

NEGRO COMPANIONS OF THE SPANISH EXPLORERS¹

BY R. R. WRIGHT

The fact seems to be well established that Negroes were introduced into the New World with the first discoverers and explorers. Indeed, there is evidence which leads to the surmise that some of the pre-Columbians may have been Negroes. Peter Martyr, a learned historian and an acquaintance of Columbus, mentions "a region, not two days' journey from Quarequa's territory, in the Darien district of South America, where Balboa, the illustrious discoverer of the Pacific ocean, found a race of black men, who were conjectured to have come from Africa and to have been shipwrecked on this coast."² In connection with this statement may be noted a report by the Bureau of Ethnology which describes "early American pottery with physiognomies of decided African lineaments."³ The late Justin Winsor stated in a letter to the writer that "there is a possible chance that at some early time the ocean currents may have swept across from the Canaries and the African coasts canoes with Guanches and other African tribes from which some considerable strains of Negro blood may have mixed with the pre-Columbian peoples of tropical America. The skulls found in caves in the Bahamas seem to be very like those in the early burial places of the Canaries."

The good Bartolomé de las Casas, the "Protector of the Indians," is often charged with the introduction of Negro slavery into this continent.⁴ It is claimed that he introduced Negro

¹ The interest in this paper is enhanced by the fact that it is the result of research by a native of the race which took such a prominent part in the discovery and colonization of the New World.—EDITOR.

² Helps, *Spanish Conquest in America*, I, p. 360.

³ *Fourth Annual Report*, Bureau of Ethnology, p. 407.

⁴ Helps, *Spanish Conquest in America*, III, p. 210.

slaves to relieve the hard-worked natives, and it is charged that "at one inauspicious moment of his life he advised a course which has ever since been the one blot upon his well-earned fame, and too often has this advice been the only thing which has occurred to men's minds respecting him, when his name has been mentioned. He certainly did advise that Negroes should be brought to the New World." "I think, however," wrote Sir Arthur Helps, "I have amply shown in the *Spanish Conquest* that he [Las Casas] was not the first to give this advice and that it had long before been largely acted upon."¹ It is said again that Las Casas, as early as 1498, with his father, accompanied Columbus and was therefore familiar with the companions of the latter and especially with Ovando, the successor to the Discoverer in the government of the Indies. It was during the year 1501 that Columbus was deposed from the government of the Indies, and he may probably himself have been cognizant of the fact that Negro slaves had been introduced into the new Spanish possessions. But there seems to be no positive evidence either way as to the great admiral's attitude toward the introduction of African slavery into the New World. There is a letter of Columbus in which he refers to Negroes in Guinea, and it is known that he gave an Indian slave to Las Casas' father, but all beyond this seems to be mere surmise.²

The year 1501 is the date of the earliest reference in American history to Negroes coming from Spain to America.³ Sir Arthur Helps, in his *Spanish Conquest in America*, states that, in the year mentioned, instructions were given to the authorities that while Jews, Moors, or new converts were not to be permitted to go to the Indies or to remain there, "Negroes born in the power of Christians were to be allowed to pass to the Indies, and the officers of the royal revenue were to receive the money to be paid for these permits."⁴

¹ Helps, *Life of Las Casas*, preface.

² Ellis in Winsor's *Narrative and Critical History*, II, p. 304.

³ Helps, *Spanish Conquest*, I, p. 180. Irving, *History of Columbus*, III, p. 162.

⁴ Helps, *ibid.*

From this time forward Negroes were more or less familiar personages in the West Indies.¹ On September 15, 1505, King Ferdinand of Spain wrote to Ovando, then governor of Hispaniola, a letter of the following tenor: "I will send more Negro slaves as you request; I think there may be a hundred. At each time a trustworthy person will go with them who may share in the gold they may collect and may promise them ease if they work well."² Some time prior to this, soon after he had become governor, Ovando had objected to the importation of Negro slaves into Hispaniola on the ground that "they fled among the Indians and taught them bad customs and never would be captured."³

In 1510, according to Antonio de Herrera, the royal historiographer to Philip II, King Ferdinand informed Admiral Don Diego Columbus that he had given orders to the officials at Seville that they should send fifty Negroes to work in the mines of Hispaniola.⁴ The next year, 1511, the king complained in language like this: "I do not understand how so many Negroes have died; take much care of them."⁵

Again, on September 27, 1514, King Ferdinand, in response to a request of the Bishop of La Concepcion, in Hispaniola, that more Negroes should be imported, said that there were already many Negroes and it might occasion inconvenience if more males of the race should be introduced into the island.⁶ There seems, therefore, to have been no cessation, but rather a yearly increase in the number of Negroes sent to the New World. On his accession to the Spanish throne, Charles V granted "license for the introduction of Negroes to the number of four hundred."⁷

¹ Helps, *Navarrete, Coleccion*, I, p. 233. Herrera, *Historia de las Indias*, dec. I, lib. 5. Irving, *History of Columbus*, III, p. 162.

² Helps, *Spanish Conquest*, I, p. 219 (Coleccion de Muñoz, MS., tomo 90).

³ Herrera, *Historia de las Indias*, dec. I, lib. 5, cap. 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, *Hist. West Indies*, Stevens' trans., I, p. 374.

⁵ Helps, *Spanish Conquest*, I, p. 245 (Coleccion de Muñoz, MS., tomo 90).

⁶ *Ibid.*, I, p. 491.

⁷ *Ibid.*, I, p. 505.

From this time onward the importation of Negroes into the West Indies became a considerable industry, and the monopoly was greedily sought by Cortés and more eagerly bestowed by King Charles in 1523.¹ There were sent to Hispaniola, 1500 (half of these males); to Cuba, 300; to Jamaica, 300, and 500 to the province of Costilla del Oro on the mainland.² By 1528 there were in the New World, according to Herrera's account of the Indies, nearly 10,000 Negroes. It is said that the treatment of the Negroes was injudiciously lenient; they had four months' holiday.³

In Honduras, in 1539, Francisco de Montejo sent a Negro of his, who knew the Indian language, to burn a native village.⁴ In 1554, in Peru, 30 Negroes accompanied a military force of 70 Spaniards, under Francisco Hernandez.⁵ In 1541, in Tolanite, a settlement in New Galicia, Mexico, the Indians killed a Negro, "de Bovadilla," perhaps the name of the owner, and robbed him of his cattle and hacienda—his establishment—and everything he had.⁶ On April 14, 1559, the *cabildo* or town council of Santiago de Chile, voted to grant a petition of one Tomé Vasquez, a free or enfranchised Negro, by allowing him possession of a lot of land in the town, provided this was found to be vacant and unclaimed.⁷ The wording of the record seems to show that Vasquez received precisely the same treatment as the white applicants for permission to settle in the town.

On St Luke's day, October 18, 1526, Lucas Vasquez de Ayllon died. According to Navarrete he was among the first to bring Negroes to the present confines of the United States.⁸ He explored our eastern coast and attempted to found a colony at San

¹ Helps, *Spanish Conquest*, III, p. 210 (Coleccion de Muñoz, MS., tomo 90).

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, tomo 81.

⁴ Pacheco-Cardenas, *Coleccion de Documentos de las Indias*, II, p. 216.

⁵ *Ibid.*, III, p. 319.

⁶ *Ibid.*, III, p. 37.

⁷ *Coleccion de Historiadores de Chile*, Santiago, 1898, XVII, p. 66.

⁸ Shea in Winsor's *Narrative and Critical History*, II, 241.

Miguel de Gualdape, since known as Jamestown, Virginia.¹ In this colony, under his successor, a Porto Rican, the Negroes were so grievously oppressed that they arose in insurrection against their oppressors and fired their houses.² The settlement was broken up and the Negroes and their Spanish companions returned to Hayti, whence they had come. This ended the first introduction and the first insurrection of Negroes on our eastern shores. Thus Hayti, the place where Negro slaves were first introduced into the New World, was strangely enough the first to manifest an awful retribution against human slavery. It would be interesting to know what part Ayllon's fugitive Negroes, in the persons of their descendants, took in the dreadful revolution which swept over that island nearly three centuries later under the lead of Toussaint L'Overture, Dessalines, and their associates. A singular incident connected with Ayllon's expedition along this coast is the fact that he, with the assistance of his Negro slaves, built the first ships constructed on our coast. This fact is made more interesting when it is known that Vasco Balboa had with him some thirty Negroes who in 1513 assisted in building the first ships on the Pacific coast of America.

The introduction of Negroes into the western portion of the United States was about as early as the coming of the Spaniards. George Bancroft thinks that there was no part of the United States into which the Spanish explorers did not land Negroes. Cortés had with him three hundred Negro slaves in 1522.³ Under date of July 19, 1537, the governor of Mexico wrote: "I have written to Spain for black slaves because I consider them indispensable for the cultivation of the land and the increase of the royal revenue."⁴ Also Gustav Adolf Bergenroth, the collector

¹ Ibid. [For a discussion of the location of the settlement of San Miguel, see Lowery, *Spanish Settlements within the Present Limits of the United States*, pp. 448-452.—EDITOR.]

² Ibid.

³ Prescott, *Conquest of Mexico*, III, p. 350.

⁴ Pascual de Gayangos, *Calendar of Spanish State Papers*, Col. v, p. 441.

of Spanish papers, has shown that Negroes at an early date were considered and called the "strength and sinew of the western world."¹ The Great Antilles especially had already been crowded with Negroes on the plea that they were sent thither with a view of facilitating the christianization, and to relieve the toil and suffering of the unfortunate natives²; but their advent into the western portion of America was fraught with a good deal of concern. Before 1530 there were enough Negroes in Mexico to warrant an attempt at self-liberation from the Spanish yoke.³ Their plan was to massacre the Indians friendly to the Spanish, form an alliance with the others, elect a ruler, and set up a government for themselves in the City of Mexico. H. H. Bancroft, speaking of this event, says that "the Negroes neither gave nor accepted quarter."⁴ Their enterprise, however, failed, the ringleaders being betrayed, captured, and executed. In this connection there is another interesting story of the followers of a certain Bayano, a Negro insurgent captured and sent back to Spain, whose followers in 1570 founded the town of Santiago del Principe.

There is, however, some reason for the belief that many of the Negroes imported by the Spaniards were not savages nor ignorant; that many of them were nominally Mohammedans or Spanish Catholics. One writer mentions his Mandingo servant who could write the Arabic language with great beauty and exactness.⁵ The Guinea or Gold-coast Negroes were bold, brave, and liberty-loving, as the history of the Pacific states will attest.

Bandelier says that the most interesting period in the history of the discoveries on the American continent was during that part of the sixteenth century when the efforts of the Spaniards were directed from the already settled coasts and isthmuses into the in-

¹ State Papers of Spain in British Museum, collected by Gustav Adolf Bergenroth. Revetus Enys to Secretary Sir Henry Burnet. Paper Col. Entry Bk., vol. XI, p. 82.

² Winsor, Letter to author, July 9, 1894.

³ H. H. Bancroft, *History of the Pacific States*, III, p. 384.

⁴ *Ibid.*, II, p. 385.

⁵ Bryan Edwards, *History of the British West Indies*, II, p. 72.

terior of both North America and South America. It was during this interesting period that certain Negroes connected with the Spanish explorers rendered conspicuous service on various expeditions.¹ Mr George Parker Winship mentions, in his *Coronado Expedition*,² a Negro slave of Hernando de Alarcon who, in the expedition of 1540, was the only one in the party who would undertake to carry a message from the Rio Colorado across the country to the Zuñis in New Mexico when Alarcon wished to open communication with Coronado.

In 1527, some time prior to Coronado's expedition to New Mexico and the buffalo plains, we are introduced to another Negro who was, perhaps, the most conspicuous of those who took part with the Spaniards in the early expeditions and discoveries on this continent. Reference is here made to him who was one of the four survivors of the ill-fated expedition to the New World made by Pamfilo de Narvaez who sailed from Spain, June 17, 1527, having received from King Ferdinand a commission as governor of Florida, Rio de las Palmas, and Espiritu Santo. This is the best authenticated case at hand, however, of a Negro participating in exploring this continent. Estevanico, or Estevanillo, the Negro here referred to, was most likely not the only Negro who accompanied Narvaez from Spain in 1527, but he was the only one whose identity has been made known. That he was the discoverer of the Zuñi Indians and of New Mexico is, I think, a fact now well known. It has often been claimed that Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, the treasurer of the ill-starred expedition of Narvaez, was the discoverer of that country; but Bandelier has shown quite conclusively that Cabeza de Vaca never saw New Mexico, and that he was absent from the country at the time of the exploration of the New Mexican territory in 1539.³ The evidence which this authority adduces to show that the Zuñi In-

¹ Bandelier, Letter of February 4, 1900.

² Bureau of Ethnology, *Fourteenth Annual Report*, p. 406.

³ Bandelier, *Contributions to the History of the Southwestern Portion of the United States*, chap. IV.

dians and New Mexico were not discovered by Cabeza de Vaca is, in the opinion of the writer, equally conclusive against the claim of discovery by any other man than the Negro Estevanillo. Bandelier's historical researches show beyond doubt that only one of two men can possibly be credited with the discovery—Fray Marcos de Niza or his Negro guide and interpreter, Estevanillo, or Estevanico; for a careful reading of his own narrative does not reveal any evidence upon which the discovery can be attributed to Cabeza de Vaca.

The only claimant worthy of consideration against Estevanillo is the friar Marcos de Niza. Bandelier ably supports Fray Marcos' claim to the honor of the discovery, but this claim can certainly have no foundation except as it is based upon the fact of the guidance and information which Niza received from the Negro Estevanillo. While it is true, therefore, that Estevanillo disobeyed Niza's order to "stop and send messages," it is likewise a fact, supported by all authorities, that Estevanillo saw the territory of New Mexico some days before the arrival of the friar. According to the information, Fray Marcos followed days in the rear of his ambitious guide.

Later historians, in writing of this discovery, have not only ignored any right which Estevanillo, or Estevanico, had to the discovery, but have charged him with undue ambition and avarice. In writing of Fray Marcos, Cortés called the monk "a common impostor" and declared that he claimed to discover countries that he never saw. While it may not be proper to accept this wholesale charge, it is safe to say that Fray Marcos was too far in the rear of his Negro guide to lay claim to the discovery of New Mexico.

Fiske, in his *Discovery of America*, writes rather slightly, in our opinion, of this interesting episode of American history, laying particular stress on the "illo" or "ico" in Estevanillo's, or Estevanico's, name.¹ Although it would perhaps be improper to

¹ Fiske, *Discovery of America*, chap. IV, p. 500.

charge so distinguished a historian with flippancy in his reference to "poor silly little Steve,"¹ it would not, perhaps, be pretentious to suggest that the termination alluded to in Estevan's name does not warrant such a reflection on the man. Indeed, it seems clear that a fair interpretation of the facts related in Dr Fiske's work (II, pp. 500-508) would warrant the conclusion that a "man [Estevanillo] who visited and sent back reports of a country," is more entitled to the honor of its actual discovery than one who, according to Dr Fiske's own statement, "from a hill only got a Pisgah's sight of the glories of the country, and then returned with all possible haste"—without having set foot actually within the Cibolan settlements of New Mexico.

Dr Henry W. Haynes treats Estevanico with greater justice. He says: "The Negro was ordered to advance in a northerly direction fifty or sixty leagues, and to send back [to Fray Marcos] a report of what he should *discover*."² This the Negro did; he sent back information that he had *discovered* "a country, the finest in the world." It was Cibola, one of the long-sought-for "Seven Cities."³ Now, instead of giving credit to his guide, who had been killed in prosecuting his discoveries,⁴ Fray Marcos claimed all the honor for himself, and subsequent historians, if they have not sustained the friar have not placed the honor where it belongs.

It is a pity that we have no connected narrative of this important Negro discoverer. An account of his connection with the ill-fated expedition of Narvaez in 1527, and of his association with Marcos de Niza in 1539, may be found in the various writings bearing on this period. But aside from these little is known of his early

¹ Fiske, *Discovery of America*, chap. IV, p. 505.

² Winsor, *Narrative and Critical History*, VII, p. 477.

³ It was called "Cibola" by mistake, this being the name of the seven Zuñi settlements collectively. The pueblo of Hawikuh, now in ruins near the Zuñi summer village of Ojo Caliente, is the pueblo meant.—EDITOR.

⁴ For the Zuñi account of the killing, see Lowery, *Spanish Settlements*, pp. 280, 281.

history. Estevan was born in Azamor,¹ one of the principal cities of Morocco, Africa, and may be supposed to have been about twenty-eight or thirty years of age when he joined the expedition of Narvaez, which sailed from San Lucas de Barrameda, Spain, June 17, 1527. With the first fleet were 506 persons. After landing on the coast of Florida they wandered through the country, harassed by the Indians until they had lost all but 240 of their number; then, about September 22, they set sail, in a number of boats, in the Gulf of Mexico. Narvaez, as usual, proved a poor leader; misfortune befell him and his men. At the end of the year only four survived,² — three whites and the Negro Estevanico. These four men discovered and landed upon the coast of Texas. They strove to keep together so that they might render mutual aid, but found this to be impossible. For eight years³ they wandered among the savages, and it is evident that the Negro manifested fully as much tact and ability as the white men for self-maintenance among the savages and for exploration. Each of these unfortunate Spanish wanderers labored as a slave, and all finally became "medicine-men" of distinction among the natives. They are reported to have become so expert in healing the sick that the savages came from great distances to be cured, and crowds followed them from place to place.⁴

The black explorer was as successful as his white brothers; he became familiar with the Indian dialects and characteristics, and the experience gained in these eight years of wandering afterward proved valuable to him. At the conclusion of their marvelous journey Estevan's three white companions left for Spain,⁵ but Estevan remained in Mexico, where he was held in esteem by those who were interested in extending the Spanish dominion.

¹ Buckingham Smith, *Narrative of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca*, chap. xxxviii, p. 123.

² *Ibid.*, chaps. xvii and xxxviii. Bryant and Gay, *Popular History of the United States*, vol. I. Bancroft, *History of the United States*, I, p. 20.

³ Herrera, *op. cit.*, Stevens' trans., v, p. 105.

⁴ Smith, *Narrative of Cabeza de Vaca*, *op. cit.*, chap. xxii, p. 74.

⁵ Herrera, *op. cit.*, Stevens' trans., v, p. 105.

Accordingly it was not long before Estevan was selected as guide for an expedition into the northern country, a selection which gave him the opportunity of his life. He evidently had a strong ambition to become an explorer and a discoverer, as is shown by the fact that he risked disobedience to instructions in order that he might be the first to find Cibola. The story of the search for this supposed El Dorado is most interesting, but it is sufficient here to say that though he lost his life, the Negro succeeded in discovering the famous "Seven Cities" of the Zuñi Indians of New Mexico.

The importance of the discovery of Estevan to his time, and its influence on the early progress of Spanish America, may be judged from the fact that various expeditions had been planned for this discovery, but had failed. Cortés had vainly spent nearly twelve years in trying to push an expedition into the northern country, and following Estevan's discovery there was a wild desire on the part of explorers to find the now famous Seven Cities of Cibola. Coronado longed to be the discoverer, and he did visit the country the year following the discovery made by Estevan and which resulted in the latter's death. Bandelier, who gives all the credit of the discovery to Niza, asserts that this journey, which he acknowledges to have been led by Estevan, was of the greatest value to Christendom, and to Spain in particular. The value of the discovery was such that we can only rightfully accord to Estevan an important place among the early explorers of America.

It is not inappropriate to add testimony from Sir Clements R. Markham, the noted historian, who writes: "Owing to information brought to Mexico by Cabeza de Vaca in 1528 [1536], the viceroy, Don Antonio Mendoza, determined to send an expedition to search for the powerful towns reported to exist in the north of Mexico. A friar named Marcos de Niza was sent in search of these towns. A Negro named Estevan, who had previously served in the expedition of Cabeza de Vaca, accompanied

Niza ; and they set out from Culiacan, on the Gulf of California, in March, 1539. Niza and his Negro companion met with a good reception everywhere. They crossed deserts and came to Indians who had never heard of the Spaniards. Here they received tidings that in an extensive plain some days' journey to the north there were several large towns. Niza sent his faithful Negro companion *alone*, and *waited* for his return with news. Estevan sent back word to Niza that he had found the way to the great city called Cibola. Niza then followed ; but after a few days he received news from an Indian that Estevan had reached Cibola, but had been killed by the natives. Niza fled back to Mexico. This," concludes the English historian, "is one instance of a Negro having taken an important part in the exploration of the continent. Estevan was the discoverer of Cibola," the territory of New Mexico.

It may be asked, Why is it that this Negro's name has remained practically in obscurity for more than three and a half centuries? The answer is not difficult. Until recently historians were not careful to note with any degree of accuracy and with due credit the useful and noble deeds of the Negro companions of Spanish conquerors, because Negroes were slaves, the property of masters who were supposed to be entitled to the credit for whatever the latter accomplished. The object of this paper is to direct attention to this apparent injustice, and if some one more competent will undertake a thorough investigation of the subject, the purpose of the writer will have been accomplished.