



## Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca Spanish Explorer



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*Cabeza de Vaca (1490?–1560?) lived for years among Native Americans as a trader and healer. He blazed new trails for later Spanish exploration of the American continent.*

Cabeza de Vaca was born around 1490 in Jerez de la Frontera, Spain. He joined the Spanish army in 1511.

**Arrival in Florida** In 1527 Cabeza de Vaca was appointed royal treasurer for an ill-fated expedition to Florida commanded by Pánfilo de Narváez. When the expedition arrived off the coast of Florida, Narváez split his land and sea forces. He led a large group inland to look for gold. Finding none, the Spaniards returned to the coast but found that their ships had sailed without them.

The deserted Spaniards decided to build new boats and sail to the Spanish settlement of Pánuco in north-eastern Mexico. They set sail in September of 1528. Most of the men drowned in a storm. Cabeza de Vaca and about 60 others came ashore on an island off the coast of Texas. Many of them died during the harsh winter that followed. In the spring, the survivors—by then only about 15—headed for the mainland, leaving behind Cabeza de Vaca because he was too sick to travel.

**Life Among the Native Americans** Cabeza de Vaca later crossed to the mainland and traveled west, trying to reach Pánuco. For several years he wandered among the Native American groups in eastern Texas as a trader. Along the way he gained a reputation as a healer and medicine man. According to some accounts, he was held as a slave at times.

In the early winter of 1533, Cabeza de Vaca encountered three other survivors of the original expedition, who were being held by Native Americans as slaves. Later, the men escaped, and the four continued their journey to Mexico. Upon finally reaching Mexico City, the group was warmly welcomed by Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza.

**Return to Spain** Cabeza de Vaca returned to Spain in 1537. Although he had experienced only hardship on his long trip, he reported legends that he had heard

about fabulous riches to be found in the Seven Golden Cities of Cíbola, which were said to lie somewhere beyond the region he had traveled. But the true riches he brought back were his descriptions of what is now the southwestern United States, its people, and its animals. These included the opossum, armadillo, Gila monster, and bison.

**Imprisonment and Deportation** In 1540 Cabeza de Vaca was named captain general of Spanish settlements on the Rio de la Plata in what is now Paraguay. He was later imprisoned by a rebel governor and deported to Spain in 1545. Charged with trying to subvert the authority of the king, he was found guilty and condemned to exile in Africa.

One source states that, after his trial, Cabeza de Vaca was cleared of all charges by King Charles I and lived in well-deserved honor until 1557. According to another account, the verdict was upheld, but he received a lightened sentence after he appealed. This same source indicates that he died in poverty sometime after 1556.

### Review Questions

1. After arriving in Florida, why did Narváez lead a group inland?
2. Why was Cabeza de Vaca left behind at the end of the first winter?

### Critical Thinking

3. **Making Inferences** How do you know that the Native Americans of eastern Texas respected Cabeza de Vaca?
4. **Drawing Conclusions** What was the importance of Cabeza de Vaca's first trip to the North American continent?