



I. The Caribbean
Columbus's first voyage in 1492 opened the way for European exploration and colonization of the Americas. During his second voyage (1493–1496) Columbus explored the coasts of Jamaica, Cuba, and Hispaniola. On the third voyage (1498–1500) Columbus planned to explore to the south of his earlier discoveries. During his final expedition he explored the coast of Jamaica, the southern shore of Cuba, and the east coast of Central America.

In 1513 Vasco Núñez de Balboa was the first European to look upon the Pacific Ocean from the shores of the New World. It took him about 25 days to cross the Isthmus of Panama and reach the Pacific Ocean, which Balboa called the 'South Sea'. Balboa took possession of the ocean and all lands washed by it in the name of the Spanish monarch.

II. Mexico and the West Coast
Juan de Grijalva led the expedition that explored the Yucatán Peninsula and mapped the part of the Mexican coastline. The Spanish dream of finding great riches in America was realized when Hernán Cortés conquered the Aztec Empire in 1519–21. The Spaniards destroyed its capital city Tenochtitlán and built Mexico City on its ruins. Cortés then continued to explore the northwestern part of Mexico and discovered the Baja California Peninsula. In 1539 the Gulf of California was discovered, originally named the 'Sea of Cortes'.

Few years later Francisco Vázquez de Coronado led an expedition from Mexico to present-day Kansas through parts of the southwestern United States. His expedition marked the first European sightings of the Grand Canyon and the Colorado River.

III. The Gulf of Mexico and the East Coast
Juan Ponce de León led the first known European expedition to Florida which he thought was an island and named it after the Spanish Eastern feast 'Pascua Florida'. In 1519 another Spanish explorer Alonso Álvarez de Pineda verified that Florida was a peninsula. Pineda's expedition also established the remainder of the boundaries of the Gulf of Mexico, while disproving the idea of a sea passage to Asia. The first expedition deep into the territory of the modern-day United States was led by the Hernando de Soto who is also the first documented European to have crossed the Mississippi River.

The first description of the northeastern coast of North America was given by Italian explorer Giovanni da Verrazzano in the service of French king. He also gave France its first claim to American lands by right of discovery.

IV. The Gulf of Saint Lawrence and the Northern Region
In the early 1500s French explorer Jacques Cartier continued in French exploration of the northeastern coast of North America. He tried to find a sea passage to the East Indies there but instead he discovered the St. Lawrence River and opened Canada to European settlement.

At the end of the 16th century English explorers were searching for the Northwest Passage in the northern part of the continent. Sir Martin Frobisher reached the Baffin Island in the part of present-day Frobisher Bay and discovered the Hudson Strait. During three voyages another Englishman John Davis rediscovered Greenland, which had been lost to Europeans since the decline of its Viking settlements and on his third expedition he sailed as far north as 72° 12' N.

Data sources:
Natural Earth Data - vector data (www.naturalearthdata.com)
Encyclopedia Britannica Kids - Early Exploration of the Americas (kids.britannica.com)
Wikipedia - information about explorers (en.wikipedia.org)

Cartography by Petra Jilková,
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