Basques in the Americas 1492 to 1592

Sculpture of Basque navigator Juan Elcano, first to circumnavigate the globe. Photo: CellarTours.

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This is one in a series of chronologies on historic contributions of Basques featured in Euskal Kazeta

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Christopher Columbus

Not much is known of Christopher Columbus’ early life except that he was probably born in Genoa, Italy.

However, his parents’ heritage is unknown, which has given rise to an interesting question: Was Columbus Basque? Supporting this theory, Spanish historian Fernando del Valle Lersundi argues that Columbus was from Nafarroa and, at one time, fought as a Basque pirate for his uncle, Admiral Guillermo de Casenove.
Lersundi states Casenove was a Basque pirate and was variously known as Colon, Coullon or Coulou. In the battle of Cape St. Vincent, near Lisbon in August 1476, del Valle relates that when Columbus was just 14 years old he fought in and with his uncle's pirate fleet against Genoa under the name of Columbo Junior. In addition, in 1485 when Columbus' wife dies, he spends the rest of his life with Basque Beatriz Enriquez de Arana, who is introduced to him by Diego de Arana. Diego is an officer on Columbus' first voyage to the New World. Columbus and Beatriz never marry and have an illegitimate son, Fernando.

**August 2, 1492** — Columbus' First Voyage (Three ships).

Columbus' flagship, the Santa Maria (nicknamed “La Gallega”) is built in Basque shipyards and is the property of Bizkaian, Juan de la Cosa who is also its shipmaster. (De La Cosa is also referred to as Lakotsa, Lakotza, LaCosa, Lacozza, Lakoza and Juan Vizcaíno.) Among the other Basques on the Santa Maria are: Juan de Lequeitio, boatswain from Bizkia; Martín de Urtubia, cabin boy from Natxitua, Bizkia; Lope Aresti, caulker from Erandio, Bizkia; Pérez Vizcaíno, cooper from Lekeitio, Bizkia; Domingo de Anchía, cooper from Ispazter, Bizkia; Diego de Arana, mentioned earlier, who is expedition bailiff and of Basque origin from Córdoba; Domingo Vizcaíno; Juan de Urniga and Pedro de Bilbao.

Among the Basques on the Niña are: Juan Ruiz de la Peña, from Bizkia; Juan Martínez de Acoigue, from Deba (Deva), Gipuzkoa; Pedro Arraes, from Deba, Juan Arnaes (son of Pedro), also from Deba; Miguel de Soria and Pedro de Soria.

Among the Basques on the Pinta are: Juan Quintero, from Algorta, Bizkia; and Ojer de Berástegui, from Gipuzkoa. (Professor Joxe Mallea-Olaetxe and Basque historian Donald Garate report that most Basque names are toponyms—taken from geographical locations. In addition, Garate contends that the additions of “de” and accent marks in Basque names are Castilian or Spanish additions. However, some New World Basques made the personal decision to add “de” to their names for the reason of prestige and/or to show nobility. For a complete explanation see Garate’s paper “Basque Names, Nobility and Ethnicity on the Spanish Frontier.”)

The Basques assert their unity early during this first voyage. Columbus told his crews that they would reach land within 750 leagues of the Canary Islands. When they hadn’t reached land at 800 leagues, the Basques on the Santa Maria threaten to throw him overboard. Only a quick meeting of the crews and officers of all three ships keep this from happening. It should be noted here what Basque historian José Manuel Azcona Pastor says of the close-knit unity of the Basques:

“[In the New World] the Basques participated willingly in all of the enterprises in which their presence was sought by the Spanish monarchy. They often acted collectively, as they represented an ethnic group and were seen as such by the Crown’s other settlers. They frequently used Euskara, their native language, to provide greater group strength and unity. Nevertheless, the observable clanlike spirit demonstrated by the Basques could camouflage the fact that they were often highly individualistic and competitive among themselves. Not infrequently, they resolutely defied the established powers through their leading roles in desertions, rebellions, mutinies, and various conspiracies...” After making landfall October 11 in the Bahamas, Columbus' crews replenish their supplies and continue sailing the Caribbean area.

**December 25, 1492** — The Santa Maria becomes shipwrecked off the coast of present day Haiti. The first Spanish-American establishment in the New World, La Navidad, is built with the remains of this Basque ship. (Columbus did not set out to “discover America.” In fact, Columbus never set foot on nor saw what is now America, or even North America. He set out to reach the Spice Islands by sailing directly west from Spain. Some historians call his discovery of the New World “history’s most magnificent accident.”)

As Columbus and Juan de la Cosa return to Spain for provisions and additional men, thirty-nine of the crew (Including the remaining Bizkaians) stay behind at La Navidad under the command of Diego de Arana. (Apparently, Columbus intentionally ran the Santa Maria onto a sandbar.

In order to claim new lands, the Spanish government required a settlement to be built on the new territory. In addition, he could not ask for volunteers to stay ashore while he returned to Spain. The “shipwreck” solved both problems.) At the time of Columbus' first voyage the
native population of Mexico has been estimated to be 17 million, 2-1/2 times larger than the population of Spain. There are another 3 million natives in the Caribbean Islands and more than 5 million in Central America. South America may hold an additional 24 million.

But the indigenous population was about to be decimated.

**September 25, 1493** – Columbus’ Second Two (Sixteen ships)

Juan de Arbolancha and Iñigo de Artieta organize Columbus’ second voyage in Bizkaia. Juan Perez de Loyola, the older brother of the future Saint Ignatius, outfits one of the ships. Six Basque ships in a total of sixteen sail in July with many Basque crewmen. Juan de la Cosa is master of the Marigalante and is chosen by Columbus to be his official cartographer.

A total of 1,500 men make the trip. Among the other Basques on this second voyage are the following, several of whom will play prominent roles in the development of the New World: Francisco de Garay, Sebastián de Olano, Juan Ortiz de Matienzo, Hernando de Guevara, Luis de Arteaga, Bartolomé Salcedo, Maiguel de Muncharaz, Luis de Lizarzu, Juan de Azúa, Pedro de Arana, Gabriel Butrón, Hernando de Berrio, Juan Ezquerra, Juan de Oñate, Diego de Arciaga, Pedro Vizcaino, Juan de Barruti, Juan de Zamudio, Adrián de Múxica, Pedro Gámiz, Domingo de Escobar and Juan Ibarra de Ibañez.

As Columbus returns to the island of Hispaniola, his ships are loaded with all types of foodstuffs, seeds, plants and domestic animals including horses, cattle, sheep, hogs and chickens to maintain the colonies he expects to establish. (Other organisms also make the voyage. They are in the soil, on the plants and inside and on the animals. These are all types of parasites, insects, seeds, worms, fungi and other new life forms not native to North and South America. These non-native organisms will be responsible for permanent, major changes in the ecosystems of the New World.)

At the site of La Navidad all Columbus finds are burned ruins. The natives report that several of the 39 men he had left behind had killed each other in arguments and that the Indians had killed the remainder because of, among other things, the Europeans’ greed for gold and the native women. On the other hand, when Columbus first lands in the Bahamas, these islands are home to as many as 80,000 native people.

Ten years later, the Bahamas are uninhabited – the people killed by disease or taken away to serve as slaves in Spain’s colonies in the New World. (Unfortunately, according to historian C. W. Ceram, Columbus becomes the first in a long line of slave hunters plying the outlying islands of the North American continent for human chattel.) By 1518, due to imported European diseases and difficult forced labor, captive Caribbean natives begin to die off in large numbers and the importation of African slaves begins.

The Africans are less vulnerable to the European diseases. For the Native Americans, however, European-introduced ailments such as diphtheria, trachoma, whooping cough, chickenpox, bubonic plague, typhoid fever, scarlet fever, amoebic dysentery, influenza and especially, smallpox and measles, are disastrous. Smallpox and measles attack the Indians in what one expert describes as, “possibly...the greatest demographic disaster in the history of the world.”

Historian David Weber asserts that, “...it may be that disease, the least visible trans-Atlantic baggage, was Spain’s most important weapon in the conquest of America.” The natives in the Caribbean Islands immediately feel the impact of these diseases, as they are unable to flee from them. The continental Indians have places to retreat to but waves of epidemics will sweep over them as well.

On the other hand, new forms of diseases from the Indians also find their way back to Europe. After Columbus returns to Spain, syphilis becomes the scourge of the Continent. From Columbus’ second voyage on, as the Spaniards bring more and more horses to the New World, occasionally the ships carrying them would come to an area of calm winds that would dangerously prolong the voyage, usually at about 30 degrees Latitude. Water and food would have to be rationed. The horses are typically of poor stock and many will become sick and die. The crews have to throw so many of these horses overboard that the area becomes known as, and is still recognized as, “The Horse Latitudes.”

1496 – Shortly after the first two voyages of Columbus, Pedro de Arbolancha, from Bilbao, becomes the major supplier and merchant to the New World.

**May 30, 1498** – Columbus’ Third Voyage (Eight ships)
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Among the Basques on this voyage are: Lope de Olano, Pedro de Araba, Pedro de Ledesma, Hernando de Guevara, Martín Arriarán, Bernardo de Ibarra, Juan de la Cosa, Adrián de Múxica, Pedro Gámiz and Domingo de Escobar.

On this third voyage, Columbus has to settle several serious disputes between his brother, Bartolomé—who he had left in charge on the island of Hispaniola after the second voyage—and unhappy colonists. Bizkaians Múxica, Gámiz and Escobar are among the Basques who revolt against the heavy-handed rule of the Columbus family.

In addition, Gipuzkoan Hernando de Guevara marries an Indian princess in what is the first mixed marriage in the New World. Columbus’ alcalde mayor, Francisco Roldán, orders the marriage annulled. Guevara refuses and, led by Múxica, another revolt is started by the Basques.

This third voyage will be La Cosa’s last with Columbus to the Americas. (In all, La Cosa makes seven voyages to the New World.) On this trip, Columbus orders La Cosa to sign the Perez-Luna Agreement that states that Cuba is a continent. La Cosa is positive that this is not the case. Columbus remarks that, “Juan de la Cosa thinks he knows more than I do in the art of navigating.” (Columbus never believed Cuba was an island.) Columbus and his two brothers will later be arrested in 1550 due to complaints from the colonists. They are taken to Spain in chains but all charges are dropped.

1498 — Juan de la Cosa is the first European to see South America and surely one of the first to set foot on it. The 1498 expedition also includes Americo Vespucci, for whom America is named, and Alonso de Ojeda.

Eleven years later, Ojeda will be partly responsible for La Cosa’s death.

1499 — La Cosa discovers the area of present-day Venezuela.

1500 — La Cosa continues to explore the Caribbean and draws the Carta de Marear o Mapamundi, the first map of the world to include the Americas. It is the only known map made by an actual participant on the first two voyages of Columbus that includes representations of Cuba (correctly shown as an island) Hispaniola and Puerto Rico. La Cosa’s maps are the most valued of any in his day as he has sailed more miles in the Caribbean than even Columbus.

1500 — Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, the first European to see the eastern edge of the Pacific Ocean, is brought to the New World by Rodrigo de Bastidas and Juan de la Cosa.

1501— La Cosa discovers and maps the coasts of present day Columbia and part of Panama.

1502 — In January, an expedition associated with Gipuzkoan merchant Jaun de Vergara consisting of four ships sets sail for the New World. Fellow Gipuzkoan Hernando de Guevara (who had married the Indian princess in 1498) captains one of the ships, the Santa Ana. In May they establish Santa Cruz, the first European colony on the South American continent, in what is now Colombia.

April 13, 1502 — Columbus’ Fourth and Last Voyage (Four ships)

The ships are the Santa María, Capitana, Gallega and the Vizcaina. The Vizcaina is the property of Juan de Orquina of Getaria, Gipuzkoa, and has a Basque pilot. There are 140 men with Columbus on his final crossing. Of that number, just over 20 are Basque.

Among the Basques on this final voyage: Pedro de Ledesma, pilot; Martín de Fuenterrabía, boatswain; Martín de Arrieta, cooper; Domingo Vizcaínos, caulker; Diego de Arana, caulker; Martín Machín, carpenter; Pedro Moya, sailor; Martín de Atín, sailor and Gonzalo de Salazar, trumpeter. Of the Basques on the voyage, six will die during the trip before they reach Cuba as a result of the difficulties faced on these early sailings. This final voyage is a disaster for Columbus. He returns to Spain a broken man. Columbus dies on May 20, 1506.

1508 — Two Spaniards are sent by the king of Spain to the New World to establish settlements on the coast of Columbia.
present-day Columbia. One, Diego de Nicuesa, is wealthy and a member of the Spanish Court. Basque Lope de Olano accompanies him. The other Basque, Alonso de Ojeda, doesn’t have the finances needed to fund his part of the expedition.

With no money, Ojeda turns to Juan de la Cosa, who, besides being able to navigate the trip, has also accumulated a sizable fortune from gold taken from Indians in the area of Darien, Columbia. From the very onset there is competition, deceit, bad feelings and trouble between Nicuesa and Ojeda. In addition there is competition between Olano and Nicuesa. A duel is challenged between Ojeda and Nicuesa but La Cosa negotiates a truce. La Cosa must also establish a boundary in Columbia between these two warring Spaniards.

1509 — Alonso de Ojeda heads an expedition that includes Juan de la Cosa and Francisco Pizarro, who later conquers the Incas, to the port of Calamar, Columbia. There, Ojeda and Pizarro, against the advice of La Cosa, decide to massacre all the natives in the area. In that fight, La Cosa, age 49, who had made such huge contributions to the exploration of the New World, is slain by poisoned Indian arrows while trying to cover Ojeda and Pizarro’s retreat. Despite their differences, Diego de Nicuesa comes to the aid of Ojeda so they can slaughter every man, woman and child in the tribe that killed La Cosa.

1509 — During the activities listed above, Lope de Olano discovers the mouth of the Changres River in Panama. In this same time period, while searching for the mouth of the Veragua River, he allows his fleet to be destroyed on the rocks to discourage desertion. He later regrets his decision and orders the debris collected to build a ship to leave the area. This is probably the first ship built by Europeans in the New World.

1509 — Pánfilo de Narváez, who becomes a noteworthy Basque conquistador in Mexico, is an officer under Juan de Esquivel in the conquest of Jamaica.

1510 — Lope de Olano attempts to take over Diego de Nicuesa’s command by telling his men that Nicuesa is dead. Nicuesa reappears and tries to imprison Olano on Antigua. However, a relative of Olano, Basque Juan de Zamudio, is the Alcalde of Antigua. He releases Olano and forces Nicuesa and the few remaining men loyal to him onto Nicuesa’s most un-seaworthy ship and sends them off towards Hispaniola. The boat leaves Antigua in March of 1511 and is never seen again.

1512 — Pánfilo de Narváez, mentioned previously, is an officer under Diego de Velázquez in the conquest of Cuba.

1513 — Juan Ponce de Leon and his Basque pilot Juan Pérez de Ortuílla discover Florida and the Gulf Stream.

1513 — Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, brought to the New World by La Cosa in 1500, hears of a great sea and much gold to the south. So he crosses the Isthmus of Panama and finds the Pacific Ocean. Among the Basques important to the expedition are: Antonio de Baracaldo, Pedro de Orduña, Pedro de Arbolancha (the ship owner and merchant from Bilbao) and Pascual de Andagoya one of the future founders of Panama City and its first alderman.

Other Basques on the trek with Balboa include Lorenzo de Galarza, Rodrigo de Motrico, Hernando de Celaya, Juan de Basurto, Pedro de Jaúregui, Juan de Castañeda, Diego de Esquivel, Juan de Avendaño, Martín de Cote and Rodrigo de Lázcano.

1514 — Pánfilo de Narváez founds the city of Havana, Cuba. 1514 — The Antilles Islands of the Caribbean become the center for the first Basque immigrants to the New World. At this time, Juan de Zamudio, mentioned before as the Alcalde of Antigua, is now governor of Hispaniola.

Among the Basques in the Antilles around 1514 are: Juan de Azúa, Juan Vizcaíno, Pedro de Arana, Gabriel Butrón, Hernando de Barrio, Juan Ezquerra, Cristóbal Vizcaíno, Inés Machín, Juan de Bergara, Juan de Oñate, Diego de Arriaga, Pedro de Bergara, Juan de Barrutí, Gonzalo Vizcaíno, Juan de Ochoa, Francisco de Barrena, Juan de Aguirre, Miguel de Bergara, Pedro Viscaino, Diego de Ayala and Juan de Urueña.

1515 — Francisco de Garay, born in Sotopuerta, Bizkaia, is appointed Governor of Jamaica. (Garay accompanied Columbus on his second voyage to the New World in 1493.) Garay is related to Diego Columbus’ wife, Maria de Toledo, who is related to King Ferdinand. (Diego Columbus is Christopher Columbus’ oldest son.)

Garay is wealthy, his fortune stemming from a huge gold strike in 1502 near Santo Domingo, Española, where
he found a nugget worth 36,000 pesos de oro. At one time, he employed 5,000 Indians to tend his livestock and farms. However, his indebtedness to Genoese bankers — along with his thirst for additional wealth and power to satisfy these bankers — eventually would lead to his financial demise. His need for power and wealth ultimately results in his premature death.

1517 — Diego de Velázquez, governor of Cuba, sends two ships owned by Bizkaian Lope Ochoa de Salcedo to explore the Yucatán peninsula. They sail along the Yucatán and Gulf of Mexico for six months collecting gold worth over $20,000 pesos and encounter a wide variety of cultures and lands proving it is a major land mass and not another island.

This expedition sets the stage for Hernán Cortéz to mount his quest to find as much gold as possible for the Crown. The Cortez expedition turns out to be the conquest of the mainland of Mexico. Many Basques are with Cortéz in his army and navy and become administrators after the conquest. (See pages 34 and 35 in Possible Paradises.) 1517-1527 — Fray Alonso de Zuazo, judge of Santo Domingo, is noted for his protection of the native Indians, as are padres Pedro de Rentería and Francisco Marroquín.

1518 — The Lande family from Bayonne is involved in transoceanic trade with the east coast of Canada.

1519 — Francisco de Garay, mentioned before, outfits four ships for the exploration of the Gulf Coast with Alonzo Álvarez de Pineda in command. Garay sends Pineda towards Florida to search for new lands and map the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. Pineda’s maps are the first ever made of this coastline. However, Garay faces major competition for new conquests from Francisco Hernández de Córdoba, Juan de Grijalva and Hernán Cortéz.

Pineda reports back to Garay and then immediately returns to the Río Pánuco. This time, Huastec Indians kill “all the horses and soldiers” in the expedition. Álvarez de Pineda’s skin is peeled from his body and hung up and displayed as a trophy.

Later, Garay sails to the Río Pánuco to reestablish his settlement, but he finds Cortéz’s men have already taken control of the area and founded a town called Santiesteban del Puerto, present day Pánuco, Vera Cruz. Garay’s men desert him and Cortéz’s influence is too strong for Garay.

Finally, Garay goes to Mexico City to meet with Cortéz. Cortéz is extremely hospitable as he negotiates with Garay for colonization rights on the Río de Las Palmas, which is the present day Soto la Marina River, 150 miles south of the Rio Grande. An agreement is reached and the two attend Christmas Eve Mass together. Very suddenly thereafter, Garay becomes ill and dies on December 27, 1523. Officially, the cause of death is pneumonia. However, there is great suspicion that Cortéz used the occasion to poison Francisco de Garay “with pudding and bread.”

1519 — Pascual de Andagoya founds the capital of Panama. Later he discovers the route into Peru that Francisco Pizarro follows on his conquest of the Inca. From the discovery of the New World until 1539, the Basque percentage of the European population in Mexico and the Indies has been estimated at approximately 4.5%. However, for the same period of time, Basques accounted for 14% of all the merchants, (the highest percentage of all the groups from Europe); 17.2% of all mariners; 8.8% of all miners; 8.5% of all high-level administrators and 4.8% of all clergymen.

In this era, there was not a major expedition, religious, commercial or administrative structure that did not contain Basques in numbers out of proportion to the other Europeans in the Americas.

1519-1520 — A significant number of Basques are among the troops led by Cortéz and Pánfilo de Narváez in their conquest of Mexico. Indeed, according to historian Jose Pastor, with the exceptions of the Extremadurans and Andalusians, no other group of colonists with Cortéz is as numerous as the Basques.

Among the Basques who took part in the conquest of Mexico with Cortéz and Narváez are the following: Juan Arguena, Martín López, Pedro de Anaya, Antón de Arizabala, Juan de Arriaga, Juan Pérez de Arteaga, Pedro de Berrio, Sebastián de Zubieta, Pedro de Carranza, Andrés de Eibar, Juan de Fuenterabía, Cristóbal Martín de Gamboa, Diego de Arisnea, Heredia el Viejo, Martín de Ircio, Pedro de Ircio, Hernando de Lezama, Martín Ruiz de Monjaraz, Gregorio de Monjaraz, Juan de Montano, Juan de Lizana, Rodrigo Guipúzcoano, Martín Ramos, Juan Espinosa, Pedro de Orduña, Alonso de Motrico, Diego de Olarte Gonzalo de Ochoa, Diego de Sopuerta, Andrés del Arnés de Sopuerta, Juan de San Sebastián, Pedro de Urbizaga, Juan Ruiz de Viana, Alonso de Zuazo, Juan de Árboles, José de la Cuesta, Francisco de Arroyo, Pedro de la Cueva, Alonso de Sopuerta, and many others. No comparable numbers of Basques accompanied Pánfilo de Narváez onto the Gulf Coast. However, as the Spanish conquistadors advanced north along the coast, many Basques made their way into the service of Narváez.
Juan de Guetaria, Romos Martín, Juan de Aguirre, Hernando de Argueta, Miguel Arriaga, Domingo de Arteaga, Juan de Azpeitia, Juan Díaz de Azpeitia, Francisco de Berrio, Hernando de Elgueta, Gaspar de Guernica, Diego de Guévara, Juan de Guevara, Juan Bono de Guecho, Juan de Vizcaino, Guillén de Laloa, Hernando de Lezama, Juan de Lezcano, Diego de Mortrico, Francisco Martín, Juan de Ochoa de Lexalde, Diego de Ordaz, Diego de Orduña, Francisco de Orduña, Francisco de Orozco, Ochoa de Verazu, Alonso de Orduña, Juan de Orozco Melgar, Diego de Olarte, Ochoa de Astúa, Juan de Ochoa, Martín de San Juan, Juan de Susmiaga, Antonio de Sánchez, Santiago Vizcaíno, Anton de Torraeta, Gonzalo de Urriola, Juan de Ugarde de la Cruz, Pedro Vizcaíno, Alonso de Vergara, Juan de Veragua, Pedro de Vergara, Martín de Vergara, Miguel de Veraza, Juan de Zamudio (with Cortéz), Juan de Zamudio (with Narváez) and Juan de Zubía.

The previous list does not include the sailors under the command of Cortéz. These include: Martín López, Juan de Bilbao, Juan Martínez de Aroa, Juanes de Zuazo, Juanes de Marquina, Miguel de Uribieta, Juan de Balzolo, Pedro de Ochoa, Juan de Escarza, Juanes de Arrieta, Martín de Aspiruntza, Domingo de Elejalde, Martín Pérez de Lezcano and Ortúñio Jiménez. 1520 — After the conquest of Mexico, Pánfilo de Narváez is sent by the governor of Cuba, Diego de Velázquez, in an effort to overthrow Velázquez's rival, Hernán Cortéz. Narváez is defeated. He loses an eye in battle and is imprisoned for two years before he returns to Spain. (During that takeover attempt, a member of Narváez’s army introduces smallpox into Mexico. It is the first of a number of devastating epidemics to strike the natives of the New World. A partial listing of these epidemics appears in Appendix Seven.) Language is a unifying factor for the Basques, especially in New Spain.

According to Joxe Mallea-Olaetxe:

“In 1521, when Hernán Cortés tried to explain to Moctezuma the nature of the party of Spaniards under Pánfilo de Narváez, he told him they were Vizcaínos (Castile had many Biscayan immigrants, so all Basques were called Viscainos) and added, ‘They speak like the Otomíes.’ Language was the first thing that came to Cortés’ mind about the Basques, and he communicated its barbarities to Moctezuma by equating it to that of the Otomí, a savage people whom the Aztecs held in contempt.” Emphasis added. 1520 — Cortéz names Pedro de Ircio, from Enkarterri, the mayor of Tepeaca, Mexico.

1520 to 1580 — Fully 80 percent of the ships making voyages between Europe and the Americas are either Basque-manned and/or owned by Basque commercial interests.

1580 to 1610 — 50% of the ships and commerce is Basque controlled. In these formative stages of New World trade, Basques dominate Colonial shipping enterprises for nearly 100 years. Historian David Goodman states, “Basque seamen were widely held to be the best in Spain.” (In this age of exploration and colonization, the coast of the Basque Country, held Spain’s principal shipbuilding sites and recruitment areas for sailors. In Bizkaia there were the villages of Zorroza, Deusto, Portugalete, Bermeo and Lequeitio. In Gipuzkoa there was Lezo, Pasajes, Usúrbil, Deva, Orio and Rentería.

Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa also produced valuable oak trees used in ship construction. In addition, Nafarroa produced iron cannon balls, gunpowder and matches and hemp for naval ropes.

Most of the ships built in Spain’s Golden Era were Basque built. As an example, of the 47 ships built in Spain between 1615 and 1682, all were built in Basque shipyards and Basque master shipbuilders built all but 4 of the ships. [Ships from St-Jean-de-Luz were used as well but were registered with authorities as from Bizkaia.]

A great number of the administrators, officers and crewmen of these ships were also Basques and, in many instances, followed in a line of three or more generations of builders or mariners.)

Magellan’s Attempt to Sail Around the World

1518 — Ferdinand Magellan, from Portugal, appeals to Charles V of Spain to open a new route to the Spice Islands following the coast of South America. The Emperor agrees, probably influenced by the advice of Magellan’s companions on his Royal visit, Sancho de Matienzo, the treasurer of the House of Trade, and Domingo de Ochandiano, the contractor of the expedition, both Bizkaian. 1512 — Basques play an important part in the Magellan expedition. The preparation for the monumental voyage is handled by Basque Nicolás de Artieta. Five ships began the trip and Basques are the masters of three of them.

The five ships are the flagship Trinidad, bought in Bilbao, the San Antonio, Concepción, Santiago and Victoria,
The five ships are the flagship Trinidad, bought in Bilbao; the San Antonio, Concepción; Santiago and Victoria, which is built in Zarautz. Basques account for 36 of the 265 crewmen.

The Basque members of the expedition are: Domingo de Urrutia, from Lekeitio, Master of the Trinidad; Juan Sebastián Elcano, from Guetaria, Master of the Concepción; Juan de Erloiria, from Deba, Master of the San Antonio; Sebastián de Olarte, Bilbao; Pedro de Olarte, Portugalete; Lope de Ugarte, Segura; Juan de Segura, Segura; Lorenzo de Iruña, Sorabilla; Juan de Aguirre, Bermeo; Juan de Acurio, Bermeo; Martín de Aguirre, Irun; Juan de Irún Urranzu, Irun; Pedro Mugartegui, Bermeo; Juanico el Vizcaíno, Bizkaia; Martín de Inchaurraga, Bermeo; Juan de Arratia, Bilbao; Pedro de Tolosa, Tolosa; Juan de Orue, Mungía; Pedro de Basozabal, Mungía; Juan Navarro, Pamplona; Ochoa de Erandio, Erandio; Pedro de Bilbao, Bilbao; Martín de Goytisolo, Bakio; Antonio de Basozabal, Bilbao; Domingo de Icaza, Deba; Pedro Sautua, Bermeo; Martín Garate, Deba; Juan de Menchaca, Bilbao; Pedro de Chindurza, Bermeo; Juan de Zubileta, Barakaldo; Juan Ortiz de Gopegui, Bilbao; León de Ezpeleta, Bilbao; Diego de Peralta, Peralta; Pedro de Olabarrieta, Galdakao; Martín de Barrena, Orio and Lope Navarro, Tudela.

Only three ships reach the Philippines after two are lost sailing around the rugged southern tip of South America. After attempts to impart Christianity onto the natives, the Europeans are attacked and Magellan is killed. The explorers burn the Concepción due to losses of crewmembers and Basque Juan Sebastián Elcano (or del Cano) assumes command of the Victoria and the expedition. He is also named treasurer of the remaining group.

On September 6, 1522, almost 3 years after it had set off, the Victoria returns to Sanlúcar de Barrameda barely afloat. It traveled almost 42,000 miles and only 18 of the original crew of 265 men successfully completed the first circumnavigation of the earth. In addition to Elcano, 3 other Basques live through the adventure: Juan de Acurio, Juan de Arratia and Juan de Zubileta. Naval historian David Goodman calls Elcano’s voyage, “The most outstanding feat in the history of navigation...”

1522 — Francisco de Orozco settles the Oaxaca area of Mexico. Orozco had been an artillery captain under Pánfilo de Narváez.

1524 — Bizkaian Juan de Orduña is secretary of the council of Mexico City. 1525 — García Jofre de Loaísa (Loaysa) leads an expedition to the Spice Islands (now the Maluku Islands) trying to establish a better route to the Philippines. Also on the voyage is Juan Sebastián Elcano who had been first to circumnavigate the earth. Seven ships are involved with Loaísa, Elcano and Santiago de Guevara commanding three of them.

The expedition meets with disaster. Loaísa dies one year into the trek. Elcano takes command of the expedition but dies of malnutrition and scurvy somewhere in the Pacific just one week later. Alonzo de Salazar, another Basque, takes command. He dies before reaching the Philippines at which time another Basque, Martín Iñiguez de Carquizano, takes over command. He is poisoned and dies in Tidore. Natives capture the rest of the crews. Only a handful survives. One of these survivors is Andrés de Urdaneta. He escapes after seven years in captivity and sails throughout the Spice Islands for a number of years, in spite of the efforts of the Portuguese to apprehend him. He even learns the Malay language. He then sails back to Spain, becoming the second person to sail around the world, albeit not in one continuous voyage.

Later, in 1552 Urdaneta becomes a monk and studies mathematics, astronomy, science, cosmology, Latin, military history and philosophy. He also becomes a diplomat a humanist and a missionary. However, his sailing days are not finished.

1525 to 1527 — By this early date several Basque merchants have prominently established themselves in Nueva España. Among these are Miguel Ibarra and Antso Agurto (mentioned previously) Gabriel de Valmaseda, Martín Aburruza, Martín Ipinza and Sebastian Aquearza.

1526 — Large and prosperous trading companies are established between the Indies and Seville. Many are Basque owned and run. As an example, one of these trading houses includes Indies’ representative Martín de Zubizarreta, while Juan Sáez de Aramburu, Francisco de Churrutua and Martín Pérez de Achogetegui run the office in Spain. All four are from Azcoitia, Bizkaia. Another associate is Juanés de Astigarraga.

1527 — In Spain, Pánfilo de Narváez is appointed governor of Florida by Charles V and sets sail with 700 men for his return to the New World. After wintering in Cuba but weakened by storms and desertions he lands among hostile Indians on the coast of Florida in 1528 near Tampa Bay with 300 men and 80 horses. Disappointed by the lack of gold and continually harassed by Indians, beset with hunger, illness and critical storms, he dies and is interred in the church of St. Nicholas at Tampa. The Basque and other officers being seized by the Indians are killed.
Disappointed by the lack of gold and continually harassed by Indians, beset with hunger, illness and critical tactical errors, he has his men build several crude canoes. They head up the coast of Florida and across the coasts of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas.

In November of 1528 the overloaded boats wash up on Galveston Island. During a storm, Narváez stays in one of the boats and is washed out to sea, never to be seen again.

1527 — Juan de Zumárraga is named first bishop of Nueva España, New Spain. (According to Basque historian Pastor, Basques were involved in every ecclesiastical sector or activity in the New World.) In Mexico Zumárraga surrounds himself with Basque relatives and compatriots and he recruits colonists from his native Durango, Bizkaia, to come to Mexico. Among these are: Antso Gartzi Larrazabal, Juan Lopez Zumárraga, Andres Mucharaz, Martin Mucharaz, Martín Zabala, Juan Mendiola and his entire family, Patxi Urquiaga, Andres Zuricaray, Juana Zumarraga, Juan de Tolosa, Diego de Ibarra, Miguel Ibarra, and Juan Urrutia (both of whom are slave traders) Antso Lopez Agurto and Miguel Lopez Legazpi y Gorrocatagui, the man who later bloodlessly conquers the Philippines.

Bishop Zumárraga

Zumárraga was one of the most powerful and influential Spanish officials in the New World. In 16th Century Mexico, most Basques speak only Basque. For this reason they tend to group together. As an example, Zumárraga is the author of one of the oldest documents written in Euskara, the Basque language.

In 1537, Zumárraga sends a long letter to a distant relative in Durango, smuggled via a Basque ship captain named Urrutia. Written primarily in Castilian, about 400 words are in Euskara, which he uses to explain secretly that, on his and his Basque collaborators’ behalf, some Basque shipmasters will be smuggling money into Durango. (According to professor Joxe Mallea-Olaetxe, these collaborators are Matxin Ibañez Hernani and Antso Gartzi Larrazabal.)

Zumárraga does not want any Castilian official to know of these matters in case the letter falls into their hands. (A translation of the letter appears in Appendix Eight.) Zumárraga relies on several Basque shipmasters to smuggle the silver and gifts. Among them are Gonzalo Ugarte, Antso Pinaga and Joanes Ypazteco.

Among Zumárraga’s accomplishments are the introduction of the first printing press into the New World and the establishment of schools and hospitals. He founds the Colegio de Santa Cruz de Tlateloco.

Historian Mallea-Olaetxe also reports that Zumárraga might also have been the first Basque sheepman in North America. Most importantly, however, Zumárraga believes that the Indians are actual human beings. This is an opinion not shared by everyone, including some of his closest religious friends. Zumárraga lays the foundations for the Christian Church in Mexico and is a major force in the implantation of Western culture in Mexico.

Zumárraga is appointed the first Archbishop of Mexico and notification of this appointment is sent out on July 8, 1548. However, unknown to Church officials, Bishop Zumárraga had died one month earlier. While the position and power of the Catholic Church in Mexico is still exceptional, it was extraordinarily strong in its first 300 years in the New World. The Mexican church becomes enormously wealthy through gifts and bequests that it can hold indefinitely. In these 300 years, the church comes to own one-third of all property and land in Nueva España. This lasts until 1859, when its holdings are nationalized.

1527 — Spaniard Hernán Cortéz, commanding Basque owned and manned vessels, discovers Baja California. Again, a sizable number of the troops under Cortéz are Basque mercenaries who served in Spain’s Italian campaigns and later in the conquest of the Antilles in the Caribbean.

1527 — Pedro de Carranza is alderman of Mexico City. During the 1520s, Basques and other soldiers of fortune begin to brave Indians and the elements as they expand their search for land and riches into the wilder, northern area of Mexico. William A. Douglass, one of the premier Basque scholars, states in an article in the journal Names:

“On the eve of the discovery of the Americas, the Basques were Spain’s mariners and mercenaries par excellence. As such they were from the outset heavily involved in Spain’s New World colonial venture. Temporally, throughout the colonial era and, geographically, in all of the colonies, Basques played prominent roles as merchants, soldiers, administrators, and ecclesiastics. However, nowhere was this more the case than...”
Historian P.J. Bakewell agrees with Douglass, stating that the history of the exploration and settlement of northern New Spain is dominated by Basques in the 1500’s and 1600’s. This would include Francisco de Ibarra and Francisco Urdiñola in Nueva Viscaya, Juan de Oñate in New Mexico and General Agustín de Zavala and his son, Martín, in Nuevo Leon.

These northern reaches include the Sonoran area of Mexico and what will become Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. The Basque prominence continues through the 17th and 18th centuries.

1524 — Cristóbal de Oñate y Narria arrives in Mexico City from Narria, a small village outside of Oñati, Gipuzkoa. By 1528 he rises to the rank of regidor. His brother Juan joins him in the New World and they head out with Nuño Beltrán de Guzmán to conquer what is now the New Galicia area of Mexico.

1530 to 1542 — The Oñate brothers are captains in the company of soldiers under the direction of one of the most bloodthirsty and evil conquistadors in New World history, Nuño Beltrán de Guzmán, known as “Bloody Guzmán.”

Among the other Basques in the Guzmán expedition are: Juan de Tolosa, Juan de Villalba, Domingo de Arteaga, Jerónimo Pérez de Arciniega, Martín de Rentería, Miguel de Ibarra, Jerónimo de Orozco, Juan de Zubia, Juan de Urbina, Rodrigo Guipuzcoano and Vincente and Juan de Zaldivar.

In 1530, Guzmán sets off with his army of 500 soldiers and 10,000 Indians for the area that now includes the Mexican states of Jalisco, Nayarit, Aguascaliente, Durango, Sinaloa and Zacatecas. Rather than trying to convert the Indians to Christianity, Guzmán is only interested in land and power. He enslaves or tortures and slaughters the Indians and savagely takes whatever land he wants, even if it had been previously granted to other Spaniards.

Guzmán then establishes encomiendas (private land grants) for himself and his men, including the Oñates. He names this area Nueva Galicia for the province in Spain where he is from and he founds the first pueblo of Guadalajara, named for the city where he was born. The Indians repeatedly attack the pueblo and it is relocated three times. 1530 — On April 15, Cristóbal de Oñate founds the village of Santiago de Tequila in Nueva Galicia.

1531 — Oñate helps found San Miguel de Culiacán. The Viceroy of New Spain, Antonio de Mendoza, begins hearing of Guzmán’s atrocities involving the Indians and, urged on by Franciscan Father Bartolomé de las Casas and Bishop Zumárraga, he has Guzmán arrested in 1535.

Guzmán returns him to Spain in 1536 where he dies in obscurity in 1544. (Guzmán’s arrest comes after he had threatened Zumárraga with imprisonment and the gallows. Guzman’s agents also confiscate Zumárraga’s letters to the king reporting his murderous activities. Zumárraga finally manages to get a letter out of Mexico to Spain and the king, smuggled in a block of wax via a Basque sailor, and Guzmán’s crimes are exposed.)

Cristóbal de Oñate rejected the brutality of Guzmán early on. He chose to deal with the Indians respectfully while trying to enforce the royal laws that protect them. He is a moderating influence in the otherwise brutal expansion of northern Mexico. His proven decency and honor make his association with Guzmán an interesting puzzle. This is in sharp contrast to his brother Juan, Juan brazenly takes part in the torture and slaughter of the Indians and, according to historian Marc Simmons, would occasionally feed their corpses to his dogs.

Juan de Oñate is accused of numerous crimes during Guzmán’s trial but by then, with Cristóbal’s help, he escapes to Peru to avoid punishment. He dies there in exile, blind and penniless.

1532 — Pedro de Heredia (who had already been governor of Santo Domingo and Nueva Andalucía, Columbia) settles Cartagena in the area where Juan de la Cosa had been killed years earlier. With his brother Alonso, he will found Maritue, Tolú, and Mompós, Columbia.

Basques are also found in other parts of Columbia. Among them are: Diego de Ospina founding Neiva; Pedro de Ursúa y Armendariz founding Pamplona and Tudela de Muzo; Juan de Lemus y Aguirre founding Tulúa; Andrés López de Galazar founding Ibagué; Alonso de Olaya founding Villeta; Francisco Martínez de Ospina founding Remedios de Antioquia; Juan de Otalora founding Villa de Leiva; and Alvaro de Guzmán founding
1533 — Gaspar de Marquina, in a letter to his father Martín de Gárate in Mendaro, Bizkaia, explains how he is obtaining wealth and success with Francisco Pizarro in the conquest of the Incas in Peru. He relates how he is sending gold home for his father and other relatives. He also gives a description of the Inca ruler Atahuallpa and how Pizarro and just 160 Spaniards “…all armed with lances 15 feet long, and we routed them all. In the rout we killed 8,000 men in about two hours and a half, and we took much gold and clothing and many people.”

Later in 1533, Incas kill Marquina. He was 21.

Historians James Lockhart and Enrique Otter offer the following comment on Marquina’s letter: “The use of a different surname in the Indies… was a quite common phenomenon, particularly with the Basques, who were happy enough to let themselves be called anything the other Spaniards could pronounce.” (Emphasis added.)

1533 — Fortun Ximenez Bertandona is the pilot of a ship captained by Cortez’s relative, Diego Becerra. They are sent to explore northward along the Pacific side of Mexico.

Bertandona leads a mutiny and kills the tyrannical Becerra. Bertandona becomes the first European to reach the Pacific side of Baja California and may have been the first to reach present day California. It is also speculated that he gave the area its name after a mythical queen, Califia.

To this day, what ultimately became of Bertandona is unknown. Conflicting reports indicate Indians in the area may have killed him or he may have escaped, only to be killed by “Bloody” Guzmán.

1534 — Juan Ortiz de Zárate accompanies Francisco Pizarro and Diego de Almargo in the conquest of Peru.

1534 — The first explorations of what is now Chile begin. Among the first Europeans in the area are Basques Martín de Cote, Francisco Galdemes, Francisco de Isásaga, Domingo de la Orta, and Juan de Larrañaga, all from Bilbao; Ortún Jiménez de Bertendona, also from Bizkaia, and Pedro de Zárate and Gaspar de Bergara from Gipuzkoa.

1536 — Bishop Zumárraga’s closest inner-circle of advisors are Basque. They are Martín Ynoso, Juanes Ochoa Egurbide and Antso Larrazabal. Egurbide and Larrazabal are his nephews.

1537 — Francisco de Ulloa reaches the southern tip of Baja California. One of the priests accompanying him is Basque Pedro de Ariche. In 1602 Sebastián Vizcaíno names the area Cabo San Lucas. (Presently, located in a wide band from the Pacific to the Sea of Cortez across the center of the Baja Peninsula, is the El Viso Biosphere Reserve. Within the Reserve are the Desierto de Vizcaíno and, on the Pacific side, the Bahía Sebastián Vizcaíno.)

1537 — Juan de Salazar founds Fort Asunción in the area to become Paraguay.

1538 — Jerónimo de Loaisa is Bishop of Lima, Peru until 1542.

1538 — Adame de Oñaberriaga is Fort Asunción’s Royal Treasurer and, in 1541, Domingo Martínez de Irala will formally name Asunción a city rather than a fort and it becomes the capital of Paraguay.

1539 — Irala is credited with being the founder of Paraguay and is its first governor. He is the first governor in the Americas elected by a free vote of the colonists. He is also a proponent of polygamy. He sets an example by having seven wives himself; all the daughters of a prominent Indian chief.

1539 — Juan de Arteaga y Avendaño is appointed Bishop of Chiapas (Mexico.) Later, Guipuzkoan Andrés de Ubilla holds the same position.

1539 — Lope de Aguirre, born in Oñate, Guipuzkoa in 1518, leaves for South America as a soldier of fortune. He joins the 1560 expedition of another Basque, Pedro de Ursúa y Armendariz, to try and locate the legendary city of El Dorado at the headwaters of the Amazon.

Aguirre leads a mutiny and kills Ursúa and many others in the party. (Ursúa had arrived in New Granada, South America, in 1545 and was governor of Santa Fe and Bogotá.) Aguirre has such a history of larceny and treason his nickname is “The Traitor.” (At one time he was sentenced to a public lashing for mistreating Indians. The judge, fearing for his life because of Aguirre’s reputation, tried to relocate and hide from him — to
Indians. The judge, fearing for his life because of Aguirre’s reputation, tried to relocate and hide from him—to no avail. After 3 years and 1,800 miles, Aguirre tracked him down and slit his throat.

In the end, after murdering his own daughter and several priests to try and save himself, Aguirre is captured by the Spanish in Peru. He was executed.

1540 — Pascual de Andagoya, mentioned earlier, founds the port of Buenaventura, Columbia.

1540 — Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza sends Juan de Saldívar to find a land route from Mexico to Florida. He is on a strict timetable and travels “many leagues” finding only desolation and poor Indians before he must return to Mexico without success.

1541 — Francisco Pizarro, the Spanish conquistador who in 1532 had crushed the Inca in Peru, is facing strong political opposition. On June 26 rivals rush his palace in Lima, attack and kill him. Among those in the assassination party are Basques Juan de Rada, Martín de Bilbao, Juan Sojo, Sebastián de Arbolancha, Bartolomé de Enciso and Pedro Navarro.

1541 — In Nueva Galicia, even though Bloody Guzmán is gone, the Indians’ hatred of the Spanish remains. They unite and attack Guadalajara, again trying to drive off the Spaniards. Cristóbal de Oñate has to call upon Viceroy Mendoza for help, and the Indians are eventually defeated.

As a result, however, New Galicia reverts to the control of the Colonial Government of New Spain. In 1542, Guadalajara is moved one last time and re-founded under the direction of Oñate and Miguel de Ibarra, as well as Miguel’s nephew, Diego de Ibarra. It becomes the capital of Jalisco and the second largest city in Mexico. Oñate also is one of the founders of Culican.

1541 — Lope de Urrea, a trusted officer under Francisco Vásquez de Coronado, accompanies him in his search for the Seven Cities of Gold throughout what will become Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas. Among the other Basques with Coronado are Melchor Díaz and junior officer Juan de Zaldívar, from Vitoria. Zaldívar is the nephew of Cristóbal de Oñate, the son of Cristóbal’s sister María.

1542 — Frey Luís de Urbeda, an early colleague of Bishop Zumárraga, is also on Coronado’s trek into the unknown north. He stays in Tierra Nueva (what will become New Mexico) with the Indians when Coronado returns to Mexico.

1542 — Just 50 years after Columbus established La Navidad on the island of Hispaniola, Bartolomé de las Casas, a Spanish priest, historian, advocate of Indian rights and a contemporary of Bishop Zumárraga, issues a sobering report. Because of his countrymen’s “killing, terrorizing, afflicting, and destroying” the natives of Hispaniola, barely 200 natives remain on the island from an initial population of perhaps 2 million. The same is true throughout the Caribbean.

1543 — Cristóbal de Oñate makes the first mining strikes in Nueva Galacia: Silver at Espíritu Santo, Guachinango, Xocotlán and Etzatlán – and gold at Xaltepec. The strikes are small, but they encourage new settlement in the area.

1544 — The first book published in the New World is written by Bishop Zumárraga. Titled Doctrina Breve, it instructs the Aztecs, in their own language, about Catholicism.

1545 — Claudio de Arciniega arrives in Mexico at the age of 18. He becomes a master artisan, craftsman and builder. He designs, consults on and helps erect the cathedrals of Puebla and Mexico City, both of which still stand as amazing structures today.

1546 — Cristóbal de Oñate forms a company with three other Basques he had served with under Guzmán. They are Juan de Tolosa and Miguel and Diego de Ibarra, all from Gipuzkoa and all three relatives of Bishop Zumárraga.

Tolosa (nicknamed “Barbalonga” or “long beard”) is sent prospecting and discovers silver at a location called La Bufa. La Bufa turns out to be a “mountain of silver.” They add another partner, Baltasar Temiño de Bañuelos, and become the benefactors in mining one of the largest silver discoveries ever made in North America. It provides one-fifth of the world’s silver through the eighteenth century. They co-founded the city of Zacatecas. (Oñate and the Ibarras had also founded Guadalajara.) Diego is the first mayor of Zacatecas. Historian P.J. Baker observes that most of Zacatecas’ founding Basques “were a shoe-making assistant, a carpenter, a millwright, a sculptor, a tailor, a barber, a clockmaker, a doctor, a notary and a priest.”
Bakewell says this about Zacatecas and Basques: “There was a tendency among emigrant Basques, above all other Spaniards in America, to congregate with others of the same tongue and regional origin. But Zacatecas was not a city numerically dominated by Basques at any time...Basque families were influential but few. Above all, Basques were great explorers; and Zacatecas the source of finance for their expeditions and the base from which they set out.”

The rich silver discoveries at Zacatecas force Spain to commit to bring the wild northern areas of Mexico within the Nueva España Empire. The north is twice as large as the “civilized,” settled area of central Mexico.

Obviously, silver is the basis of the extreme wealth of the Oñates, Tolosas and Ibarras. The three families are excellent examples of a privileged group called hacendados. At the top of society in this new frontier, they engage in conquest, governing, mining, agriculture and livestock raising for several generations.

1546 — Martín Aranguren, a wealthy businessman and close, trusted friend of Bishop Zumárraga, becomes administrator for Zumárraga’s Hospital de Bubas. It is the first hospital in the New World. Aranguren is also the sole heir to Zumárraga’s estate.

1547 — Because of Indian problems, the pueblo of Zacatecas is temporarily abandoned. Diego de Ibarra and Tomás de Arrayaize return to the deserted town and build substantial stone houses, strong enough to withstand any future Indian attacks.

1548 — Pedro Ocharte arrives in Mexico. In 1563, he takes over the printing business of Juan Pablos, who had been brought to Mexico by Zumárraga.

1548 — Alonso de Mendoza founds the city of La Paz, the present capital of Bolivia, and incorporates all of its territory into the viceroyalty of what was then Peru.

1548 — Miguel de Urrutia introduces domestic sheep into the Argentine Pampas. Instead of the small, family flocks found in the Pyrenees, the Basques must adapt and develop an extensive range sheep business in South America.

(Three hundred years later, in the 1850’s, the largest Basque influx into the gold fields of California comes from Argentina. These gold-seekers find raising sheep to feed to the miners more profitable than mining. Therefore, when these Argentine Basques begin tending sheep in California they have with them the techniques and practices of open-range herding that they have learned over the centuries on the Pampas in South America.)

1548 — Francisco de Villagra, conquistador son of Alvaro de Sarria and Ana Velázquez de Villagra travels to Chile with Pedro de Valdivia and takes part in the conquest of Chile. He is governor of Chile four times.

1549 — At the age of 10, Francisco de Ibarra comes to the New World to join his uncle Diego de Ibarra. 1550 — Ochoa de las Rivas is one of the most prominent Basque merchants in Mexico. He has business connections with Basque partners in Bizkaia, Seville, Guatemala and throughout Mexico. In addition, he has arrangements with non-Basque partners in Italy and Valencia. He deals in merchandise ranging from armament to slaves.

1550 — Fray Gerónimo de Mendieta is a Franciscan historian in Mexico in the middle 1500s.

1550 — Martín Ignacio Martínez de Mallea, known as Martín Ignacio de Loyola, is born in Eibar. Grand nephew of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, he is the first person to circumnavigate the earth twice (1580-1584 and 1585-1589). He travels to Paraguay in 1603 as the Bishop of Asunción. He is probably the most traveled man in history up to the 17th Century.

1550 — Diego de Ibarra is given the task of continuing the expansion of Nueva España to the north. However, he turns the job over to his very young nephew, Francisco.

1552 — Martín Ruiz de Gamboa arrives in Chile. He becomes a veteran of many of the Indian wars and holds several important government offices.

1554 — Francisco de Ibarra leads his first expedition at the age of 16. At age 17, he leads the first authorized exploration north and west of Zacatecas. Between 1554 and 1574, he and Juan de Tolosa conquer the area of northern Mexico.

Northern Mexico is now comprised of the present states of Durango, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Sinaloa, Sonora, and some parts of Zacatecas, San Luis de Potosí and León. In the 1560’s Ibarra carries out extensive
and some parts of Zacatecas, San Luis Potosí and León. In the 1560's Ibarra carries out extensive exploration, conquest and settlement of the unknown lands north of San Martín and names the area Nueva Viscaya after his homeland in the Basque Country.

1555 — Bartolomé de Oyarzun arrives at the mines in northern Mexico. He is a miner and trader and also heavily involved in the transportation of metals and merchandise in the Zacatecas, Mazapil, Sombrerete, Fresnillo and Guadalajara areas.

1556 — Alonso de Ercilla comes to Chile as a conquistador and fights the native Araucarias. There he begins his epic poem, La Arauana. The poem is published in three parts in 1569, 1578 and 1589. It is considered to be one of the greatest Spanish historical poems ever written.

1557 — Due to imported European illnesses, 55 years after original Spanish contact on Cuba, only 2,000 Taino Indians remain from an original population of approximately 2 million.

1557 — In August, Juan de Tolosa and his brother-in-law Luis Cortés discover silver and lead 100 miles northwest of Zacatecas at what will become San Martín and Sombrerete. These new deposits will out-produce Zacatecas in the late 1600s.

1558 — Francisco de Ibarra establishes the royal mining town of San Martín. Among its first settlers are Martín Pérez de Urrutia, Martín de Rentería, Martín de Oñez and Martín de Larraga.

1558 — Several Bizkaians are working the mines in Jocotlán, Mexico. Among them are Martín de Gamón, Juan de la Vera, Francisco Hernández Escobar, and the Arguetas brothers. After some problems, Gamón is exiled from Jocotlán and flees to Zacatecas. There, protected by the powerful Francisco de Ibarra and other Bizkains, no outsider dares to confront Gamón or speak to him as to why he was forced from Jocotlán.

1559 — In August, Fray Andrés de Urdaneta, the second man to sail around the world and now a priest, lands at Pensacola Bay. He is with Tristán de Luna y Arellano and his 11 ships on an expedition to establish a permanent settlement and explore what is now Florida. On September 19, 1559 a hurricane sinks as many as seven of the ships in Pensacola Bay. Two years later, the colony at the present site of Pensacola is abandoned, and Urdaneta returns to Mexico.

1560 — Architect Juan de Veramendi, from Bizkaia, sees the completion of his Cathedral of Cuzco in South America.

1561 — Alonso de Zorita is judge of the Mexico City audiencia.

1562 — Francisco de Ibarra founds the cities of Nombre de Dios and Durango in Mexico. Durango is named after his birthplace in Bizkaia. Later, Bartolomé de Arriola is head of the royal treasury of the city. Durango is the military capital of the northern frontier for many years.

1562 — Ibarra names renegade Martín de Gamón, mentioned previously, field marshal of his army as he prepares to explore northward.

1563 — Francisco Ibarra coins the name “Nuevo México” for the area that will become New Mexico, Texas and Arizona.

1564 — Ibarra explores the upper tributaries of the Rio Conchos in southern Chihuahua. The next year he is appointed governor and captain general of the province of Nueva Viscaya and holds those positions until he dies of tuberculosis in 1575 at age 36.

Ibarra, Tolosa and Luis de Carvajal combine efforts as they carve out the provinces of Nueva Viscaya and Nuevo León by the late 1500s. Historian Eugenio del Hoyo credits Francisco de Ibarra as being the most important person in the colonization of northeastern New Spain.

1564 — Juan Ortíz de Zárate is named governor of Paraguay.

1564 — Fray Andrés de Urdaneta and Miguel Lopez de Legazpi y Gorrocataugui open the sea route between Nueva España and the Orient. In 1564, a new expedition to explore the Philippines and to look for an eastern passage is organized in Mexico by Urdaneta and Legazpi. Legazpi uses his personal fortune to finance the expedition.
In the 1500s, Spain is still hoping to make the Philippines a stopping place in route to China and the lucrative trade there. The Portuguese have closed the Cape of Good Hope to all countries but themselves. So Spain must find an eastward passage across the Pacific.

Going west from Acapulco to the East Indies offers no difficulty. Any navigator can steer into the belt of the northeast trade winds and stay there. The return east is an entirely different matter. It requires “tacking” back and forth in the teeth of the trade winds taking so much time no ship of the day can carry enough provisions to survive the trip.

After Magellan discovers the westward passage to Asia, several attempts follow to break into the Portuguese monopoly. However, the only man who knows anything about these waters is Andrés de Urdaneta. He consents to go along as an observer and advisor and a navigator to find the way back to Mexico — but only if Legazpi leads the expedition. (Urdaneta is also the godfather of Legazpi’s daughter, Ysabel.)

The fleet is basically a Basque enterprise with Basque leadership, manpower and capital. Mateo de Saz is captain of one of the ships and second in command. Martín de Ibarra is master of another of the ships with Francisco de Astigarribia, boatswain, Esteban Rodríguez, first mate and Pierre Plin second mate. Other Basques include Juan and Rodrigo de la Isla, Andrés de Ibarra, Martín de Goiti, Luís de la Haya, Andrés de Miranda, Felipe de Salcedo, Guido de Lavezares, Andrés de Carchela, Martín de Rada and Pedro de Gamboa. Two Basque priests are also along, Andrés de Aguirre and Diego de Herrera.

The fleet sails from Acapulco in November 1564, under the command of Legazpi. After reaching Manila and leaving everyone else in the Philippines Urdaneta sets out with only one ship, the Nao San Pedro, to sail back to Mexico and to find the eastward passage. Shortly thereafter, the pilot and sailing master die and Fray Andrés must take the helm.

During the voyage, scurvy leaves the vessel virtually without enough hands to sail it. But Urdaneta takes the ship north 2,000 miles and then east to California and then south to Acapulco, arriving there on October 3, 1565. He completes the first voyage on the Great Circle Route across the Pacific, 10,000 miles, in four months and two days. Fourteen of the crew die of scurvy and, at Acapulco, no one even has the strength to drop anchor. In fact, the only two men able to stand at all are Captain Felipe de Salcedo, nephew of Legazpi, and Fray Andrés de Urdaneta.

Not only did Urdaneta find the eastern passage back to New Spain, he was responsible for the introduction of Christianity into the Philippine area. He dies of ill health in Mexico City in 1568 at the age of 70. 1564 — Miguel López de Legazpi y Gorrocatagui sees the Philippines as another source of wealth. He invades Luzon and establishes Manila as the capital of the new colony. Juan de Salcedo, his grandson, and Martin de Goiti are among the Basques who accompany him.

It is during Legazpi’s governorship that Manila’s economic potentials are expanded into what will become known as the Galleon Trade. These trading ships make the trip from Manila to Acapulco each year until 1815. After Legazpi’s death, Basque Guido de Lavezares leads the government.

1564 — French Huguenots trying to escape the fighting between Catholics and Protestants in their homeland, arrive near what is now Jacksonville in present day Florida. They establish a settlement and fort named Fort Caroline. Their New World experience will be short-lived.

1565 — King Philip II of Spain orders Admiral Pedro Menéndez de Avilés to “hang and burn the Lutherans” at the newly established colony of Fort Caroline. (Luthera was the name applied by the Spanish to any Protestant.) Menéndez establishes St Augustine then begins to massacre the French. (This was done after he celebrated what was probably the first parish Mass held in the future United States.) A few weeks later he ordered the execution of more than 300 French shipwreck survivors at a site just south of St. Augustine now called Fort Matanzas, from the Spanish word for ‘slaughters.”

1568 — Martín García Óñez de Loyola arrives in Peru. He is a leading soldier and is named governor of Paraguay in 1592. However, just before he takes office, King Philip II names him Royal Governor of Chile. 1568 — Visiting oidor (judge) of Zacatecas is Francisco de Mendiola.

1569 to 1580 — Martín López de Ibarra is involved as treasurer and deputy governor of Nueva Vizcaya. 1570 — The alcalde mayor of Zacatecas is Juan de Rentería. 1570 — Sebastian de Lartaún is appointed Bishop of Cuzco.
1570 — Vincente de Zaldivar is appointed to his first of three terms as Teniente de Capitán General of Nueva Galicia.

1573 — Juan Ortiz de Zárate, explorer and conquistador, lands his expedition at the mouth of the Río Plata at what is now Colonia, Uruguay. His purpose is to populate the area, found cities and introduce cattle and horses. He and fellow Basque Juan de Garay defeat the Charrúa Indians. Zárate assumes governorship in Asunción where he holds the office until 1575.

1575 — Two years after coming to the New World, Francisco de Urdiñola, along with Cristóbal de Sagastiberry, founds the city of Saltillo, Mexico. Urdiñola also founds Concepción del Oro, Parras and Patos in Coahuila. Among the first settlers of Saltillo are Basques Francisco de Isasti, Martín de Charrieta, Agustín de Lesaca, Juan and Martín de Elizalde, Pedro de Murga, and Martín and Pedro de Salazar.

1578 — Juan de Garay is appointed governor of Assunción in South America. Among his many accomplishments, in 1580 he re-grounds Buenos Aires, Argentina, on its old ruins and brings stability and security back to the area unknown since the days of Martínez de Irala.

1579 — Martín de Hoyarcabal publishes one of the first navigational pilot books for Newfoundland. Born in Ciboure, Hoyarcabal titles the book “Voyages Avantureux” and it is widely used by Basque, French and Spanish mariners for centuries. In 1677, Pierre D’Etcheverry translates it into Labourdian Basque.

1580 — Martín Ruiz de Gamboa, mentioned previously, becomes governor of Peru.

1581 — Nicolás de Guevara arrives in Potosí, Peru (now Bolivia) from Durango, Bizkaia. (Potosí is the highest city in the world at 13,500 feet above sea level.) Guevara becomes a wealthy mining entrepreneur with several profitable mines and mills. He also becomes municipal council secretary of the city.

According to historians Lockhart and Otte: “The Basques, with their iron deposits, were the miners of Spain, and were correspondingly prominent in the silver mines of the Indies, in both Mexico and Peru…”

The mines of Potosí are discovered in 1546 and during the 300 years of Spanish colonial rule, more than 600 metric tons of silver are removed at a cost of more than 1 million Indian and African slaves’ lives. Once a slave is forced to work in the mines, his life span is usually six months or less.

1586 — Silver is not the only commodity produced in quantity in Zacatecas. The surrounding area of the city is an excellent area for raising sheep and cattle. In this year, at his hacienda of Trujillo, Diego de Ibarra’s ranch workers brand 33,000 young steers.

1586 to 1595 — No fewer than 100 ships, mostly Basque built, are destroyed in Atlantic storms or from failing to clear the sand bars at Sanlúcar or Veracruz. Commander of the New Spain fleets at this time is Aparicio de Arteaga y Zamudio and he initiates improvements to remedy this situation. His father is Admiral Aparicio de Arteaga of the Indies escort fleet. 1590 — Pedro de Viscarra arrives in Chile from Spain. He is twice Royal Governor of Chile.

1590 — Simón Bolívar “the elder” (the fifth paternal grandfather of Simón Bolívar, considered the architect of American independence) establishes a boarding school of Spanish grammar in Caracas that will be directed by Juan de Arteaga and Simón de Basauri. All three are native Bizkaians.

The elder Bolivar is also the attorney general and alderman-for-life of Caracas. However, he is also a slave trader. Other Basque slave traders in the area are Juan de Urquiza, master of the island of Margarita, and Esteban de Iriziar, both of whom are sentenced in 1589 for their collaboration with Dutch slave traffickers.

1592 — By this year, Basques have been in the New World for over 100 years.

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Tags: Basque, Christopher Columbus, conquistadores, euskal kazeta, explorer, Ferdinand Magellan, History, Joxe Mallea-Olaetxe, Mexico, New World, Phillipines

21 Comments

21 Responses to “Basques in the Americas 1492 to 1592”

Dave Green on February 2nd, 2010 10:37 am

Beautifully done. ... Can’t wait to see it in print form someday.

aC on March 27th, 2010 9:56 pm

Yes Viceroy Mendoza and other major families were of Basque/Celtic origin in western Mexico...DNA tests are confirming at least that some families with these surnames are of this origins...can be verified on http://www.ysearch.org. Often I run into sites where these people are mistaken for crypto-(insert religion) versus an understanding of the Basque influence and overall Norman families influence in the reconquest of Spain and then conquering of Mexico.

Bassque on April 17th, 2010 7:33 am

To Dave Green.
Thank you, Dave. If you’d like a PDF copy to print out, contact Nancy and she’ll contact me and I’ll send it to you at no charge.
Steve

Carlos Martin Renteria on July 23rd, 2012 4:02 pm

Do you have any Family Trees available that might link my Great Grand Father Damacio Renteria who lived in San Luis Potosi in 1850 that can lead to the first Basque settlers arriving from
Spain? Please advise, Carlos Renteria.

Nancy Zubiri on July 24th, 2012 11:01 am

Hi Carlos: One of the best places to get information about your family tree is to join the basque-geneology yahoogroups. Send them an e-mail at basque-genealogy@yahoogroups.com. You can also see the info from this group at basque geneology yahoo groups.

The Editors

Nancy Zubiri on May 9th, 2013 8:59 pm

One of the best places to start your search is through the Yahoo group for “Basque genealogy.” They can answer a lot of your questions.

Robert Totoricaguena on February 1st, 2014 9:23 am

My grandmother was born in Gernika in 1892 and my grandfather in Galicia of Celtic origin. I have been to her parents caserio (native home) on a hill above village of Munitibar Auzoa, on Totorika Auzoa road. It has been in the family for 211 years.

Tomas Totoricaguena on April 28th, 2017 10:22 pm

Hello Robert,

My name is Tomas Totoricaguena and my brother is also Robert Totoricaguena. We live...
My paternal grandmother’s maiden name is Norzagaray. She was from Sonora, Mexico. I was not aware until a few years ago that the Norzagaray surname is Basque. I am an American of Mexican descent. I likely have both Spanish and Indian blood in me and now, it seems, also Basque blood.

Frank Meneses on March 10th, 2014 8:39 pm

Many Latin Americans are unaware that they have Basque blood. The Basques came to the Americas so many generations ago that the information about their Basque heritage has been lost. We are glad you found out about yours.

The Editors

Alex Bayarena on September 3rd, 2014 8:58 am

Looking for descendents of Jil Zarate Y Ballarena who migrated to Camargo, Mexico in 1801. Zarate was his Dad’s last name and in respect he added his mother’s maiden name, Ballarena, as was the custom in Spain and Mexico. He received a Mexican land grant in 1835 along with his son Pilar in south Texas around present day Brooks County. Two grants….La Alameda and La Blanca. Please reply. thank you

Paul Bayarena on December 16th, 2014 7:56 pm

Hi Alex,

I have an official (notarized) family tree of our family, as well as the Grants for La Alameda and La Blanca. Let me know what you need.

Thanks,

Paul

Alberto Duarte on September 3rd, 2014 4:36 pm

Thank you for the great write up on the Basque explorers that came to the new
Basque explorers that came to the new world. After a number of years researching for my ancestors, I found a great number of them were Basque, both from my mothers side and fathers side, and I was able to identify a number of them (Mendoza, Onate, Renteria, Zaldívar, & Urrutia) in your write up. My DNA results indicated my paternal ancestors came from northern regional of Spain, which was hard for me to believe since I have dark features. Again, thank you for your great write up.

Tere' Renteria on December 10th, 2016 9:38 am

What did you find on the Renterias?

Antonio Perales del Hierro on September 12th, 2014 10:53 am

Thank you very much for this information on the various individuals, their origins, and their participation in the so-called conquest of this continent. I say ‘so-called” because a glance at history reveals that often “arrangements” had to be made with indigenous peoples which had little to do with dominating them, which I find gratifying, being myself mestizo. In 11 years of research, I have discovered that my lineage’s predominantly Castilian/Basque families came from Ampuero, Maqueda, Antequera and Cádiz—a gathering of young people who arrived together to settle in Nueva Vizcaya in 1565—becoming las “familias grandes” de Chihuahua. I hope that you enjoy my website xlowrider times Pancho Villa, which covers more ground than just genealogy. General Villa is family. Un saludo cordial.

Marcos Rosacker on June 26th, 2016 10:10 am

Thank you for this very informative site!

Has anyone come across any information about a Portuguese/Spanish Basque sailor, ships captain, ship owner, merchant, or possibly even metallurgist-founder named FRANCISCO ARTIAGA? His actual name as it appears on a document I have is “RANCICO DARTIAGA”, but I suspect that it is simply a non-standardized or possibly Spanish spelling of the name Francisco. I have sought out Portuguese language scholars, and no one I have talked to has ever seen the name “RANCICO” in Basque or Portuguese writings.
“RANCICO” is Basque or Portuguese writings.

There are certainly many Francisco Artigas or Arteagas who have lived throughout the expanse of time; but this one seems to have, or have had a maritime/sailing connection. I also do not know what era of time he may be from; possibly between the 16th and 18th centuries.

Any information at all would be deeply appreciated.

Marcos

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Robert Samudio on August 8th, 2017 12:11 pm

Excellent piece of work and chronological order of Basque ancestors that I am currently researching.

My family name that I am researching is Zamudio, who came from Vizcaya but specifically the town of Zamudio as identified in ongoing historical research.

Any additional information or suggestions in regards to Zamudios coming to the Americas or historical presence in Mexico between 1600 to 1800s would be greatly appreciated.

Respectfully, Robert Samudio

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Larraine Orozco on March 29th, 2018 6:37 am

Thanks. Great article with so much information. My mothers maiden name is Orozco.

A long time ago, she mentioned there was also family in Mexico. Looking for Orozco, I found Pascual Orozco from Mexico. Pascual Orozco looks very much like a twin brother to one of my deceased brothers.

On some website, someone answers a question about ancestry and mentions that 8 eight Orozos left for the New Spain to settle their name Orozco in various Latin American countries.

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Violet Ewing on May 14th, 2018 9:01 pm

Thank you for such an extensive account of Basque influence in the New World, primarily Zacatecas, or Nueva Galicia.

I’ve been focusing on my paternal side. An older cousin recently divulged that my grandmother’s father was a very tall ‘white man with...
grandmother’s father was a very tall ‘white man with ‘ojos color del mar’, and that he was a Vasco! I just figured he was a tall ‘Guero’ of Latin heritage, until she said he was a Basque, and I had visions of Basques being ‘short.’ My Mexican grandmother was 5’9”, and all her siblings, and her own sons were over 6’. Her own mother was a Mancillas and very Native in appearance. I’ve been able to determine that Sanchez side by following the death certificates according to Ancestry. I’m stuck at the 3x great grandfather, and haven’t found where my Nepomuceno Sanchez came from, prior to Zacatecas. I noticed a Sanchez among the Cortez explorers, but I also verify before including in my tree. Thank you again for all your historical work, but what is confusing is when English speakers refer to Colombia as Columbia. They’re totally different names. Thank you
Violeta

If you want a picture to show with your comment, go get a [gravatar](http://www.gravatar.com).

Name (required)

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Speak your mind

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The census definitions I find to be the most offensive and raciest you could imagine. They partially define some categories by race and others by color. No wonder why we don’t know how to identify ourselves in this country. We have become more consumed by definitions of our color and let that divide us instead of working on eliminating the objects that separate us and create inequality! For heavens sake we are Americans. Not perfect and working to improve our nation not divide it.

Hang on for a minute...we’re trying to find some more stories you might like. Close. Close Modal Window. Email This Story. Send email to this address Enter Your Name Add a comment here. Verification. It’s a chilly Saturday, the sky is gray, and some 15 bikers are gathered to begin a 15 mile race. Why would anyone in their right mind do such a thing? For the sake of building friendships, learning something new and feeding the community. I work as a volunteer director of the Food Pantry at the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh and a few weeks prior, I received an email from a fellow Pitt student and recreational cyclist Sean Crandell, a senior at Pitt who wanted to hold a unique community event to benefit refugees and other food-insecure individuals in Pittsburgh. As an avid biker, he proposed a