



Francisco Vázquez de Coronado: The Search for the Seven Cities of Gold

By Curtis Jerry Smothers

Chasing a Legend

Few expeditions in North American history were driven by greater optimism—or ended in greater disappointment—than that of **Francisco Vázquez de Coronado**. Between 1540 and 1542, the young Spanish governor led one of the largest exploring parties ever assembled in the New World in search of the legendary **Seven Cities of Cibola**, rumored to possess fabulous riches equal to those of the Aztecs and Incas.

Instead of finding cities paved with gold, Coronado discovered the pueblos of the American Southwest, the vast Great Plains, and some of the most spectacular landscapes in North America.

The Governor's Ambition

At only twenty-nine years of age, Coronado served as governor of **New Galicia** in western Mexico. He enjoyed the confidence of **Don Antonio de Mendoza**, the first Viceroy of New Spain, who approved an ambitious expedition after the Dominican friar **Marcos de Niza** reported seeing one of the legendary Seven Cities of Cibola.

Spanish experience in Mexico and Peru had taught that large, settled civilizations often possessed enormous wealth. The successes of Hernán Cortés and Francisco Pizarro made the reports seem entirely believable.

In reality, Fray Marcos had glimpsed the **Zuni pueblo of Hawikuh** in present-day New Mexico—a substantial Indigenous settlement, but hardly the magnificent city of gold he imagined.

The Long March North

In 1540, Coronado departed Mexico with hundreds of soldiers, Indigenous allies, priests, servants, and more than 500 horses, accompanied by enormous herds of livestock and pack animals.

After months of exhausting travel through deserts and mountains, the expedition finally reached Cíbola.

The weary conquistadors expected to see glittering cities. Instead, as one chronicler described it, they found only "a little pueblo all crumpled together."

Coronado himself later wrote to the Viceroy that Fray Marcos "has not told the truth in a single thing that he said."

Still Searching

Many leaders would have abandoned the expedition after such a crushing disappointment.

Coronado did not.

Instead, reports of yet another fabulous kingdom—**Quivira**—rekindled hopes of immense riches. Guided by an Indigenous informant known to the Spaniards as "**The Turk**," Coronado led a small force northeast across the Great Plains into present-day Kansas.

Once again, the promised cities proved imaginary. When the deception became apparent, Coronado ordered the execution of The Turk, ending another chapter in the long search for mythical wealth.

Firsts in American History

Although Coronado never found gold, his expedition achieved several historic milestones.

One of his lieutenants, **García López de Cárdenas**, became the first European known to view the **Grand Canyon** from its South Rim. Members of the expedition were also among the first Europeans to hunt the **American bison**, describing enormous herds stretching across the plains.

Coronado's journey provided Europeans with their first detailed descriptions of the peoples, geography, plants, and animals of the American Southwest and Great Plains.

Horses: Spain's Greatest Advantage

One of Coronado's greatest military assets was his cavalry.

The Indigenous peoples of North America had never seen horses before the Spaniards reintroduced them to the continent. Mounted soldiers could move with remarkable speed, strike from an elevated position, and often frightened opponents unfamiliar with cavalry.

The expedition began with more than **550 horses**, giving the Spaniards a tremendous tactical advantage in battle and making rapid exploration possible across vast distances.

Relations with Indigenous Peoples

Unlike some conquistadors, Coronado began his expedition under orders from the Viceroy to treat Indigenous peoples fairly and to obtain provisions through trade whenever possible.

Relations, however, quickly deteriorated as the large expedition consumed local food supplies. Fighting erupted with several Pueblo communities, including the Zuni of Hawikuh. Although Coronado later attempted to establish peaceful relations, his army left a trail of destruction in several villages as it continued its fruitless search for riches.

A Failure—or a Success?

Measured against its original goal, Coronado's expedition was an unmistakable failure. It found no cities of gold, no wealthy empire, and no profitable new colony. The enormous undertaking consumed vast resources and damaged Coronado's reputation, forcing him into retirement shortly after his return to Mexico.

Yet history has judged the expedition differently.

Coronado mapped immense regions previously unknown to Europeans, expanded Spain's geographic knowledge of North America, and demonstrated that no great empire existed beyond Mexico. In doing so, he helped define the northern limits of Spain's ambitions on the continent.

His quest for the Seven Cities of Gold failed, but his remarkable journey opened a new chapter in the exploration of the American Southwest and remains one of the great adventures of the Age of Discovery.