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The Hispanic Heritage of North America
Commemorating 500 years

Introduction

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In April 2013, Florida will commemorate Juan Ponce de León's historic voyage. Yet Ponce de León's arrival was, in several important ways, not just the beginning of Spain's presence in Florida, but in North America as a whole. Today, the historical Spanish influence on America is palpable—in culture, language, politics, and more.

Latinos are now the largest ethnic minority in the United States. Teachers across the nation are being asked to accommodate the needs of the nation's largest minority population while simultaneously teaching about the rich 500-year-old history of Spain in North America. Teachers who have a deeper understanding of the Hispanic heritage of America—based in literature, history, politics, and cultural anthropology—will be better able to meet the academic needs of all their students. In turn, these students will be better prepared for post-secondary education and the workforce.

First Encounter

After King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella had driven out the last of the Moors and most remaining Jews from Spain in 1492, they agreed to financially back the exploratory voyage of Christopher Columbus. Representing the Spanish crown, the Italian sea captain set off from the Spanish port of Palos in August 1492 with three ships, two other captains, and a crew of 90 men. Three months later, they claimed their first land for Spain, a small island in the Bahamas. Soon thereafter the expedition would sight Cuba and then land in Hispaniola. The course of history was forever altered, inciting a global race for conquest of the New World.

Juan Ponce de León and the Legacy of Spanish Conquest

In his second voyage (1493), Columbus was accompanied by Juan Ponce de León, a young Spanish explorer with inordinate ambition. After living for a time on Hispaniola and then Borinquen (renaming it Puerto Rico and serving as its first Spanish governor), Ponce de León would go on to explore the Bahamas, Bimini, and then Florida. Arriving on Easter Sunday ("Pascua Florida") in 1513 near present-day St. Augustine, Ponce de León called the land La Florida. He later returned with 200 settlers to establish a colony near the Gulf of Mexico, but Ponce de León was injured in a skirmish between settlers and the local Calusa people and died from the wound at the age of 61.

Other Spanish explorers followed, traveling the Southeast through parts of what are now Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Tennessee, Louisiana, and the Carolinas. Spanish explorers continued their trek across the continent establishing colonies throughout "New Spain," in present-day Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and California. Spain went on to claim lands throughout the Western Hemisphere, spreading its language, religion, and customs to the Native Americans who already lived there and to the millions of enslaved Africans that were brought for hard labor. This mix of Spanish, Native, and African would give rise to a new people with new cultures and ways of life.

Over the next five centuries, Hispanics have impacted and contributed to United States history and culture in a myriad of ways. In every major conflict—from the American Revolution to today's armed conflicts in the Middle East—Hispanics have been present. In the struggle for civil rights that dominated much of the twentieth century, Latinos were key in securing rights for all people. In the music, art, and literature that characterize American culture, Hispanic Americans have made their mark. And in every profession and every level of government, Hispanics can be found, although the struggle for equality continues.

Contemporary United States

This year affords teachers the perfect opportunity to help students understand the diversity that exists among Hispanics in the United States. One place to start with is the terms that Latino groups use to describe themselves.

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"Hispanic" are often used interchangeably, some distinctions exist. The term "Latino" refers to people in the United States whose roots are from Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America, while "Hispanic" tends to emphasize connections to Spain. The term "Hispanic" was first introduced in the U.S. Census in 1970 and is often used in government reports. But many Latinos prefer more specific terms such as Tejano and Nuevomexicano, referring to people of Spanish-speaking descent who live in states once controlled by Spain and Mexico. Some Americans of Mexican ancestry prefer Chicano or Chicana. Still others creatively reflect their mixed cultural heritage with terms such as Nuyorican, Chino-Latino, or even Mickeyrican (Puerto Ricans in Orlando, Florida, where Disney World has a heavy influence). All this is to say that Latinos are not a monolithic group.

Reflecting their rich history, Latinos in the contemporary United States are an incredibly diverse group. Mexican Americans are the largest group (63%), followed by Puerto Rican Americans (9%). Those from Central America (including Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans), the Caribbean (such as Dominicans and Cubans), and South America (including Colombia, Peru, Argentina, and Venezuela) make up the remaining percentages.

According to the 2010 U.S. Census data, Latino populations can be found in all 50 states. However, they are concentrated mostly in the states of Texas, California, New Mexico, Arizona, and Florida. Other states with significant Latino communities include New York, New Jersey, and Illinois. Of course, Puerto Rico, a commonwealth of the United States, is home to 3.7 million people who claim Hispanic ancestry.

This issue of *Social Education*

In this themed issue of *Social Education*, we offer a mixture of scholarly articles and classroom-ready learning activities that capitalize on Ponce de León's historic voyage as a jumping off point to discuss the Hispanic presence in the United States.

In "Beyond La Niña, La Pinta, and La Santa María: The Invention and Mental Mapping of the New World," Professor Luis Martinez Fernández uses period maps and geographic reconstructions to teach about the intellectual debates that surrounded Europe's encounter with the New World. He then offers a classroom-ready exercise that demonstrates the gradual unveiling of the New World.

Museum curator Rodney Kite-Powell illustrates how maps can act as a cornerstone of our understanding of history. In "Charting the Land of Flowers: Exploration and Mapmaking in Spanish Florida," he uses maps to explore Florida's early Spanish history weaving the stories of Juan Ponce de León, Hernando de Soto, Pedro Menéndez de Aviles, Antonio Herrera, and Francisco Maria de Celi.

In "Borderlands of the Southwest: An Exercise in Geographical History," Professor Stephen J. Thornton argues that geography is more than a passive backdrop to time and events. Geographical perception is culturally mediated. He examines the case of the American Southwest and how its geography and historical heritage have been portrayed and how they might be otherwise if viewed through a different lens.

In "Operation Pedro Pan: The Flight to Neverland for more than 14,000 Cuban Children," I tell the story of the 22-month program involving the political exodus of thousands of Cuban children to the United States in the early 1960s. Fearing communist indoctrination and the rumor of patria potestad—the government assuming legal guardianship of their children—Cuban parents sent their unaccompanied children to the United States with plans of reunification in the near future. In addition to providing a brief history of the program and the aftermath of the migration, Mario Minichino offers teaching strategies and resources for K-12 classrooms.

Professors Jason L. O'Brien and Wolfram Verlaan present children's literature relevant to the theme of this special issue in "500 Years of Spanish Exploration and Settlement: Children's Literature." Topics span from early Spanish exploration to contemporary Latinos in the U.S. Synopses of suggested books and teaching ideas for each are organized by sub-themes surely useful for the social studies educator.

This year marks the 500th year anniversary of Juan Ponce de León's historic arrival. It not only offers an opportunity for teachers to discuss this event with students, but also provides an important rationale for teaching about Spanish heritage in the United States. We invite you to share this journey with your students.

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