



Spanish Colonization

In A Nutshell

Beginning with Columbus in 1492 and continuing for nearly 350 years, Spain conquered and settled most of South America, the Caribbean, and the American Southwest. After an initial wave of conquistadors-aided by military advantages and infectious diseases that decimated the native populations- defeated the pre-Columbian civilizations of the [Aztecs](#), [Mayans](#), and [Incans](#), Spain organized a huge imperial system to exploit the land, labor, and mineral wealth of the New World. The Spanish empire became the largest European empire since ancient Rome, and Spain used the wealth of the Americas to finance nearly endless warfare in Europe, protecting the Americas with a vast navy and powerful army and bringing [Catholicism](#) to the New World. The growth of a racially mixed society eventually caused rifts to develop between Spain and its American colonies, and by 1824, all of Spain's New World colonies except Cuba and Puerto Rico had fought for and won their independence.

Why Should I Care?

Ever wonder how we, as modern Americans, got here? After all, our society doesn't look much like the societies that existed here in the Western Hemisphere during the previous few thousand years. And while the American people today are descendants of peoples from every continent, American culture does look a lot like European culture, which is funny because [Europe is far away](#). European culture in America began not with the English, but with Spain, which over the course of about one hundred years managed to conquer the native societies of Latin America and install a forceful presence in what is now the United States.

Christopher Columbus is a controversial figure today, celebrated by some as a great hero even while others attack him as a historical villain, responsible for the often-vicious conquest of the Americas by the Spanish who followed in the wake of his "discovery" of this continent. Whether you imagine Columbus in the role of hero or villain, there's no denying his importance. Columbus opened the Atlantic to European explorers, adventures, merchants, and the famous [conquistadores](#). And the process that Columbus set in motion led to the foundation of the United States about three hundred years after Columbus sailed the Ocean Blue.

The Spanish were able to colonize much of South and Central America, but the territory that later became the United States stood on the far periphery of the Spain's New World empire; only in the West did the Spanish have a serious presence in territory that is now the United States, and Spanish penetration of California and New Mexico came only in the

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Spanish place names and institutions are still found all over California and the Southwest. But even more important than the physical remains of Spanish society in the United States is the mere fact that the Spanish came here, paved the way for later European nations to come here, and provided the models on which those other societies thrived. There would be no United States without Spain, and it is with Spain that the history of the United States as we know it began.