

## *Vasco Nunez de Balboa*



Figure 1: *Vasco Núñez de Balboa.*

(1475–1519). The first European to look upon the Pacific Ocean from the shores of the New World was Vasco Núñez de Balboa. The Spanish adventurer and explorer also led a colony in what is now Panama that was the first stable European settlement on the mainland of the Americas.

Balboa was born in 1475 in Jerez de los Caballeros, Spain, into the lower ranks of the nobility. In 1500 he sailed for the Americas on an exploring expedition to what is now Colombia. He later settled on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola. There his unsuccessful attempts at farming led him into debt. In 1510, hoping to escape his creditors, he stowed away on a ship bound for the new colony of San Sebastián, on the northern coast of Colombia.

When the ship arrived at San Sebastián, the expedition discovered that the colony's founder had fled and abandoned the survivors. Balboa persuaded his superiors to transfer the colony to Darién, on the Isthmus of Panama, where the colonists founded the town of Santa María de la Antigua. Balboa soon became the head of the colony.

From local Indians, Balboa learned of a great ocean beyond the mountains and of the gold to be found there. He sent word to Spain that he needed reinforcements to explore the area. In Spain an expedition was organized, but Balboa was not given command. The king instead sent Pedro Arias Dávila as commander and as governor of Darién.

Meanwhile Balboa, without waiting for reinforcements, had set out across the isthmus. It took about 25 days for his party of 190 Spaniards and hundreds of Indians to cross 45 miles (70 kilometers) of dense jungle. On September 29, 1513, Balboa reached the shores of the Pacific Ocean, which he called the South Sea. He took possession of the ocean and all lands washed by it in the name of the Spanish monarch.

When Balboa returned to Darién, conflict arose immediately between him and the new governor. Balboa received grudging permission to explore the South Sea but was then summoned home and arrested on the false charge of instigating a rebellion. He was found guilty and was beheaded on January 12, 1519, in Acla, near Darién.

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