

# First Encounters

## Accounts of Exploration and Exploitation

When Christopher Columbus landed on a tiny Caribbean island in 1492, he called the inhabitants Indians because he thought he was near the East Indies. One of the first men to try to communicate with Columbus inadvertently cut his hand on Columbus's sword because he didn't know what a sword was. Such events—mistaken identity and injury—marked the first recorded encounter between the native people of the Americas and the Europeans who were to come in increasing numbers over the next 500 years.

Although the first explorers' motivations for coming to the Americas were complex, many came for the reason people often seek out dangers—and challenges: a desire for fame and adventure. In addition, the early explorers expected to find great riches. European rulers had already sent explorers to India and China to bring back spices, silks, gold, jewelry, and other luxuries. Columbus, of course, was looking for a shortcut to these countries when he unexpectedly bumped into a new world. Once the European monarchs realized that Columbus had led the way to two previously unknown continents, they put their best explorers to work finding out what wealth they could gain from these new lands.

Not all motivations for coming to the Americas were selfish ones, however. Reports of the existence of people in the Americas stirred many to come to spread Christianity. Others, such as the English Puritans, came seeking the religious freedom that they were denied in their homeland. Nevertheless, for both Catholics and Protestants, Christianity was the only true religion. People who



The Landing of Columbus at San Salvador (Guanahani), October 12, 1492.  
The Granger Collection.

## Voices from the TIMES


from *The Log of  
Christopher Columbus*



Friday, October 12, 1492

No sooner had we concluded the formalities of taking possession of the island than people began to come to the beach, all as naked as their mothers bore them, and the women also, although I did not see more than one very young girl. All those that I saw were young people, none of whom was over 30 years old. They are very well-built people, with handsome bodies and very fine faces, though their appearance is marred somewhat by very broad heads and foreheads, more so than I have ever seen in any other race. Their eyes are large and very pretty, and their skin is the color of Canary Islanders or of sunburned peasants, not at all black, as would be expected because we are on an east-west line with Hierro in the Canaries. These are tall people and their legs, with no exceptions, are quite straight, and none of them has a paunch. They are, in fact, well proportioned. Their hair is not kinky, but straight, and coarse like horsehair. They wear it short over the eyebrows, but they have a long hank in the back that they never cut. Many of the natives paint their faces; others paint their whole bodies; some, only the eyes or nose. Some are painted black, some white, some red; others are of different colors.

The people here called this island *Guanahani* in their language, and their speech is very fluent, although I do not understand any of it. They are friendly and well-dispositioned people who bear no arms except for small spears, and they have no iron. I showed one my sword, and through ignorance he grabbed it by the blade and cut himself. Their spears are made of wood, to which they attach a fish tooth at one end, or some other sharp thing.



were not Christian had to be converted by persuasion or by force. Those who rejected Christianity were considered enemies of God, suitable only for enslavement or death.—

The story of cultural contact, like the story of America itself, would not be complete without the experiences of the Africans who were brought here as slaves. The European trade in enslaved Africans had been started by the Portuguese during the 1400s, and enslaved Africans accompanied most of the Spanish and Portuguese explorers in the Americas. In fact, one of the three men who survived with Cabeza de Vaca on his disastrous journey was an enslaved African named Estéban.

Africans were first brought in large numbers to the West Indies to provide labor for the vast sugar plantations. At first, the Spanish plantation owners had tried to use Indian labor, but the native peoples proved too susceptible to European diseases and unable to withstand the harsh treatment of their masters. Africans took their place. Before long, English colonists were also participating in the slave trade. In 1619, twelve years after the founding of Jamestown, Virginia—the first permanent English

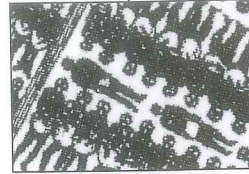
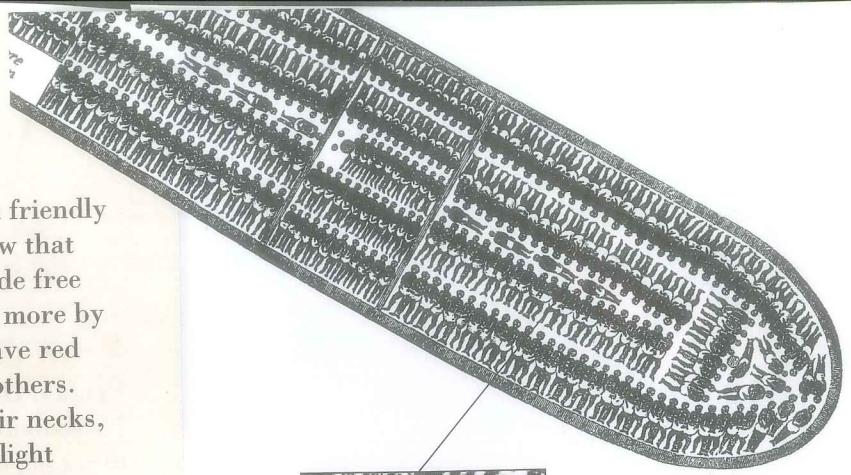
I want the natives to develop a friendly attitude toward us because I know that they are a people who can be made free and converted to our Holy Faith more by love than by force. I therefore gave red caps to some and glass beads to others. They hung the beads around their necks, along with some other things of slight value that I gave them. And they took great pleasure in this and became so friendly that it was a marvel. They traded and gave everything they had with good will, but it seems to me that they have very little and are poor in everything. I warned my men to take nothing from the people without giving something in exchange.

This afternoon the people of San Salvador<sup>1</sup> came swimming to our ships and in boats made from one log. They brought us parrots, balls of cotton thread, spears, and many other things, including a kind of dry leaf<sup>2</sup> that they hold in great esteem. For these items we swapped them little glass beads and hawks' bells.

Many of the men I have seen have scars on their bodies, and when I made signs to them to find out how this happened, they indicated that people from other nearby islands come to San Salvador to capture them; they defend themselves the best they can. I believe that people from the mainland come here to take them as slaves. They ought to make good and skilled servants, for they repeat very quickly whatever we say to them. I think they can easily be made Christians, for they seem to have no religion. If it pleases Our Lord, I will take six of them to Your Highnesses when I depart, in order that they may learn our language.

*Translated by Robert H. Fuson*

1. San Salvador (săn sāl'və-dôr'): the name that Columbus gave the island he first landed on; it means "Holy Savior" in Spanish.
2. dry leaf: tobacco



Slave ship diagram, 1798

settlement in the Americas—20 Africans were brought there as indentured servants. Eighteen years later, the first American-built slave ship, the *Desire*, set sail from Marblehead, Massachusetts.

One of the few firsthand accounts of the perilous two months that enslaved Africans spent packed in ships bound for the Americas is that of Olaudah Equiano. You will read about his experiences in this part of the unit.

## Traditions Across Time: The New Explorers

The tradition of writing about the exploration of a new place and what is encountered there has continued up to the present day. But what, you might ask, is left to explore in a world of jet propulsion, TV, computers, and fiber optics? In the remaining selections in this part of Unit One, you will read about some contemporary explorations: William Least Heat-Moon's exploration of forgotten areas of his own country, and Maya Angelou's journey across the ocean to discover the Africa of her ancestors.

## Historical Narratives

### Recording the American Experience

Imagine living in a world with no electronic media. For many of us, it would be quite a stretch to imagine living like that. However, for all people, this was the basic condition of life more than 400 years ago, when people from very different parts of the world first interacted with each other in America.

Many records of these interactions still exist and provide insights into the past. **Historical narratives** are accounts of real-life historical experiences, given either by a person who experienced those events or by someone who has studied or observed them. In many cases, the narratives are key historical documents, existing as our principal record of events. Historical narratives take two basic forms:

**PRIMARY SOURCES** Historical narratives can take the form of documents, such as letters, diaries, journals, and autobiographies, that present direct, firsthand knowledge of a subject; these are known as a primary sources.

**SECONDARY SOURCES** These types of narratives provide indirect, secondhand knowledge. Histories and biographies are examples of secondary sources.

### Records of Real Life

The first Americans, the Native Americans, had been recording information for thousands of years through picture symbols (in the form of pictographs, animal skin drawings, Mayan *glyphs*, and wampum belts), and through oral language. The myth “The World on the Turtle’s Back”



John White and Thomas Harriot, Roanoke colonists, rendered this map of Virginia in about 1588. Copyright © British Museum.

(page 24), the sacred song “Song of the Sky Loom” (page 33), and the selection of coyote stories (page 39) represent a tiny part of the wealth of this oral tradition.

In the late 15th century, Europeans began voyages by ship to the Americas and reported news of their explorations and settlement. Many historical narratives of these times were survivors’ tales, gripping adventure stories written down in journals and letters. Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca was one of many explorers who sailed to the New World after Christopher Columbus. The historical narrative *La Relación* was Cabeza de Vaca’s report to the King of Spain. Note the details conveyed in this passage:

When night fell, only the navigator and I remained able to tend the barge. Two hours after dark he told me I must take over; he believed he was going to die that night.

—Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca

The use of vivid, sensory details makes historical narratives come to life. In 1620, the Puritans survived a journey across the Atlantic in *The Mayflower* and landed at Cape Cod. In 1630, William Bradford, the Plymouth Colony’s second governor, began writing *Of Plymouth Plantation*, a chronicle of his colony’s experiences. This is Bradford’s description of the colony’s first winter:

The weather was very cold and it froze so hard as the spray of the sea lighting on their coats, they were as if they had been glazed.

—William Bradford

As American colonies expanded from the 16th through the 18th centuries, the slave trade expanded as well. Olaudah Equiano, one of the millions of Africans captured and transported to the Americas, survived his ordeal and published his autobiography in 1789. (It is also a slave narrative, a literary form that is discussed in detail in the box on the right). These lines from *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* describe his first reactions to going below the decks of a slave ship:

There I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life; so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench, and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste anything.

—Olaudah Equiano

**YOUR TURN** On the basis of these three excerpts, what personal qualities do you think the writers share?

## “Remarkable Productions”

The **slave narrative** is an American literary genre that portrays the daily life of slaves as written by the slaves themselves after having gained their freedom. Some 6,000 slave narratives are known to exist. The Reverend Ephraim Peabody, writing in 1849 about five recently published slave narratives, wrote:

We place these volumes without hesitation among the most remarkable productions of the age—remarkable as being pictures of slavery by the slave, remarkable as disclosing under a new light the mixed elements of American civilization, and not less remarkable as a vivid exhibition of the force and working of the native love of freedom in the individual mind.

—The Reverend Ephraim Peabody

Probably the most influential example of the genre is the autobiography of Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845). Harriet Tubman’s *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (1869) is another important example of the genre.

## Strategies for Reading: Historical Narratives

1. Look for clues to a narrative’s organization, such as the use of headings and bold type.
2. Determine a document’s origin. Check for the use of ellipses [. . .], a clue that words or lines have been cut from the original narrative. Be aware of the original audience and purpose.
3. Keep track of the events described. If necessary, make a time line.
4. Reread and paraphrase (restate in your own words) to help you understand unfamiliar words or sentence structures.
5. Let yourself “experience” the narrative.
6. Briefly state the main idea of the narrative in your own words.
7. Take into account the time a work was written, and try to understand the background, perspective, and even the motives of the writer.
8. Remember to use your Strategies for Active Reading: **monitor, predict, visualize, connect, question, clarify, and evaluate.**

## from *La Relación*

Report by ÁLVAR NÚÑEZ CABEZA DE VACA

(äl'vär nōō'nyēs kā-bě'sä də vā'kā)

### Connect to Your Life

**Conquistadors—Popular Images** Lured by the prospect of vast lands filled with gold and silver, Spanish explorers known as conquistadors (conquerors) took to the seas to claim new colonies for Spain. What image do you have of conquistadors? What did they look like? How did they act? Share your ideas with classmates.

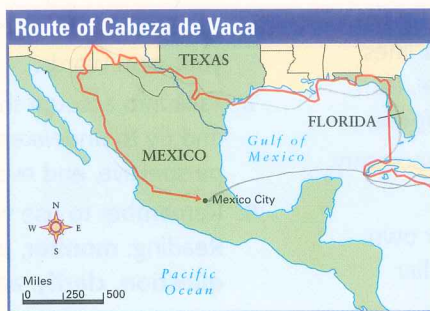
## Build Background

**A Doomed Expedition** In 1527, Pánfilo de Narváez, a Spanish conquistador, led a five-ship, 600-man expedition to Florida. His second in command was Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca. The expedition was a disaster from the moment the Spaniards entered the Caribbean. After the loss of two ships in a hurricane and over 200 men by drowning and desertion, the Narváez expedition finally made its way to the west coast of Florida. Against the advice of Cabeza de Vaca, Narváez separated 300 of his men from the ships and marched these forces overland. Narváez intended for the ships to meet the land forces at a Spanish settlement on the coast of central Mexico, but he had grossly underestimated the vastness of the territory and the difficulty of crossing it. Eventually, overwhelmed by hunger, disease, and Indian attacks, the land forces decided to build five crude barges to get them to Mexico more quickly. These barges, each carrying about 50 men, soon drifted apart, and the one commanded by Cabeza de Vaca was shipwrecked on Galveston Island, off the coast of what is now Texas.

Ultimately, Cabeza de Vaca and three companions were the only survivors of the Narváez expedition. They wandered for more than eight years before reaching Mexico City and thus became the first Europeans to cross North America. After returning to Spain in 1537, Cabeza de Vaca wrote *La Relación*, a report addressed to the king of Spain.

### WORDS TO KNOW Vocabulary Preview

beseech	ingratiate
cauterize	inundate
comply	placate
embody	lament
infirmity	scoff



## Focus Your Reading

### LITERARY ANALYSIS AUDIENCE

The **audience** for a piece of writing is the person or persons intended to read it. Cabeza de Vaca wrote *La Relación* for a specific audience—the king of Spain. As you read, notice how Cabeza de Vaca’s sense of audience determined the content, format, and organization of his report.

### ACTIVE READING USING TEXT ORGANIZERS

Aids—such as italics, boldfaced headings, and colored type—that help emphasize, clarify, or structure ideas in a piece of writing are called **text organizers**. For example, in *La Relación* the italicized paragraphs on pages 73 and 76 provide important background information and introduce the excerpts. The boldfaced headings organize the report by breaking it down into topics. Each heading announces what the section is about.

**READER'S NOTEBOOK** As you read this report, turn each boldfaced heading into a question. Then take notes, searching for the key details that answer the question and jotting them down.