

California Discovered

Many historians of California confer upon Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo the honor of "discoverer" of what is now California in 1542, when Cabrillo's two small vessels undertook a months-long voyage along the coast of Alta (Upper) California. Andrew F. Rolle's history calls Cabrillo's sighting of the bays of Southern California's coast "the most important voyage Spain had yet to make on the western coast."

Walton Bean's second edition of his textbook **California** proclaims his judgment that "the evidence that [Hernando de] Alarcón or Melchor [alternatively spelled by other researchers as Melchior] Díaz first sighted Upper (or Alta) California by land, near its southeast corner, is not quite substantial enough to take the traditional honor of discovery away" from Cabrillo (see Bean, p. 17), yet earlier (p. 15) he admits "It is probable that Alarcón came far enough up the [Colorado] river to make him the first European to see any part of California. It is also probable that Melchor Díaz was the first explorer to set foot on it, for accounts of his expedition seem to indicate he crossed the river at some point considerably north of the modern [international] boundary." The third edition of Bean's text does not mention Díaz' exploration.



Colorado River north of Winterhaven

If we believe the historical accounts of the voyage of Alarcón in the summer of 1540 and Melchor Díaz' land-based expedition as part of Coronado's search of the Seven Cities of Cibola that same year, then the European discovery of what is now called California first occurred in modern-day Imperial County, and not along the coast of San Diego County.

Edwin Corle's description of the Gila river in the Rivers of America series summarizes the background of this discovery. In 1150, the Spanish city of Merida was captured

by the Moors. Seven bishops, according to the legend, fled the city to escape death. Carrying valuables across the "Sea of Darkness" these priests each established a city in the New World that grew to enormous wealth. As this legend grew, the Spanish explorers attempted to find these cities over centuries.

The conquest of Mexico in the years 1519-1521 by Hernán Cortés led to the Spanish explorations of the vast country to the north. In 1536, the legend of the Seven Cities of Cibola (an Indian word) reached Mexico City, when four explorers who survived the explorations of the vast reaches of the southwest brought tales of these cities which they had heard from Indians. Cortés in 1539 sent Francisco de Ulloa up the coast of Mexico in three small vessels, and Ulloa ventured into the Sea of Cortés or the Vermillion Sea as the Gulf of California was then called. Ulloa sailed to the mouth of the Colorado River, but the explorers made no attempt to discover, in the words of their diary, "whether that were a straight or a river which we had left behind us unsearched at the bottom of this great sea or gulf." Ulloa was given little credit for the revelation that Lower California might be a peninsula.

Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza, sent to Mexico to restrain the power of Cortés, launched his own searches. He sent Francisco Vázquez de Coronado to explore the territory in 1540. Mendoza, freed of Cortés' power by the latter's return to Spain that same year, then sent Hernando de Alarcón to cooperate with Coronado's land expeditions. In August 1540, Alarcón's explorers reached the mouth of the river, then towed their boats up the Colorado, which he called *El Rio de Buena Guia*, or River of Good Guidance.



Colorado River delta today

How far north did Alarcón go? The publisher/historian Hubert Howe Bancroft states Alarcón "possibly passed" the mouth of the Gila River. Another, Herbert Bolton, in his book **Coronado** states (at p. 168) "incidentally, it may be reported that Alarcón at Yuma touched California on its eastern border a year or more before it was 'discovered' by Cabrillo on the western shore." Corle provides his opinion (p. 63): Alarcón was "unquestionably the first white man to set foot on what is now the state of California...." Warren Beck and David Williams state it is "very probable" that Alarcón or Díaz crossed the Colorado into California.

Freeman's book cited the work of Dr. Elliot Coues (who concluded the point reached by Alarcón was Needles) and Frederick S. Dellenbaugh (who concluded he went as far north on the river as the present heading of the Blythe Canal. After reviewing the evidence, Freeman states his opinion (p. 17) that Alarcón's northmost stop was somewhere between Lighthouse Rock 50 miles north of the Gila River junction and Picacho about 35 miles north of the Gila River junction..

Jack Forbes (**Warriors of the Colorado**, pp. 88-89) believes that Alarcón did not reach Yuma:

There seems to be little doubt that Alarcón's terminal point on the Colorado River was the Pilot Knob-Yuma area, where the river is pressed upon by mountains and hills for the first time....The fact that Alarcón did not advance very far into the interior is confirmed by Pedro de Castaneda's account of the expedition of Melchior Díaz, who is said to have found Alarcón's message and point of farthest penetration some 15 leagues from the mouth of the river....[That the] expedition was still in the lands of the Coano (Kohuana) Indians where it turned back is virtually conclusive evidence, since the Kohuanas lived south of Pilot Knob for more than two hundred years (from 1604 until the early 1800s).

Assuming Alarcón reached the area of Yuma, or even as far north as the Colorado's confluence with the Gila River (although this is such an obvious landmark he surely would have mentioned it), he may have set foot on California soil. Whether he did or not may never be known. California Historical Landmark No. 568, placed near the intersection of Interstate 8 and Highway 186 near the base of Pilot Knob declares:

HERNANDO DE ALARCÓN
EXPEDITION 1540

Probably the first white man to touch California soil was Hernando de Alarcón. On May 9, 1540, Alarcón started from Acapulco, Mexico, and sailed north until he reached the mouth of the Colorado River. On several occasions during the fall of 1540 he crossed the river to a point probably a little beyond the site of Yuma.

The historical record shows that, after Alarcón's departure, a land expedition led by Melchor Díaz, sent by Coronado to find Alarcón and obtain needed supplies, reached the river area, and Díaz found written on a tree the message "Alarcón reached this place; there are letters at the foot of this tree." Díaz learned from Indians who had seen Alarcón that Alarcón had given up hope of making contact with Coronado's expedition and left shortly before Díaz and his party arrived.

Díaz crossed the river, which he called *Rio de Tizon*, or Firebrand River. So even if Alarcón never set foot on land on the western bank of the river at Yuma or north of it, it is likely Díaz did. Although most historians contend Díaz never reached as far north as modern-day California, Forbes, writing first in the ***Pacific Historical Review*** and later in his book ***Warriors of the Colorado***, maintains Díaz traveled up-river, crossed it north of Blythe, and explored the desert of what is now Imperial County. Accounts of Díaz' expedition mention his finding mud volcanoes, geysers and paintpots. This could have been a description of an area near Mullet Island in the Salton Sea area. However, such descriptions of surface volcanic activity could also describe an area of activity southeast of Cerro Prieto in what is now Mexicali, Mexico. Freeman concluded that the description in the accounts of expedition of the field of hot springs gave the name to Volcano Lake southeast of Mexicali center (p. 20).

Carl O. Sauer's 1971 book ***Sixteenth Century North America***, citing archival documents in Madrid, Spain, concludes Díaz reached the Colorado 30 leagues north of the coast, then continued west with his soldiers "where there was neither water nor herbage, but many sand dunes, perhaps to the desert base of the mountains of San Diego County."

Whether Díaz reached California desert land or not, he was wounded in a freak accident, and died about twenty days later in early 1541. He probably was buried in Mexico, but since the historical accounts are vague, he may have been buried in the desert of Arizona or California. If his party of men carrying the wounded Díaz re-crossed the river, as stated in some accounts, then he was not buried in Imperial County, but instead in Arizona or Mexico.

Based on the various accounts of Alarcón's and Díaz' explorations, we may conclude that, two years before Cabrillo sighted San Diego Bay, the real European discovery of California occurred in 1540 on land in California's last county, the County of Imperial.

Two centuries later, in 1774, Juan Bautista de Anza led an expedition from Tubac, Arizona (second oldest European settlement west of the Mississippi River) across Southern Arizona and the Imperial Valley to begin the establishment of the system of [California missions \[see link 1\]](#), which were 300 years old in October 1997. The Anza party camped near the base of Mt. Signal, where it found water. Tom Simondi has provided an [excellent web site \[see link 2\]](#) on the missions from a typical

tourist's perspective. Kenneth A. Larson also has photographed the two Imperial Valley Mission sites [see Link 3] described below.

In 1781 a large group of colonists accompanied by 1,000 head of cattle arrived in the area. Although they were destined for the new city of Los Angeles, the Quechan Indians apparently believed their grassland was to be used by the settlers. The Indians attacked both missions in July 1781, killing Captain Don Fernando Rivera, Father Francis Tomás Hermenegildo Garcés, and most other males then present at the two missions. More than 100 Hispanic settlers were killed, and 74 were held captive until ransomed by Pedro Fages in 1782.



Mission Bicuñer monument

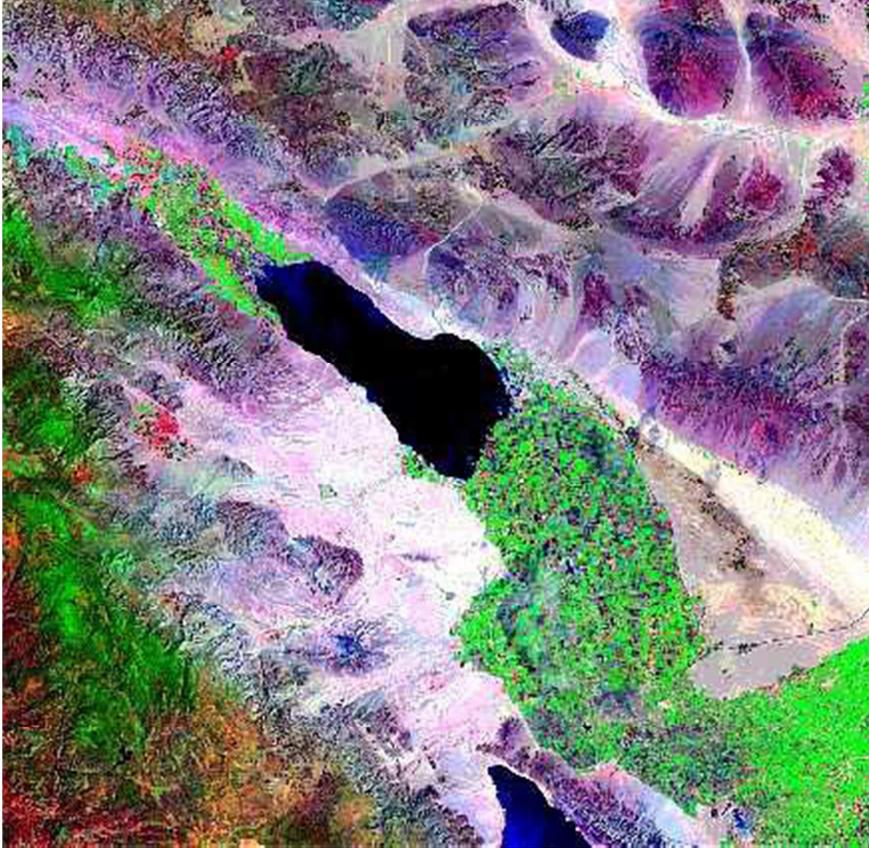
The two Colorado missions were small and no ruins exist of their wooden buildings. One mission is marked by a memorial plaque below an old cemetery about a mile south of Laguna Dam near the All-American Canal (although there has been substantial disagreement that the location of *Bicuñer* was north of *Purísima Concepción*; some reliable accounts place it near Pilot Knob). Forbes (***Warriors of the Colorado***, pp. 144-148) places it at the Quechan settlement at Xuksil, a village approximately 2½ miles south of Pilot Knob on the edge of a lagoon that may have been the source of the Rio Alamo. The village was across the Colorado River northwest of another Quechan village, San Pablo, although the village of Xuksil was called El Llanto in 1771 and San Pablo in 1774. John Francis Bannon's work places *Mission Bicuñer* at this location. The California Department of Parks and Recreation monument, however, is located on County Road 524 about 0.2 mile west of the intersection of Levee and Mehring Roads, 4.4 miles NE of Bard. The GPS coordinates are 32° 48'59.00" N, 114 ° 30'54.00"W.



Father Garcés monument in Winterhaven

Purísima Concepción's site is believed to have been on land presently occupied by St. Thomas Church beside the Indian Museum on Winterhaven's Indian Hill. California Historical Landmark No. 350 is located at Winterhaven's Mission St. Thomas near a statue of the legendary Father Garcés, who in addition to accompanying Anza had explored much of California and Arizona, as well the Sonora deserts of Mexico, roaming over the landscape, according to Officer (***Hispanic America 1536-1856***), even more than the famed Jesuit explorer, Father Eusebio Francisco Kino.

For more than 50 years after the Anza expeditions, there was little activity on the Colorado Desert. Dan Judkins, President of the Tubac Historical Society in Arizona, notes that American military explorers traveled in the desert from 1846-1848, and there was also a large group of American settlers who crossed into California in October of 1848. In 1849, the Yuma crossing was used by those traveling to California in search of gold, the so-called Southern-Route 49ers, perhaps as many as 10,000 or so. In 1857-58, the Butterfield Overland State trail from St. Louis, Missouri to San Francisco traversed the county. The Butterfield route, a portion of which crossed into Mexico, was generally regarded as the accepted route from Yuma to San Diego. There is an active effort to recognize the heritage of the [Yuma crossing](#) [see Link 4].



Salton Sink satellite view

In the mid-1800s, Dr. O. M. Rozengurt conceived of harnessing the Colorado River to irrigate the desert to the west, and in 1901 water from the Colorado was diverted and thus began the development of modern-day Imperial Valley. Similarly, land to the south of the U.S. border with Mexico was developed [in the same period \[see Link 5\]](#).

Sources:

Bancroft, Hubert Howe. *The Works, Vol. XVII, History of Arizona and New Mexico 1530-1888* (San Francisco: The History Publishing Co., 1889).

Bannon, John Francis. *The Spanish Borderlands Frontier 1513-1821* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974).

Bean, Walton. *California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

Beck, Warren A. and David A. Williams. *California* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972).

Bolton, Herbert Eugene. *Coronado* (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1949).

Corle, Edwin. *The Gila* (New York: Rinehart and Co., 1951).

Forbes, Jack D. "Melchior Díaz and the Discovery of Alta California," *Pacific Historical Review*. XXVII (November 1958), 351-358.

Forbes, Jack D. *Warriors of the Colorado: The Yumas of the Quechan Nation and Their Neighbors* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965).

Fradkin, Philip L. *A River No More* (New York: Alfred A.Knopf, 1981).

Freeman, Lewis R. *The Colorado River* (New York, Dodd, Mead and Co., 1923)

Etter, Patricia A. *To California on the Southern Route, 1849: A History and Annotated Bibliography*. (Spokane: The Arthur H. Clark Co., September 1998).

Lavender, David. *Colorado River Country* (New York: E. P. Dutton, Inc., 1982).

Officer, James D. *Hispanic America 1536-1856* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1987).

Pepper, Choral. *Desert Lore Of Southern California* (San Diego: Sunbelt Publications, 1994).

Rolle, Andrew F. *California* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1963).

Sauer, Carl O. *Sixteenth Century North America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

Udall, Stewart. *To the Inland Empire* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1987).

Waters, Frank. *The Colorado* (New York: Rinehart and Co., 1946).

This document was originally published on the web in 1997 at www.greencity.org/discovery.html. It was updated in January 2012 by its author, Douglas G. Detling, and posted at www.detling.us/?p=629.

Link 1: <http://www.californiamissions.com/>

Link 2: <http://missiontour.org/>

Link 3: http://www.missiontrailtoday.com/code/mission_colorador.htm

Link 4: <http://www.yumaheritage.com/>

Link 5: http://www.baja.com/lugares/info_mexicali.htm