

Biographies

Hernando De Soto

Hernando De Soto (1500?-1542) was a Spanish explorer who led the first European expedition to cross the Mississippi River. He was known as a courageous explorer who helped conquer the New World for Spain, but in their search for riches, De Soto and his men tortured and killed many Indians.

De Soto was born in the province of Extremadura in Spain, but came to the Americas as a teenager. His first explorations were in the tropical rain forests of Panama as part of expeditions to search for wealth and enslave Indians. In the early 1530s, De Soto joined the expedition led by Francisco Pizarro against the empire of the Inca Indians in what is now Peru. De Soto helped Pizarro capture Cusco, the Inca's capital, in 1533.

De Soto returned to Spain in 1536. Having looted treasures during the Inca conquest, he was a rich man. He sought his own command in the New World and was appointed governor of Cuba. King Charles I of Spain also authorized De Soto to conquer and colonize the territory that now comprises the southeastern United States. In 1539, De Soto landed with his army of over 600 men and horses near present-day Tampa Bay. In his search for gold and to colonize the region, De Soto planned to march through Indian territories, capturing the chiefs and holding hundreds of Indians prisoners for ransom. Beginning in spring 1540, the army traveled through Georgia and the Carolinas and crossed the Great Smoky Mountains before heading south through Georgia and Alabama. In October 1540, the Choctaw ambushed De Soto's army at the town of Mabila, located south of present-day Montgomery, Alabama. Although he won the battle, De Soto's army retreated to the north. They explored the Mississippi area, crossed the Mississippi River, and crossed through Arkansas and other present-day states west of the river. On May 21, 1542, while camped by the Mississippi River, De Soto died from a fever.

Rene-Robert Cavalier La Salle

Rene-Robert Cavalier La Salle (1643-1687), was a French explorer who led the first European expedition down the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico. La Salle claimed the entire Mississippi Valley for France.

La Salle was born Rene-Robert Cavalier in Rouen, France. He took the name La Salle from the name of his family's estate. In 1666, La Salle sailed to Canada, where France had established a colony. La Salle purchased land near Montreal and became a prosperous fur trader. Through his trading he heard of two great rivers to the southwest, the Mississippi and the Ohio. The Indians thought these rivers flowed into the sea. La Salle believed that one or both of the rivers was a route through North America to the Pacific Ocean. In 1669, he set out in search of the rivers.

From 1669 to 1673, La Salle traveled through the vast interior of North America, perhaps reaching Ohio. By the end of his exploration, he was convinced the Mississippi River emptied into the Gulf of Mexico.

La Salle returned to France in 1674. King Louis XIV granted him land that included Fort Frontenac, now the city of Kingston, Ontario, Canada. He set up a fur trading post at the fort and became one of the most powerful people in Canada. In 1677, he returned to France to get permission from King Louis XIV to explore the Mississippi River. In 1679, La Salle launched an expedition to allow France to gain control of the Great Lakes region. One year later, he founded the first European settlement in what is now Illinois. Fort Crevecoeur (Fort Heartbreak) was on the Illinois River, near present-day Peoria.

La Salle returned to Canada but came back to the Illinois region in late 1681. A rebellion by some of its residents had destroyed Fort Crevecoeur. With approximately 20 Frenchmen and around 30 Indians, La Salle traveled in canoes down the Illinois River to the Mississippi. On February 13, 1682, the party began its trip down the Mississippi River. They reached the Gulf of Mexico on April 9, 1682. Near the mouth of the Mississippi, La Salle put up a cross and a column bearing the French coat of arms. He claimed the territory drained by the Mississippi and its tributaries for France. This area extended from the Great Lakes on the north to the Gulf of Mexico on the south, and from the Appalachian Mountains on the east to the Rocky Mountains on the west. In honor of King Louis XIV, La Salle named the region Louisiana.

Between 1682 and 1685, La Salle established two settlements named Fort Saint Louis. The first on a bluff along the Illinois River, in present-day Starved Rock State Park, and the second was located near Matagorda Bay, about 80 miles east of what is now Corpus Christi, Texas. The second colony was threatened by Indians and lost many colonists to disease. Because the colony desperately needed help, in 1687, La Salle led a small group on an overland march to the Mississippi. Because they could not find the river, the men rebelled and killed La Salle.

Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville

Sieur de Bienville (1680-1768) was a French-Canadian explorer and administrator. Born Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne in Montreal, he was given the title Sieur de Bienville in 1691. He was the son of a wealthy fur trader and the brother of Sieur d'Iberville. In 1699, Bienville and his brother explored the region around the mouth of the Mississippi River.

Bienville was a leader of the French settlement of Louisiana, serving as governor from 1701 to 1712 and from 1732 to 1743. He was also acting governor from 1716 to 1717. Bienville maintained good relations with neighboring Indians and helped turn Louisiana from an isolated outpost into an established colony.

Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur d' Iberville

Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur d' Iberville (1661-1706), was a French-Canadian trader, soldier, naval officer, and explorer. He was son of a wealthy fur trader and the brother of Sieur de Bienville. Iberville founded the colony of Louisiana.

During King William's War (1689-1697), Iberville was a leader of the French forces fighting the British. After the war, in 1698, The king of France commissioned Iberville to explore the mouth of the Mississippi River and set up a fort. In 1669, Iberville and his brother Sieur de Bienville reached the mouth of the river in 1699. Iberville established Fort Maurepas on Biloxi Bay, at present-day Ocean Springs, Mississippi. The first French settlement in the Mississippi Valley, Old Biloxi, grew up around Fort Maurepas.