

SPANISH LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN THE UNITED STATES:  
PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE  
AN OVERVIEW

By Dr. Georgette M. Dorn  
Chief, Hispanic Division, Library of Congress

In 1968 the U.S. Congress authorized President Lyndon B. Johnson to designate a week in September as Hispanic Heritage Week. By 1988 the celebration became a month-long event from September 15 through October 15 of each year. Hispanic Heritage Month celebrates the history and culture of those who trace their ancestry and culture to Spain and or Latin America which includes the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. The starting date of Hispanic Heritage Month is September 15. This is also the official national day for five Central American countries, while Mexico and Chile celebrate their independence on September 16.

According to a July 1, 2007 U.S. *Census Bureau Report* (Facts for Features) 45.5 million U.S. residents who are five years of age and older speak Spanish as a first language. In 2007 it was estimated that more than one in 9 Americans converse in Spanish at home. Thus, persons of Hispanic origin comprise about 16 percent of the American population. The estimate did not include the almost four million residents of Puerto Rico. The states with about half million Hispanic residents or more, include Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, and Washington. The Hispanic American/Latino population continues growing in numbers and ethnic diversity.

THE SPANISH PAST 1500 to 1850

Spanish was the first European language introduced to the continental United States and remains in continuous use. Spaniards were the first to map the Atlantic and Pacific coastlines. They explored the greater part of North America.

The Spanish conquest of what is today the United States began in Florida.<sup>i</sup> The explorer Juan Ponce de León, who founded San Juan in Puerto Rico in 1508 and became governor of the island, during 1509-1511, named the land “Florida” having arrived on Easter Sunday---“Pascua Florida” in Spanish---in 1513. He sailed north along the Atlantic coast to Virginia, Massachusetts, and Maine and also along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico to Port Charlotte.<sup>ii</sup> Ponce de León died in 1521 from wounds he received in battle with the native population in Gulf Coast area of Florida. Although Puerto Rico is a Commonwealth and its inhabitants are American citizens, a survey of language and

culture of Puerto will not be a part of this overview, because the focus is on the continental United States.

There is no doubt that Florida became the lynchpin in the Spanish conquest of present day United States. Spanish strategic interest needed to safeguard the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico coasts from pirates and from incursions of other European countries. The Timucua were possibly the first Indians encountered by the Spaniards. Franciscan friars, Jesuits, and other missionaries followed the explorers to teach Spanish to the native population and to convert them to Christianity. An example of these Spanish efforts is a catechism in Spanish in the Timucua language, which was published in Mexico City in 1627<sup>iii</sup> Spanish explorations were followed by the establishment of settlements, missions, and fortifications throughout Florida and parts of Georgia. The Spanish built the first missions for the native population in 1565 after the founding of the city of St. Augustine. Spain aimed to bring its culture, language, and form of government to the New World. To accomplish these purposes explorers and settlers built forts, towns, and established missions all over the Americas.

Here we will mention some key conquistadors and their role in the exploration and settlement of what we call the United States. One such a figure was the Spanish naval officer and *adelantado* Pedro Menéndez de Avilés who became captain-general of the Indies in 1560. He founded the city of St. Augustine in Florida in 1565. It is the oldest city in the continental United States which was established by Europeans. Menéndez de Avilés sent expeditions and planned fortifications and garrisons as far north as the Appalachian Mountains. His ambitious plans ultimately failed owing to resistance by the native populations, but also to the attacks by the British. Sir Francis Drake burnt down St. Augustine.<sup>iv</sup> British and French incursions and attacks by pirates were constant threats to Spain's dominions in North America.

An earlier attempt to explore and conquer Florida was undertaken by Pánfilo de Nárvaez and Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca who landed near Tampa Bay in 1527. The expedition headed northwest where it was attacked by Indians. Those who escaped set sail again toward Mexico. The men were shipwrecked near Galveston Island. Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca and three companions, including the African Spaniard Estebanico, survived the ordeal and headed on foot toward New Spain (Mexico). Wandering for seven years through Alabama, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California, Cabeza de Vaca alternately became a merchant, a shaman and an anthropologist. Hundreds of Indians followed them across the continent. The group finally reached the Bay of California in New Spain in 1536.<sup>v</sup> Cabeza de Vaca and his companions were the first Europeans to cross the continent in the present United States. The intrepid conqueror wrote a masterful account of his travail in *Naufragios*.

Hernando de Soto, who tried to recruit some of the survivors of the Pánfilo de Nárvaez expedition, was another Spanish explorer who landed with nine ships on Florida's Gulf Coast. He had previously taken part in the successful expedition of Francisco Pizarro which had conquered the Inca Empire in South America. Covered with honors, De Soto was granted the title of governor of Cuba and Florida in 1537. He then

undertook an ill-fated three-year expedition from Tampa Bay to Arkansas in 1539. He explored the Mississippi River area and was the first European to survey the U.S. South. He brought with him livestock and was generally well supplied. However, unlike Cabeza de Vaca who befriended the native population, De Soto enslaved many of them and plundered their villages. De Soto died in 1542 and was buried in the Mississippi River. However, his expedition continued and crossed the Appalachian and Blue Ridge Mountains.<sup>vi</sup>

Among other important Spanish explorers we should also mention Francisco Vázquez de Coronado, who explored the area of Zuni pueblos of the Southwest in 1540 seeking gold and silver. He continued his voyages and encountered the Plains Indians into central Texas and Kansas. In 1542 he returned to New Mexico and then to New Spain (Mexico) without having established permanent settlements.<sup>vii</sup>

In 1542 Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, a Portuguese explorer in the service of the Spanish crown, traveled along the Pacific Coast and became the first European to sail into San Diego harbor. He continued north to Point Reyes. Cabrillo died in 1543, but his expedition continued to today's California-Oregon border and to Alaska.

Juan de Oñate, a wealthy mine owner, set out to colonize the area of New Mexico, Arizona and parts of Texas. He was sent by King Felipe II, but also financed part of the expedition himself. He founded towns at Santo Domingo (near the present Albuquerque), San Juan, and San Gabriel and later moved to Santa Fe. He established El Paso, Texas. Captain Gaspar de Villagrà accompanied the Oñate expedition and wrote a poem which is considered the first history of New Mexico. Oñate's group established permanent settlements and missions. He took possession of the territory of New Mexico or *Nuevo Mexico de Santa Fe*, which encompassed a large portion of the Southwest, in 1598, a great expansion of Spain's territory in North America. The entire Spanish area of North America became known as "Provincias Internas." Oñate made several attempts to reach the Pacific coast.<sup>viii</sup>

Jesuit missionaries ventured north from Baja California and established missions in the area which became known as Alta California under the leadership of the Jesuit priest Eusebio Kino. After Carlos III of Spain expelled the Jesuits in 1767, Franciscan friars continued the task of converting the native population and teaching them Spanish.

Because Sir Francis Drake reached the Pacific Coast of North America in 1597, Spain began to fear British incursions. Sebastián Vizcaíno, a prominent Mexico City merchant, explored Baja California and proceeded further north. He mapped the Pacific coast during his exploratory voyage of 1602-1603. Having missed San Francisco Bay, he recommended Monterey Bay as a harbor for Spain's operations. The geographic names given by Vizcaíno are by and large still in use today.<sup>ix</sup> Exploration of the Pacific coast area was continued by Admiral Pedro Porter y Casanate, Juan Francisco Bodega y Cuadra, Gaspar de Portolá, and Juan Perez. The interior of California was explored by Juan Bautista de Anza. Franciscan missions were established along California. Junípero Serra was the most prominent friar in establishing missions. The Spanish also built

garrisons and presidios. Fortifications and presidios became even more necessary when it became apparent that Russian settlers began coming south from Alaska and Canada. Spain wanted to make California a bastion against the Russians. All through the Spanish era in North America, there was constant disagreement between the Spanish troops and the missionaries regarding the treatment of Indians.<sup>x</sup>

Imperial rivalry continued among Spain, Britain, and France. In the 1770s Spain supported the war of independence of the thirteen English colonies in North America and the American Revolution. Bernardo de Gálvez, governor of Louisiana, aided the colonists from the very beginning. Spain actually even gave more financial support than France, although it did not to publicize it too much since it feared for its own colonies of Spanish America.

Mexican independence from Spain, begun in 1810, became final in 1821. The interior Provinces of North America suffered some neglect during this period. Mexico was a fledgling nation; political factions struggled for supremacy. In that uncertain climate the territory of Tejas (Texas) declared its independence from Mexico in 1836 due to economic and political reasons. Encroachment from Anglo-American settlers intensified as Americans began to move westward. Anglo-Americans gained control of Texas and also writing its history.<sup>xi</sup> In 1845 the U.S. Congress passed a bill offering Texas admission to the Union and statehood.

#### EVOLVING LEGACIES 1850-1900

The annexation of Texas in December 1845 was one of the factors which led to the war between the United States and Mexico in 1846, a watershed in relations between the two countries. The war began in 1846 along the Rio Grande when U.S. President James Polk sent troops into the disputed territory. The war ended in 1848 with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, by which Mexico relinquished all claims to Texas, Nuevo Mexico de Santa Fe, and Alta California and all the territories between Texas and the Pacific coast. Mexico received fifteen million dollars and other monetary concessions. In effect Mexico lost more than half its territory.<sup>xii</sup>

The United States embarked on its Manifest Destiny. All the Spanish territories eventually adapted to English language and culture and to the American system of government. The transition more often than not was painful, as the American settlers were reluctant to recognize and validate Spanish and Mexican land grants and claims. Many of these were not validated for decades by the U.S. General Land Office.

The Anglo-Americans arriving in the formerly Spanish/Mexican territories did not expect to see a largely *mestizo* (mixed race) population. In David Weber's words, "...Anglo-Americans repudiated the Spanish past all across the borderlands, judging Spain's legacy an unmitigated failure and replacing its vestiges with their own institutions and culture."<sup>xiii</sup> Anglo-Americans brought with them the Hispanophobia prevalent in England and northern Europe. It was mixed with the little regard they held Catholic Spain and the European governments' ancestral envy of the once-successful

Spanish overseas empire. In other words, the “Black Legend” propagated by the British was certainly alive. Anglo-American expansionism had to justify itself by belittling the legacy of Spain and Mexico. Hispanophobia abated more rapidly in California, New Mexico, and Arizona than it did in Texas. In fact, California after the onset of the gold rush became a veritable Mecca for those seeking fortunes. The novelist Helen Hunt Jackson portrayed the “Californios” favorably, as did Bret Harte. The states of the Spanish Borderlands saw rapid and great progress in wealth and population. Spanish and Mediterranean architecture was introduced and is still prevalent today. In California and throughout the southwest Spanish and Mexican arts and crafts became popular again by the end of the nineteenth century. In 1834 the first Spanish-language book, a grammar, was published in Santa Fe, New Mexico.<sup>xiv</sup> The Spanish language never ceased to be the primary tongue in New Mexico.

The territories wrested from Mexico became known as Spanish Borderlands. The history and culture of Latin America attracted the attention of universities. In the West and Southwest universities spearheaded the study of Latin America and Spanish. The University of California at Berkeley, founded in 1868, became one of the first to teach Hispanic studies, as well as the history of the Spanish Borderlands. It possesses a superb library on the Borderlands, as well on Latin America and Iberia. Today the largest land-grant university in California is the University of California at Los Angeles, founded in 1889. Most of the universities in the state offer Latino Studies, as well as courses on Latin America in many disciplines. Leland Stanford founded Stanford University in 1891, which has major libraries and academic disciplines in Latino and Hispanic studies. The University of Texas was established in 1883. It offered one of the earliest important Chicano/Latino studies programs. It was at UT at Austin where folklorist Américo Paredes wrote his seminal works on Hispanic/Latino culture.

Hispanic studies were offered even earlier at universities on the East Coast such as Harvard, Yale and Columbia. All these universities assembled important library collections. Other major libraries with relevant Hispanic collections were the New York Public Library and the Boston Public Library. In New England, George Ticknor was an important collector of Hispanic books. And it was in Boston that Prescott wrote his influential books on the history of Mexico. One of the major collectors of Hispanic American materials by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was the Library of Congress.

Immigration from Latin America, especially from Mexico, and after the 1860s from Cuba, had a definite impact on furthering varieties of Spanish culture and linguistic forms. Political upheavals prompted waves of immigrants from various areas of the Hispanic world. In Cuba revolutionary independence movements began in the 1860s. Arrivals from the island settled in New York City for the most part. Prominent among Cubans was the poet and independence figure the poet José Martí.

Cuba’s quest for independence from Spain culminated in a war that became the Spanish American War or 1898.<sup>xv</sup> In the aftermath, Spain lost Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines. American influence pervaded Cuba and Puerto Rico and the latter became a protectorate and now has the status of Free Independent State of Puerto Rico. Its

inhabitants are American citizens. Many of them settled in New York during the hundred and twenty years.

Academic departments and study centers and excellent libraries were the most important factors in disseminating Hispanic culture. Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, future president of Argentina, visited Boston, New York, and other cities in 1847. He marveled at the libraries and schools he saw. When years later he came representing Argentina as Chargé d'Affaires in 1867, he again revisited schools and libraries. As president he used United States public libraries as models for Argentina.

Archer Milton Huntington, the scion of a wealthy family was educated by tutors in classical languages and history. As a teenager he became interested in the Hispanic world. He concluded he needed to study Spanish and Arabic with a professor at Yale. He reached Spain in 1892. He prepared a three-volume edition of the *Poema del Cid*. Huntington continued doing research in Hispanic culture. He also decided to use his family fortune producing facsimiles of rare materials and collecting books and art. His early interest led him to establish in 1904 the Hispanic Society of America in New York City, as a free public library and museum for the advancement of the culture and history of the countries where Spanish or Portuguese are spoken.<sup>xvi</sup> The complex in the Upper Manhattan area of New York City, with its neoclassic buildings came to hold various cultural institutions also funded by Huntington and his wife, the sculptor Anna Hyatt Huntington.

#### FROM 1900 TO THE PRESENT: INSTITUTIONS AND THE PRESERVATION OF SPANISH CULTURE

The dawn of the twentieth century the United States witnessed a large increase of immigrants from Europe, but many arrivals also came from Mexico and the Caribbean. Institutions of higher learning, libraries and museums became ever more important in the preservation of Spanish culture. Columbia University expanded its academic programs and its Teachers College invited the Spanish literary scholar Federico de Onís to join its faculty. The Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral came to Columbia in 1921, invited by Onís and published her first book of poems through Columbia. In the 1920's the Spanish playwright Jacinto Benavente was scholar-in-residence at Yale.

Spanish intellectuals fleeing the Civil War emigrated either to Spanish America or to the United States. In this country they enriched academic departments, principally literature. The Spanish poet Pedro Salinas, taught at Johns Hopkins University, while Juan Ramón Jiménez was a professor at the University of Maryland in the 1940s and at the Universidad de Puerto Rico in Río Piedras in the 1950s. In 1956 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Jiménez visited the Hispanic Reading Room of the Library of Congress in 1948 and 1949 while he was in residence at the College Park campus of the University of Maryland. It was Archer Huntington, the founder of the Hispanic Society of America,

who developed an interest in the Library of Congress and decided to assist in developing its collections. The Library's interest in the Hispanic world dates Almost to the beginnings when it bought the private collection of Thomas Jefferson. The former president had a special interest in writings about the Americas. The Luso-Hispanic collection grew apace especially when in 1865 the Smithsonian Institution transferred its books and periodicals in the humanities and social sciences to the Library of Congress, then located in the Capitol building.

When Congress finally appropriated funds for a library building, it was constructed in two and half years and opened its doors in 1897. In the wake of the War of 1898 many books, manuscripts and reports arrived about the newly acquired American territories in the Caribbean and the Pacific. Growing specialization in the Hispanic field began attracting important gifts. The aforementioned Archer Huntington began donating funds to acquire Hispanic materials in the 1920s. In 1927 he provided for the position of Specialist in Hispanic Culture. In 1936 he endowed the establishment of the Hispanic Foundation and its Reading Room (now known as the Hispanic Division). Chilean poet and critic Francisco Aguilera became the Specialist in Hispanic Culture in 1942 and served until his retirement in 1969. He initiated the program of recording Hispanic poets and writers. In 2009 we have a total of 690 writers in the Archive of Hispanic Literature on Tape, among them eight Nobel laureates. The first director of the then Hispanic Foundation was Lewis Hanke, who brought with him from Harvard where he was a lecturer, the *Handbook of Latin American Studies*. This pioneering annotated and scholarly annual bibliography is still prepared in the Hispanic Division and published by the University of Texas at Austin. Since 1990 it is also available online.

From its earliest days using Huntington funds, as well as appropriated ones the Library eagerly collected books, maps, prints, and recordings about the Spanish Borderlands. Thus we have one of the outstanding collections which include for instance *corridos* by Lydia Mendoza. The total holdings of the Library in 2009 stand a 135 million items, of which 25 million are books and periodicals. The Luso-Hispanic collection in into which I include the history and culture of the Spanish Borderlands, are about 10 percent of the Library's total collection, or about 13 million items. Especially noteworthy are historic maps.

At the request of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, in 1995 the Hispanic Division prepared the book *Hispanic Americans in Congress, 1821-1995*<sup>xvii</sup>. It was published by the Government Printing Office. In 2009 the Office of the Clerk of the House of Representatives is currently embarked in preparing a second edition listing all the members past and present.

We cannot emphasize enough the role institutions play in preserving Spanish and Hispanic language and culture. The Cervantes Institutes in New York, Chicago, Miami, Albuquerque, and Los Angeles funded by the Spanish government maintain circulating libraries, provide and hold public events. In Washington, D.C., the former building of the Embassy of Mexico has been converted into the Mexican Cultural Institute. It has a rotating art gallery and it organizes a great many public events.

The North American Academy of the Spanish Language was established in New York by the Spanish poet Odón Betanzos. The current president is Gerardo Piña Rosales and the headquarters are in New York City. The academy is an affiliate of the *Academia Española de la Lengua*. Its aim is preserve the linguistic integrity of Spanish in these rapidly changing times when Spanglish is a reality in many areas of the United States. The topic of Spanglish is very controversial in academic and other circles. Many consider it an intrusion of English into the Spanish language.<sup>xviii</sup>

Thanks to continued immigration, poets and writers from Latin America thrive here, as do homegrown Latino/Hispanic writers. The first Hispano writer recorded on tape by the Library of Congress is Sabine Ulibarri from New Mexico, another one was Luis Leal.

I am only mentioning here institutions which played and still play an important role in the dissemination of the Spanish language with which I am personally familiar. I will conclude this essay mentioning the publication in 2008 of the *Enciclopedia del español en los Estados Unidos*, published by the Instituto Cervantes (Madrid) and Editorial Santillana, and coordinated by Humberto López Morales and the Academia de la Lengua Española. Numerous authors collaborated to produce this compendium of 1198 pages.

There is little doubt that the use of the Spanish language in the United States will continue to grow. It is also likely that the presence of Hispanics in the arts, literature and public life will be more visible in years to come.

---

<sup>i</sup> See, Library of Congress, "Spain, the United States and the American Frontier: Historias Paralelas", at <http://www.loc.gov/rr/hispanic>

<sup>ii</sup>

Samuel Eliot Morison, *The European Discovery of North America; The Southern Voyages* (1974): 499-515.

<sup>iii</sup> P. Francisco Pareja, *Catecismo en lengua timucua y castellana en el cual se instruyen y categorizan los adultos infieles..*(1627)

Eugenio Ruidíaz y Caravia, *La Florida. Su conquista y colonización por Pedro Menéndez de Avilés*. 2 vols. (1893)

<sup>v</sup> Rolena Adorno and Patrick Charles Pautz, *Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca: His Account, His Life, and Expedition of Pánfilo de Nárvaez* (1999)

<sup>vi</sup> Lawrence A. Clayton, James Knight, and Edward C. Moore, eds., *De Soto Chronicles: The Expedition of Hernando de Soto to North America in 1539-1543* (1993).

<sup>vii</sup> The earliest history of the southwest is *Historia de la Nueva Mexico por el Capitán Gaspar de Villagrá*. Published in 1610 in Mexico City,

<sup>viii</sup> David j Weber, *The Spanish Frontier of North America* (1992)

---

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid.

<sup>x</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid, 338 ff.

<sup>xii</sup> Karl Jack Bauer and Robert W. Johannsen, *The Mexican War, 1846-1848* (1992);  
See also, “Library of Congress Guide to the Mexican War” at  
<http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/mexicanwar/>

<sup>xiii</sup> Weber, op. cit, p.341

<sup>xiv</sup> *Cuaderno de ortografía. Dedicado a los niños de los señores Martínez de Taos* (1834)

<sup>xv</sup> See, Library of Congress, “The World of 1898: The Spanish American War” at  
<http://www.loc.gov/rr/hispanic/1898>

<sup>xvi</sup> *The Hispanic Room in the Library of Congress* (1981)

<sup>xvii</sup> The book is available online at <http://www/loc.gov/rr/hispanic>

<sup>xviii</sup> Ilan Stavans, ed. *Spanglish* (2008)