

HERNANDO DE SOTO



Hernando De Soto was born in Spain in 1500. As a young boy he loved adventure. He heard stories of secret cities in North America that had large amounts of gold and silver. These stories were from another Spanish explorer named de Vaca. One of de Vaca's stories was of the *Seven Cities of Cibola*. De Soto was overcome with greed because of these rumored riches.

In 1531, De Soto traveled to Peru with Francisco Pizarro. He was part of Pizarro's conquest of the Inca Empire. He remained in Peru for two years.

In 1533, the King of Spain appointed De Soto to be the governor of Cuba. He was given the right to conquer and settle territory in the southeastern part of North America. This area was from Florida north to the Chesapeake Bay and south to northeastern Mexico.

De Soto landed on the western coast of Florida in 1539 with 600 men and 200 horses. He crossed the Appalachian Mountains, reached the Mississippi River, and then headed through the Ozark Mountains further west. He hoped to find gold and silver. Six months later he had found no riches. He turned back and sailed down the Mississippi to its mouth, the Gulf of Mexico.

During the four years De Soto and his men searched for gold and silver, he brutally treated many Native Americans from different tribes in the area—the Cherokee, Seminole, Creek, Appalachian, and Choctaw. De Soto often captured native leaders. Sometimes he kept them as hostages until he and his men made it safely through the territory. Other times he would cut off prisoners' right hands and noses and send them back to their families as a warning. De Soto and his men entered into violent battles with the natives. Sometimes he and his men massacred them and burnt their villages. Diseases brought by Spaniards killed many villages of Native Americans, too.

In May 1542 De Soto became ill with a fever and died. He was first buried secretly on the shores of the Mississippi River. However, his men were afraid that the Native Americans would discover his grave. His men dug him up, weighted his body with sand, and buried him in the Mississippi River. He died without ever finding treasure in his new territory. Only about 300 of the original 600 men in de Soto's expedition survived.

JUAN PONCE DE LEÓN



Juan Ponce de León was born in Spain in 1460. He trained himself to be warrior so that he could take part in the daring adventures of the time. In the early 1490s he became a soldier fighting the Muslims in southern Spain. Ponce de León sailed with Columbus on his second voyage to the Americas. He did not return to Spain, but stayed in the New World.

Ponce de León heard of gold on the island of *Borinquen* (Puerto Rico). He conquered it and claimed it for Spain. He became the governor of the island and treated the natives brutally. As a result, he was removed from office in 1511. He was allowed to search for the island of *Bimini*. From the natives, he heard of a legendary spring that gave people eternal life and health—the Fountain of Youth. In 1513, he sailed northwest from Puerto Rico with three ships and 200 men in search of this fountain, and perhaps riches. He reached the east coast of Florida and claimed this land for Spain. He named it the land *Pascua de Florida* (feast of flowers). Then he headed south in the warm current now known as the *Gulf Stream*. He sailed back to Puerto Rico never finding *Bimini*, the fountain of youth, or riches. Once again he was brutal to the natives he encountered. Back in Puerto Rico he again fought with the natives who tried to overcome the Spanish rule of their island.

Ponce de León returned to Spain and was named a Captain General in 1514. He sailed again to Puerto Rico, still in search of *Bimini*. In 1521 with 200 men, he landed on the west coast of Florida. The Native American warriors living there attacked them. Ponce de León was wounded with a poisoned arrow. He died in Cuba from his wounds and was buried in Puerto Rico.

VASCO DE BALBOA



Vasco de Balboa was born in Spain in 1475. His father was not a wealthy man, so Balboa worked for a rich merchant in the coastal city of Moguer. Many ships heading for the New World left from there. Balboa often heard the stories the sailors told of their voyages. He wanted to join them.

When he was 18, Balboa sailed with Columbus on his second voyage to the New World. Later he settled on the island of *Hispaniola* (now Haiti/Dominican Republic) He hoped to find gold there

When Balboa was 26 he joined a Spanish settlement expedition to South America. But because there were not enough men, food, or supplies, no settlement was ever started. Balboa returned to Hispaniola and raised pigs for a living. In 1506, he discovered an island near by and named it *Borinquen*. It was later renamed Puerto Rico. He became the island's governor, but Balboa wanted more wealth and power.

In 1510, Balboa joined another Spanish expedition to start a colony in South America. This settlement failed, too, because of the dangerous natives and lack of food. Balboa and the others moved westerly and landed where he had heard the natives were friendlier. There they established the city of Darien in what is now Panama. Balboa became the governor and explored further into Panama. He conquered some natives but made agreements with others.

In 1511, some native told him of a sea and riches on the other side of the Isthmus of Panama. Balboa and 90 Spaniards crossed the isthmus to search for the sea and riches. Along the way he fought and killed hundreds of natives. He even destroyed one native village. Three weeks later, the Indian guides told Balboa if he stood on a nearby mountain he would be able to see the sea. When he did so, he became the first European to see the Pacific Ocean He named it *Mar del Sur* (South Sea). Balboa and his men continued on and found gold and pearls. Balboa sent these treasures back to King Ferdinand. He hoped this would make him famous.

Once the King learned of Balboa's discoveries, he appointed him to serve under the new governor of Darien. But the new governor was jealous of Balboa. In 1518, he accused Balboa of treason and had him arrested. After a speedy trial Balboa was sentenced to death. In January 1519, Balboa and four of his friends were beheaded.