pearls and great wealth, and that the richest and best is near there.”

—Cabeza de Vaca, *The Journey of Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca*

De Vaca’s account inspired other explorers to travel to North America. In 1540 Francisco Vásquez de Coronado set out to explore the North American Southwest. He wanted to find the legendary Seven Cities of Gold that were rumored to exist there. His expedition went through present-day New Mexico and Arizona, where a group of his men discovered the Grand Canyon. Coronado trekked through Texas...
and Oklahoma, going as far north as Kansas before turning around. He never found the fabled cities of gold.

**Reading Check** Comparing How were the expeditions of Ponce de León and Coronado similar?

**Spanish Treatment of Native Americans**

The journeys of the Spanish explorers allowed Spain to claim a huge empire in the Americas. Spain’s American colonies helped make the country very wealthy. From 1503 to 1660, Spanish fleets loaded with treasure carried 200 tons of gold and 18,600 tons of silver from the former Aztec and Inca empires to Spain. Mexico and Peru also grew food to help support Spain’s growing empire. However, these gains came with a price for Native Americans. Native peoples suffered greatly at the hands of the Spanish.

**Forced Labor**

By 1650 the Spanish Empire in the Americas had grown to some 3 to 4 million people. Native Americans made up about 80 percent of the population. The rest were whites, Africans, and people of mixed racial background. Settlers who came from Spain were called *peninsulares* (pay-nee-soo-LAHR-ays) and usually held the highest government positions. To reward settlers for their service to the Crown, Spain established the *encomienda* (en-koh-mee-EN-duh) system. It gave settlers the right to tax local Native Americans or to make them work. In exchange, these settlers were supposed to protect the Native American people and convert them to Christianity. Instead, most Spanish treated the Native Americans as slaves. Native Americans were forced to work in terrible conditions. They faced cruelty and desperate situations on a daily basis.

The Spanish operated many *plantations*, large farms that grew just one kind of crop. Plantations throughout the Caribbean colonies made huge profits for their owners. It took many workers to run a plantation, however, so colonists forced thousands of Native Americans to work in the fields. Indians who were taken to work on haciendas, the vast Spanish estates in Central and South America, had to raise and herd livestock. Other Native Americans were forced to endure the backbreaking work of mining gold and silver. The forced labor and harsh treatment killed many native people in New Spain.