

Europeans to America Prior to the Pilgrims

The first Europeans to arrive in North America were likely the Norse, traveling west from Greenland, where Erik the Red had founded a settlement around the year 985. In 1001 his son Leif is thought to have explored the northeast coast of what is now Canada and spent at least one winter there.

While Norse sagas suggest that Viking sailors explored the Atlantic coast of North America down as far as the Bahamas, such claims remain unproven. In 1963, however, the ruins of some Norse houses dating from that era were discovered at L'Anse-aux-Meadows in northern Newfoundland, thus supporting at least some of the claims the Norse sagas make.

Christopher Columbus left Spain in August, 1492, sailed directly westward, and in October came upon an outlying island of the West Indies. Although Columbus saw some of the other islands, he never touched the continent of North America.

In 1497, just five years after Christopher Columbus landed in the Caribbean looking for a western route to Asia, a Venetian sailor named John Cabot arrived in Newfoundland on a mission for the British king.

Cabot's journey was later to provide the basis for British claims to North America. It also opened the way to the rich fishing grounds off George's Banks, to which European fishermen, particularly the Portuguese, were soon making regular visits.

Columbus (who was looking for a new route to India, China, Japan and the 'Spice Islands' of Indonesia to bring back cargoes of silk and spices (ginger turmeric and cinnamon)) never saw the mainland United States, but the first explorations of the continental United States were launched from the Spanish possessions that he helped establish. The first of these took place in 1513 when a group of men under Juan Ponce de Leon landed on the Florida coast near the present city of St. Augustine.



John Cabot

With the conquest of Mexico in 1522, the Spanish further solidified their position in the Western Hemisphere. The ensuing discoveries added to Europe's knowledge of what was now named America - after the Italian Amerigo Vespucci, who wrote a widely popular account of his voyages to a "New World."

By 1529 reliable maps of the Atlantic coastline from Labrador to Tierra del Fuego had been drawn up, although it would take more than another century before hope of discovering a "Northwest Passage" to Asia would be completely abandoned.

Among the most significant early Spanish explorations was that of Hernando De Soto, a veteran conquistador who had accompanied Francisco Pizarro during the conquest of Peru. Leaving Havana in 1539, De Soto's expedition landed in Florida and ranged through the southeastern United States as far as the Mississippi River in search of riches.



1562 Map of America by Diego Gutiérrez

Another Spaniard, Francisco Coronado, set out from Mexico in 1540 in search of the mythical Seven Cities of Cibola. Coronado's travels took him to the Grand Canyon and Kansas, but failed to reveal the gold or treasure his men sought.

However, Coronado's party did leave the peoples of the region a remarkable, if unintended gift: enough horses escaped from his party to transform life on the Great Plains. Within a few generations, the Plains Indians had become masters of horsemanship, greatly expanding the range and scope of their activities.

After the Spaniards came the French explorers and adventurers. Three things these adventurers sought in the New World - precious metals, the fountain of perpetual youth, and a passage to the East Indies. They had no idea how far westward the continent extended, and wherever they came upon a deep bay or a wide river, they hoped that by following it up they should come out on the other side. (Johnson)

While the Spanish were pushing up from the south, the northern portion of the present-day United States was slowly being revealed through the journeys of men such as Giovanni da Verrazano. A Florentine who sailed for the French, Verrazano made landfall in North Carolina in 1524, then sailed north along the Atlantic coast past what is now New York harbor.

A decade later, the Frenchman Jacques Cartier set sail with the hope - like the other Europeans before him - of finding a sea passage to Asia. Cartier's expeditions along the St. Lawrence River laid the foundations for the French claims to North America, which were to last until 1763.

Following the collapse of their first Quebec colony in the 1540s, French Huguenots attempted to settle the northern coast of Florida two decades later. The Spanish, viewing the French as a threat to their trade route along the Gulf Stream, destroyed the colony in 1565.

Ironically, the leader of the Spanish forces, Pedro Menendez, would soon establish a town not far away - St. Augustine. It was the first permanent European settlement in what would become the United States.

The great wealth which poured into Spain from the colonies in Mexico, the Caribbean and Peru provoked great interest on the part of the other European powers. With time, emerging maritime nations such as England, drawn in part by Francis Drake's successful raids on Spanish treasure ships, began to take interest in the New World.

The English were slowest of all to think of profiting by Columbus's discovery, and nearly a century rolled by after that event before ships from England crossed the Atlantic for discovery and conquest.

But when they did turn their attention to the New World, while they still hoped to find there a passage to India, and to gather mineral treasures, they went with the idea of planting colonies, which the Spaniards and the French had not dreamed of. And this, which is the only sure conquest, finally gave them possession of the largest and fairest part of the new continent. (Johnson)

About 1583, Sir Humphrey Gilbert, with a small fleet and a few colonists, landed in the harbor of St. John's, Newfoundland, and claimed the whole island as British territory. But on the return voyage all the vessels were lost except one, and Sir Humphrey himself perished.

Sir Humphrey's half-brother, Sir Walter Raleigh, made the earliest practical and determined effort to plant an English colony on this continent. In 1584 he obtained from Queen Elizabeth a charter "for the discovery and planting of new lands in America."

This gave him "free liberty and license from time to time, and at all times forever hereafter, to discover, search, find out, and view such remote, heathen, and barbarous lands, countries and territories, not actually possessed by any Christian prince, nor inhabited by Christian people, as to him, his heirs and assigns, and to every or any of them, shall seem good; and the same to have, hold, occupy, and enjoy for ever." (Johnson)

This expedition was only for discovery and exploration, and in a few weeks the ships returned to England, taking with them two Indians.

They gave such glowing accounts of the country - which henceforth was called Virginia - that plans were laid at once for sending out a colony. All was ready by the next spring, and a fleet of seven vessels sailed in April, 1585, "with one hundred householders and many things necessary to begin a new state." (Johnson)

In 1585 Raleigh established the first British colony in North America, on Roanoke Island off the coast of North Carolina. the first act was to restore to their friends the two Indians who had been taken to England.

The colony was later abandoned. Sir Walter Raleigh fitted out another colony, which sailed in the spring of 1587; the second effort also proved a failure.

The failure that attended all these efforts of the hopeful and energetic Raleigh was probably due, if not wholly, to the fact that he did not himself accompany and command any of his expeditions.

And, the main reason that he did not go with the ships was, that he was a great favorite with Queen Elizabeth, and she was not willing to let him risk himself in such adventures. (Johnson)

It would be 20 years before the British would try again. This time - at Jamestown in 1607 - the colony would succeed, and North America would enter a new era. (Alonzo L Hamby)



Then, on September 6 (September 16), the Mayflower departed from Plymouth, England, and headed for America. The voyage itself across the Atlantic Ocean took 66 days, from their departure on September 6 (September 16), until Cape Cod was sighted on November 9 (November 19), 1620.



As the Mayflower approached land, the crew spotted Cape Cod just as the sun rose on November 9 (November 19). The Pilgrims decided to head south, to the mouth of the Hudson River in New York, where

they intended to make their plantation. However, as the Mayflower headed south, it encountered some very rough seas, and nearly shipwrecked.

The Pilgrims then decided, rather than risk another attempt to go south, they would just stay and explore Cape Cod. They turned back north, rounded the tip, and anchored in what is now Provincetown Harbor. The Pilgrims would spend the next month and a half exploring Cape Cod, trying to decide where they would build their plantation. (Mayflower History, Caleb Johnson)

The early 1600s saw the beginning of a great tide of emigration from Europe to North America. Spanning more than three centuries, this movement grew from a trickle of a few hundred English colonists to a flood of millions of newcomers. Impelled by powerful and diverse motivations, they built a new civilization on the northern part of the continent.

The first English immigrants to what is now the United States crossed the Atlantic long after thriving Spanish colonies had been established in Mexico, the West Indies and South America. Like all early travelers to the New World, they came in small, overcrowded ships. During their six- to 12-week voyages, they lived on meager rations. Many died of disease; ships were often battered by storms and some were lost at sea.

Most European emigrants left their homelands to escape political oppression, to seek the freedom to practice their religion, or for adventure and opportunities denied them at home.

Between 1620 and 1635, economic difficulties swept England. Many people could not find work. Even skilled artisans could earn little more than a bare living. Poor crop yields added to the distress. In addition, the Industrial Revolution had created a burgeoning textile industry, which demanded an ever-increasing supply of wool to keep the looms running. Landlords enclosed farmlands and evicted the peasants in favor of sheep cultivation. Colonial expansion became an outlet for this displaced peasant population.

The colonists' first glimpse of the new land was a vista of dense woods. The settlers might not have survived had it not been for the help of friendly Indians, who taught them how to grow native plants - pumpkin, squash, beans and corn.

In addition, the vast, virgin forests, extending nearly 1,300-miles along the Eastern seaboard, proved a rich source of game and firewood. They also provided abundant raw materials used to build houses, furniture, ships and profitable cargoes for export.

Although the new continent was remarkably endowed by nature, trade with Europe was vital for articles the settlers could not produce. The coast served the immigrants well. The whole length of shore provided innumerable inlets and harbors. Only two areas - North Carolina and southern New Jersey - lacked harbors for ocean-going vessels.

Majestic rivers - the Kennebec, Hudson, Delaware, Susquehanna, Potomac and numerous others - linked lands between the coast and the Appalachian Mountains with the sea. Only one river, however, the St. Lawrence - dominated by the French in Canada - offered a water passage to the Great Lakes and into the heart of the continent.

Dense forests, the resistance of some Indian tribes and the formidable barrier of the Appalachian Mountains discouraged settlement beyond the coastal plain. Only trappers and traders ventured into the wilderness. For the first hundred years the colonists built their settlements compactly along the coast.

Political considerations influenced many people to move to America. In the 1630s, arbitrary rule by England's Charles I gave impetus to the migration to the New World. The subsequent revolt and triumph of Charles' opponents under Oliver Cromwell in the 1640s led many cavaliers - "king's men" - to cast their lot in Virginia.

In the German-speaking regions of Europe, the oppressive policies of various petty princes - particularly with regard to religion - and the devastation caused by a long series of wars helped swell the movement to America in the late 17th and 18th centuries.

The coming of colonists in the 17th century entailed careful planning and management, as well as considerable expense and risk. Settlers had to be transported nearly 3,100-miles across the sea. They needed utensils, clothing, seed, tools, building materials, livestock, arms and ammunition.

In contrast to the colonization policies of other countries and other periods, the emigration from England was not directly sponsored by the government but by private groups of individuals whose chief motive was profit. (Alonzo L Hamby)

The information here is taken directly from Outline of US History, Alonzo L Hamby; Captain John Smith (1579-1631), Rossiter Johnson.

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the Mayflower, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young