



New Discovery Shows Spanish Imprint In U.S.

August 12, 2013 12:00 PM

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When people think of U.S. history, they often jump to the pilgrims at Plymouth Rock. But a new archaeological discovery shows just how far inland Spanish explorers traveled, decades before the English arrived. Kenneth C. Davis talks about some of the hidden Spanish history in the U.S.

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CELESTE HEADLEE, HOST:

I'm Celeste Headlee and this is TELL ME MORE from NPR News, Michel Martin is away. Coming up, the design company, Paul Frank, offended some people last year when they hosted a powwow-themed party. They've apologized, and now they're partnering with Native American artists. We'll learn more about that project in just a few minutes. But first we go to another part of history that's often neglected in the textbooks, or too often glanced over. I'm talking about the legacy of the Spanish in the U.S.

We all know Spain was early to the New World, we learn about Christopher Columbus and the Nina, the Pinta, the Santa Maria in grade school. But for many people, their understanding of American history leaps from Columbus straight to the English pilgrims on Plymouth Rock. If we think about the Spanish as colonizers at all, it's in California, New Mexico, or Texas.

But a new archaeological discovery shows just how far inland

Spanish explorers eventually roamed on our eastern shores. Joining us to talk about that and some of the other hidden Spanish history in the U.S. is Kenneth C. Davis. He's a historian and author of the best-selling "Don't Know Much About..." series of books. Welcome back.

KENNETH C. DAVIS: Always a pleasure to be with you Celeste, and one of my favorite subjects here.

HEADLEE: Well let's talk about this discovery of what's believed to be possibly Fort San Juan near the Great Smoky Mountains. What makes this so interesting?

DAVIS: Well, it's interesting because, as you mentioned, when we think of the Spanish in the Americas we think of Columbus, we think of Cortes in Mexico and Pizarro in Peru, and the dreadful history there as the Spanish conquistadors certainly came and conquered that part of America.

But Spain had ambitions in what is now the United States of America, in North America as well. And part of that ambition was to send explorers in from the Atlantic Coast on the eastern seaboard of the future United States, to find a route into those Mexican silver mines and gold mines. They just didn't have a very good sense of geography.

HEADLEE: Many people in those days seemed to have a very odd understanding of the map. This is something that you talk about in your book, "America's Hidden History" - is how much the role of the Spaniards in the United States is downplayed now. How much we've forgotten in our textbooks, as kids learn about our country's history. Why is that? Why have we forgotten about Spain on the east?

DAVIS: Well, it goes back to the real roots of America as an Anglo-American colony, and the fact that Spain was the most hated enemy, and that was a holdover that lasted a long time. As we know, winners do write history. And when it came time to write the narrative history of America's founding and discovery, it really had an Anglo-American - Virginia - New England tilt to it. And we left the whole Spanish part of the story out.

HEADLEE: Well, you know, I was reminded of this very issue

recently. During an NBA finals game, there was a lot of criticism and noise because a young Hispanic boy - an American-Hispanic boy - sang the national anthem in English. But he was wearing a mariachi outfit. And you just got lots of tweets and e-mails and angry people saying, why on earth would they let this kid sing Spanish - you know, is he going to sing the National Anthem in Spanish, is that what's next? Very angry about even the possibility of using the Spanish language. And yet, in your book at least, we learned Spanish was spoken here before English was.

DAVIS: In much more of the country, and for a lot longer period. There is actually a movement called "La Reconquista," and forgive my poor Spanish in saying that, that harkens - that really wants to recapture, in a sense, what was once Spanish-America.

Of course, it went far beyond what we think of today as Hispanic-America, Latin America, South and Central America into Mexico. Of course, the Spanish controlled all the way up into California. They may have gone even further up on the West Coast. And as this fort demonstrates, they were exploring in the interior of the eastern coast of America in the 1560s. So this is a very, very old story.

HEADLEE: Our guest is historian Kenneth C. Davis. He's the creator and author of the best-selling "Don't Know Much About..." series of books. Let's go a little bit further, Kenneth, into the idea of why some of this history is now hidden. The English - and you alluded to this - the English planned to settle, the Spanish did not? Is that why we ended up being largely an Anglo colony?

DAVIS: Well, it's a lot more complicated than that. Certainly the Spanish approach to colonization and to exploiting the New World was very different. They essentially set up large areas that were the property of a single man, in many cases. And they were much more interested, particularly in Christianizing the Native Americans. So there was a much more of a mission-based approach to settlement. That the mission became the center, both in Florida, as well as certainly in California.

HEADLEE: Yeah.

DAVIS: I'm reminded of the fact that in 1776, while a bunch of guys were getting together in Philadelphia to write a piece of paper in English, San Francisco was being founded. So we don't...

HEADLEE: By the Spanish.

DAVIS: That's exactly right. The first mission was being founded in San Francisco. So the two tracks really run parallel for a very, very long time, and we lose that.

HEADLEE: You know, I'm certainly familiar with the Spanish colonization and mission. I mean, I'm from Mission Viejo in California. But what finally ended the Spanish in the east, in Florida, in places like New Orleans - all the places where the Spanish actually got to. How did they leave?

DAVIS: Well, a lot of it has to do with international politics on a much larger scale than what was happening in America. Certainly, European politics of the time. Spain had, of course, created the first global empire. We know from childhood that Magellan sailed around the globe and he really claimed much of that globe for Spain. That's why Spain possessed the Philippines until the United States took them away in the Spanish-American war at the beginning of the 20th century.

So this is not an empire that just disappeared overnight, it was a long, slow decline. Certainly, part of it was that pesky Spanish Armada defeat in 1588, but that was only the beginning of the end, not the end itself. And just - Spain went into a long decline. As I said, also, they had a very different approach to how they were setting up and establishing colonies in what would become the United States. Very different from the English approach, which was to send over essentially settlers to create settlements here, that were very, very successful obviously.

HEADLEE: Kenneth C. Davis is a historian and the author of the best-selling "Don't Know Much About..." series of books. His most recent book is "Don't Know Much About the American Presidents." He joined us from our bureau in New York City. Thank you so much, Kenneth.

DAVIS: It is always a pleasure to talk some history.

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