

The Conquistadores

It was the Spanish who started the lasting European occupation of America. When **Columbus** returned to Spain he took back with him some jewelery that he obtained in America. This jewelery was important because it was made of gold. In the next fifty years, thousands of treasure-hungry Spanish adventurers crossed the Atlantic ocean to search for more of the precious metal, it was a lust for gold that led **HERNAN CORTEZ** to conquer the **AZTECS** in the 1520's ; the **AZTECS** were a wealthy city built by **Amerindian** people who lived in what is today **Mexico**. In the 1530's, the same lust for gold caused **FRANCISCO PIZARRO** to attack the equally wealthy empire of the **INCAS** of **PERU**. A stream of loated treasure began to flow across the Atlantic to Spain from a new empire built up by such conquerors « **Conquistadores** » - in Central and South America.

In the years that followed, other Spanish **conquistadores** took the search for gold to North America. Between 1539 and 1543 **HERNANDO DE SOTO** and **FRANCISCO CORONADO**, working separately, explored much of the southern part of what is now the **United States**, **DE SOTO** landed in **FLORIDA** from **CUBA**, he led his expedition westward, discovering the **MISSISSIPPI** river and traveling beyond it into **TEXAS** and **OKLAHOMA**. **CORONADO** traveled north from **MEXICO**, searching for the « **Seven Cities of Gold** », that **Amerindian** legends said lay hidden somewhere in the desert. He never found them, but he and his men became the first Europeans to see the **Grand Canyon** of the **Colorado** river, and they journeyed as far as **KANSAS** before returning to **MEXICO**. The journeys of men such as **DE SOTO** and **CORONADO** gave Spain a claim to a large amount of land in North America. They also led to the founding of some of the earliest permanent European settlements there. In 1565 Spanish settlers founded **ST AUGUSTINE** on the coast of present-day **FLORIDA**. In 1609 other settlers founded **SANTA FE** in **NEW MEXICO**.

The growing wealth of **Spain** made other European nations envious, they became eager to share the riches of the New World. In 1497 King **HENRY VII** of England hired an Italian seaman named **JOHN CABOT** to explore the new lands and to look again for a passage to **ASIA**, **CABOT**, sailed far to the North of the route **Columbus** had followed, eventually he reached the rocky coast of **NEWFOUNDLAND**, at first **CABOT** thought that this was **CHINA**. A year later he made a second westward crossing of the Atlantic. This time he sailed south along the coast of North America.

The **French** also sent explorers to North America, in 1524, the French King **Francis 1**, sent an Italian sailor named **GIOVANNI DE VERRAZANO**, for the same purpose as **Columbus** and **Cabot** – to find lands rich in gold and a new sea route to **ASIA**. **VERRAZANO** sailed the full length of the east coast of America, but found neither, however, he anchored his ship in what is now the Harbor of **New York**. Today a bridge which carries his name, the **VERRAZANO narrows bridge**, is one of the city's most impressive sights.

Ten years later another **French** explorer, a fisherman from Normandy named **JAQUE CARTIER**, discovered the **ST Laurence** river, he returned to **France** and reported that the forests lining the river's shores were full of fur-bearing animals and that its waters were full of fish. The next year he sailed further up the river, reaching the site of the present day city of **MONTREAL**. **CARTIER** failed to find the way to **ASIA** that he was looking for, but he gave **France** a claim to what would later become **CANADA**.