
Garrido, Juan

(fl. c. 1500–c. 1547), conquistador and early resident of Mexico City,

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was probably born in West Africa during the last decades of the fifteenth century. As a youth, Garrido was sold to Portuguese slave traders and taken to Lisbon, the kingdom's capital and major trade center. In Lisbon, Garrido converted to Christianity. Around 1500, he traveled to, or was taken from, Portugal to Seville, in the kingdom of Castile. After about seven years, Garrido left Seville a free man and traveled to the Caribbean where he became a participant in Spanish conquests.

Most of the details concerning Garrido's life are preserved in a 1538 petition in which he solicited royal favor for his participation in Spanish conquests. Unfortunately, Garrido did not make mention of his life in Portugal or Africa. Instead, he began his narrative by noting that he traveled to the Americas as a free man arriving sometime before 1510.

Even though a freed slave, Garrido's life in the Americas was typical of many early conquistadores in that he participated in a series of conquests hoping to earn enough to settle or, preferably, return to Iberia. Ideally, a successful conquest would allow a first-time conquistador to earn enough to organize and lead a later expedition in which further spoils could be reaped. Consequently, many men arriving in the Caribbean saw conquests as steppingstones to greater and greater reward—an ideal which rarely occurred in practice. Nevertheless, Garrido's choices in the Caribbean reflect this desire.

Shortly after arriving on the island of Hispaniola, Garrido joined the company of Capitan Juan Ponce de León. Although called a company and led by a captain, these groups were more like private business ventures than military units. Individuals who joined conquest expeditions had to provide their own weapons and supplies. Wealthier individuals who could afford horses or an harquebus, and who helped pay for more costly expenses including chartering ships, would receive a greater share of the expedition's spoils than those who could only support themselves. While organizers received the title "captain," no other military ranks existed other than the distinction between *gente de caballo* (horseman) and *gente de pie* (footman). As a recent arrival with little wealth, Garrido served as a footman in Ponce de León's company.

Although Garrido's petition did not specify a year, he was most likely a member of Ponce de León's company in the 1508 conquest of Puerto Rico. On this expedition, Garrido helped found Caparra, the first Spanish settlement on the island. For the next several years, Garrido maintained a close relationship with Ponce de León. After participating in several small voyages to the islands of Guadeloupe and Dominica, in March 1513 Garrido joined Ponce de León's expedition to Florida. Although the conquistadores skirmished with Native Americans on the peninsula, the expedition did

not found any settlements nor did it discover much wealth. Worse yet, upon returning to Puerto Rico in October 1513, the expedition discovered that the settlement of Caparra had been attacked by Caribs and burned to the ground.

The lack of profit from the Florida expedition and the destruction of Caparra led Garrido to look for opportunities elsewhere. In 1511 Diego Velazquez de Cuellar had begun the conquest of Cuba but faced steep indigenous resistance. Likely disillusioned with Ponce de León's immediate prospects, Garrido probably joined Velazquez's force sometime in 1513 or 1514. The efforts of Garrido and other new additions helped turn the tide and by 1515 Velazquez had deemed the conquest complete. After 1515, Garrido may have returned to Puerto Rico where he had a small gold mining operation. His probanza stated that he spent many years there suggesting a return between the conquest of Cuba and his future exploits.

As it became increasingly clear how much territory existed beyond the Caribbean islands, adventurous men began to plan new conquests. Thanks to his participation under Velazquez, Garrido was well acquainted with the prominent figures seeking to push beyond Cuba. In 1518 Garrido signed on to an expedition being organized by Hernando Cortés that was licensed to explore and trade along the Yucatan coast. In November of that year, Garrido left Santiago, along with six hundred men, and headed west toward the mainland.

Although officially limited to exploration, Cortés and his fellow organizers fully intended to engage in conquest, if they found a lucrative region. By July 1519, the expedition had found what they had hoped for: a densely populated, wealthy indigenous civilization—the Aztec-Mexica Empire. For the next two years, Garrido would fight alongside Cortés and thousands of indigenous allies. Although Garrido's petition did not dwell on specific events, it suggests that he was present at the first meeting between Cortés and the Aztec Emperor Moctezuma (8 November 1519), that he almost lost his life in the *noche triste* (the sorrowful night, 30 June 1520) when Cortés and his men were forced to flee the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, and was present for the final capitulation of Emperor Cuauhtémoc to Cortés on 13 August 1521.

Following the conquest of Tenochtitlan, Garrido helped in the reconstruction of the city. From 1521 through 1523, Garrido remained a resident in Mexico City. In 1521, shortly after the conquest, Garrido was the first person to erect a private chapel. Probably a simple structure, the "Chapel of the Martyrs" was located near the Tacuba causeway where many Spaniards lost their lives during the *noche triste*. Eventually, the church of San Hipólito would replace the chapel. During this time, Garrido also maintained a small agricultural plot near Cortés's temporary headquarters in Coyoacán where he cultivated vegetables. Through this small economic venture, Garrido became the first person to cultivate wheat on the mainland of the Americas. Although he started with only a handful of seeds, after several years Garrido's harvest, and that of others using his seed, came to supply the Spanish population with much desired wheat bread. After several years in Mexico City, Garrido once again looked to conquest as a means of furthering his position. In 1523, Garrido accompanied Antonio de Caravajal on a small expedition to Zacatula and Michoacán.

By the time he returned, Mexico City had begun to rise from the ashes of Tenochtitlan. On 10 February 1525, Garrido was granted a house-plot within the city and formally made a *vecino* (legally recognized resident). For the next several years, Garrido was granted several small bureaucratic posts. He served as *portero* (doorkeeper) of the municipal council. He also was charged with overseeing and protecting

the Chapultepec aqueduct that supplied the city with fresh water, an extremely vital resource. Finally, he served as a *pregonero* (crier). All three positions carried salaries and afforded him a modest degree of status within the post-conquest society. At some point in the late 1520s, Garrido married Francisca Ramírez, a Spanish woman. The status of his spouse suggests that Garrido's attempts to improve his status and economic position had been successful. The couple would have three children.

Marriage and urban life did not put an end to Garrido's conquest exploits. In 1528 he made a brief mining expedition back to Zacatula. In 1534 he once again joined up with Hernando Cortés in an expedition along the Pacific coastline of Mexico. The expedition would travel as far Baja California. On that voyage, Garrido was placed in charge of a number of African and indigenous slaves brought as potential miners. Although the expedition established a tenuous settlement on the Baja Peninsula, Garrido did not stay long and returned to Mexico by July 1536. The negligible returns from this last venture may have increased the tension between Garrido and his wife. In 1536 an investigation into accusations of witchcraft in the capital uncovered evidence that Francisca had considered hiring a *hechicero* (enchanter) to help "encourage" Juan to leave her. Certainly financial hardship was on Garrido's mind because within two years he would draft his royal petition asking for remuneration.

Although few records exist for his life after 1538, we do know that after composing his petition he traveled back across the Atlantic in order to personally present his request at the royal court. This undertaking would have come at a considerable cost considering the distance and time required for such a voyage. By 1541, Garrido had traveled to the court of Emperor Charles V in Madrid and was present in Ciudad Real. Once in Castile, he had become embroiled in a legal dispute over the status of an Indian named Pedro who had been employed as Garrido's servant during his travel from Mexico. After unsuccessfully trying to sell Pedro as a slave to residents of Madrid, Garrido went to Ciudad Real where he found a buyer.

Aware of the legal prohibitions against enslavement of natives, Pedro successfully petitioned the authorities for his release and freedom. Although the issue of Pedro's freedom would linger until at least 1544, no further records of Garrido's trip to Spain exist. Most scholars assume that he died in Mexico sometime around 1547. Between 1547 and 1550 a new set of petitions for remuneration were prepared by conquistadores and their descendants. While Garrido provided information on his own behalf, by the time the documents left Mexico Garrido's entry noted that he was deceased. A major epidemic in 1547 led to widespread deaths among all colonial residents; Garrido may have been among the victims.

Garrido's life represents an amazing window into the conquest era. On the one hand, he led an exceptional life overcoming the bonds of slavery, fighting against native empires, and even visiting the court of Emperor Charles V. On the other hand, Garrido led a typical life for a conquistador. He participated in a series of conquests, each time hoping that the conquest would bring sufficient reward to improve his position or to return to Spain. Like most conquistadores this proved an illusive quest. Although he was a member of Cortés's expedition, his low position as a footman did not warrant lucrative rewards. Consequently, he sought financial security through typical means. He used his agricultural skills to become a minor businessman and supply a rare and highly desired crop. His social connections and conquest service allowed him to acquire minor bureaucratic posts—a feat many European conquistadores would never achieve. Yet toward the end of his life, his financial situation may still have been less than he desired. As a middle-aged man he continued to risk his life on

conquest expeditions and even a transatlantic crossing. Unfortunately, we do not know if Garrido achieved his goals. Nevertheless, his life is an extraordinary example of the success and failures that could befall a conquistador.

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