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# Garrido, Juan

(fl. 1508–1536),

Jane G. Landers

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explorer, Indian fighter, and gold miner, was born in West Africa and traveled to Lisbon, Portugal, in the late fifteenth century. It is not known if he went to Portugal as a slave or as a free man: both were possible. From Lisbon, Garrido went to Seville and joined a Spanish expedition sailing for the island of Hispaniola (modern Haiti and the Dominican Republic). Garrido may have been part of Governor Nicolás de Ovando's expedition of 1503 and he stated he was a free man when he sailed for the Americas. Alongside other free blacks, Garrido took part in the “wars of pacification” against the Taíno Indians, and there he found a patron in Juan Ponce de León. In 1508 Ponce de León received a charter to conquer Puerto Rico, and Garrido went with him, as did several other free and enslaved blacks. Garrido identified himself in Spanish documents as “of black color, free” but never as a slave (cited in Alegría, 9). Once the Indians of Puerto Rico were defeated, Garrido became a gold miner and had several African slaves working for him. By that time native populations in the Caribbean were succumbing in large numbers to epidemic diseases introduced by the Europeans and Africans, and the Europeans needed more laborers to work their new mines, ranches, and sugar plantations. Garrido joined Spanish slave raiders sweeping through the Caribbean islands of Guadalupe, Dominica, and Santa Cruz. In 1512 Ponce de León received a new charter to further explore and conquer, and Garrido was with him when he “discovered” Bimini and claimed La Florida for Spain in March 1513. Garrido thus became the first African known to have reached what became the United States. Sometime thereafter he went to Cuba, where he joined Hernán Cortés's expedition to conquer the Aztec Empire in Mexico. Several native codices depict Garrido as Cortés's page, holding his horse or standing nearby him when Cortés received Indian emissaries.

In his postconquest petition to the Spanish Crown, Garrido stated that he had helped the Spaniards in the conquest of the Aztec Empire and had buried the bodies of dead Spaniards when the fighting ended. He also claimed to have built a chapel at the site of the burials in 1521 and to have been the first person to plant wheat in Mexico. For these services, Garrido received a plot of land and several government posts, including doorman of the Mexico City council and guardian of the Chapultepec aqueduct. He later took part in expeditions to Michoacán and Zacatula, Mexico, and he returned to the latter to direct another gold mining operation with a gang of black slaves.

In 1533 the experienced explorer, Indian fighter, and gold miner joined Cortés once again to search for black Amazons in Baja California. This final adventure came to naught, and Garrido returned to Mexico in 1536. He died sometime thereafter, leaving behind a wife and children. The name of Garrido's wife is unknown, but she may have been an indigenous woman since few African or Spanish women lived in New Spain in the early post-conquest years. Garrido never became wealthy as some of the Spanish expedition leaders did, but he lived an adventurous, free, propertied, and respectable life in the Americas and made his mark on history.

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## Further Reading

Alegría, Ricardo E. *Juan Garrido, el conquistador negro en las Antillas, Florida, México, y California c. 1502-1540* (1990)

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