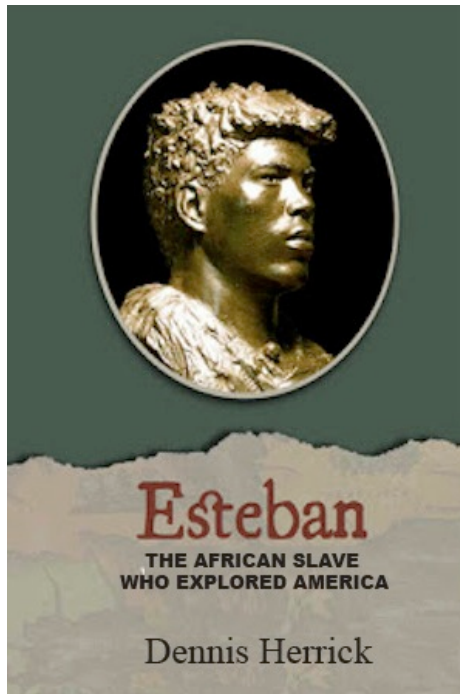


# Esteban

## *The African Slave Who Explored America*

On a May day in the year 1539, [Esteban] the Black unlocked for the world the gateway to the Southwest of the future United States. —Historian John Upton Terrell

The first white man our people saw was a black man. —Puebloan author Joe S. Sando



### PREFACE

This biography of Esteban is a true story, its principal origin being the pen of a Spaniard named Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca about five hundred years ago.

The difference is that this biography switches the emphasis from Cabeza de Vaca to the African slave.

A note on the African's name: Esteban is spelled many ways by writers in English, including Esteban, Estéban, Estevan, Estebanico, Estevanico, Estebanillo, and so forth.

When quoting from other works, the spelling used there is also used in this biography. Otherwise he will be referred to by his Spanish name of Esteban.

Because the world of the 1500s is so unfamiliar to most people, some explanations might be helpful to describe what would be alien concepts and situations today. If you're unfamiliar with the sixteenth century, before beginning Chapter 1 you might want to read "Notes for the Modern Reader" at the beginning of the book.

What little is known about Esteban comes from the writings of only a few Spaniards, beginning with Cabeza de Vaca's 1542 account known as *La Relación*, which was titled "Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's account of what happened in the Indies during the expedition on which Pánfilo de Narváez went as governor."

Cabeza de Vaca issued a revised edition in 1555. Its translated title is, "The account and commentaries of Governor Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca of what occurred on the two journeys that he made to the West Indies."

That edition includes slight revisions of his earlier account of the 1528–1536 cross-continent ordeal with Esteban and adds Cabeza de Vaca's governorship in South America. It is often referred to as *La Relación y Commentaries* or as *Naufragios*.

As the titles of the 1542 and 1555 editions indicate, the emphasis was on Cabeza de Vaca, who always portrayed himself as the leader and overall hero on the expeditions.

Many people have never heard about the African who went with him to Florida, and what they do know about him is more myth than fact.

This will be one of the very few books that does not portray Esteban negatively or insist that Zuni Indians killed him in 1539. Almost all other books that mention Esteban depict him that way.

I confess that even one of my early books joined the overwhelming consensus about his fate. In the 2013 first edition of my historical novel, *Winter of the Metal People*, I bought into the conventional wisdom that Zunis killed him. There it is, I'm embarrassed to admit, on page 10 and later. I hedged a bit by saying it was a Franciscan monk who started the story that Zunis killed him.

I began to wonder. Why was all the evidence cited against Esteban based on mostly negative assumptions and hearsay? And why were there so many different versions of his fate? I no longer think it's necessarily true that Zunis killed him.

To paraphrase President Truman: There's nothing new in the world, except the history that someone doesn't want you to know.

And there's also the observation by a noted British military writer, the late Richard Holmes. Skeptical of unverified and often fabricated elements in many popular so-called history books, Holmes said such writers "reinforce historical myth by delivering to the reader exactly what they expect to read."

My research of the last several years has refuted myths about Esteban, pointed out deliberate deceptions over the centuries, and raised reasonable doubt about Zunis killing him. This biography won't deliver what believers of conventional wisdom expect to read. It is a book, however, that comes much closer to the truth about one of the most remarkable figures of the sixteenth-century.

#### NOTES FOR THE MODERN READER

A biography like this needs to make many compromises for the modern reader as it winds its way between Spanish and English spellings, and also in presenting concepts from the sixteenth century that do not exist today. For example, "Europe" was not a word then, let alone a continentwide concept, and Spain was not the unified nation we know today. They are referred to as such for the modern reader, however. Another contrast is that in those days the word "Christian" was a synonym for Roman Catholic.

All mileage estimates based on Spanish leagues are approximate because guesses were by

the Spanish travelers' memory, and the mile equivalents of leagues also varied at the time from 2.63 to 3 miles or more.

Centuries of Spanish warfare with North Africa Moors, along with unyielding Catholic Church dogma during the 1500s in favor of slavery and in condemnation of infidels, combined to create fanaticism by all Europeans, not just Spaniards, toward natives of the New World. Among the many reasons Europeans acted the way they did in the New World, other unfamiliar aspects of the sixteenth century include:

- \* Spain's practice of primogeniture, which resulted in disinheritance of second-born and later sons who were accustomed to wealth, resulting in them doing whatever they had to do to reclaim wealth and position in the New World.

- \* The impecunious peasantry that existed for nearly everyone else in Europe, which motivated commoners to go to extremes in the New World as the one way to elevate themselves from poverty and become rich.

- \* Spain's need for great additional amounts of gold and silver to finance the Holy Roman Empire's relentless warfare across Europe during this period.

Foundational sources for this book are Fanny Bandelier's 1905 English translation of Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's 1542 account of what happened in Florida and the cross-continent escape, known as *La relación*, and by the Frances M. López-Morillos translation of the *Relación* portion of his 1555 *La relación y comentarios*, edited by Enrique Pupo-Walker and republished as *Castaways* in 1993. Also key is Gerald Theisen's translation of the six chapters called the

Joint Report in Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdéz's *La historia general y natural de las Indias*. The Joint Report chapters were first published in 1547 and include the views about the cross-continent trek by Cabeza de Vaca's companion Spaniards: Andrés Dorantes de Carranza and Alonso del Castillo Maldonado. I used other translations and essays of interpretation when appropriate, as well as many resources featuring Esteban, from histories of that time to books and articles. I also examined myths and exaggerations created by Spanish chronicles in the 1500s and U.S. writers in the 1800s, 1900s, and even into the twenty-first century.

A major problem occurs in referring to sixteenth-century Castilian Spanish names, often in a compromise between making them historically accurate or in a form familiar to readers today. As one example, the spelling decided on for the Narváez expedition's treasurer is Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca. Most English speakers are aware of how to read the diacritical marks of an accent and a tilde over certain letters, so they were retained in this book. However, the spelling of his Cabeza name was changed in this book from its original cedilla diacritical mark of *ç* to the more common *z* instead.

Spanish names are given in the Anglicized form most familiar to English speakers rather than the way they would have been used in Spain in the 1500s. For example, Americans know Francisco Vázquez de Coronado by the name Coronado, but he was not referred to that way in the sixteenth century. Instead, his full name was used, and contemporary Spaniards would have known him as Francisco Vázquez, not as Coronado. There are other exceptions to mesh with the times. The main one is that this book spells the conqueror of the Aztecs/Mexicas as Cortés with the accent mark and the original *s* instead of the *z* usually seen today. Also, Cíbola is spelled with the original accent mark rather than without, as the Anglicized version does today. When quoting

from original sources, the spelling of a name used in that source is retained.

Into the 1800s, the Spanish spelling for the Zuni tribe was with a tilde—Zuñi. The more accepted modern spelling without a tilde is used in this book. Similarly, the word “Aztec” was not invented until the 1800s. That tribe would have been known as the Mexica (meh-SHEE-kah) in the 1500s, but this book usually uses the term “Aztec” because that is how those Indians are known today.

A point of confusion is that people from all across what is today’s Europe came to the Caribbean and Americas, not just Spaniards. Everyone in those days identified by where they came from, such as Castile, Aragón, Portugal, Germany, Italy, France, and so on. The collective noun at that time for all these nationalities was “Christian,” because the continent was mostly made up of Christendom, or more specifically, Catholicism.

The usual Anglicized spelling of the Zuni village that Esteban visited is Hawikuh. Many Zunis prefer the spelling of Hawikku, so I used that in this book. The same is true for the spelling of “katsina,” which many Puebloans prefer over the Anglicized “kachina.”

By keeping these points in mind, the reader can more readily understand the differences between the sixteenth century and today.