

Gaspar and Miguel Corte Real Biography

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Biography

The Portuguese brothers Gaspar (died 1501) and Miguel (died 1502) Corte Real were among the early explorers of the northeastern coast of America.

The Corte Real brothers were members of a noble Portuguese family. Gaspar was apparently the more aggressive of the two. In 1499 he learned of a grant from King Manoel I to a fellow Portuguese, John Fernandes, to undertake an expedition into the North Atlantic. Manoel sought to establish Portuguese control over a Northwest Passage to India and the Spice Islands. He also wanted someone who would establish Portugal's claims to any new lands that might be discovered in this area. Fernandes did not immediately make use of his grant from the King. Gaspar seized the opportunity to obtain royal permission to undertake his own exploratory expedition in May 1500.

Gaspar Corte Real left Lisbon in the summer of 1500 in a fleet of three ships, financed by his family. He sailed first to Greenland and spent several months exploring its shoreline. During this time he contacted the natives, whom he compared to the wild natives of Brazil. His ships stayed in Greenland's waters until the winter icebergs forced them to leave. Gaspar and his ships returned to Portugal in late 1500.

The following year Gaspar organized another expedition, this time in conjunction with his brother Miguel. Their expedition departed in May 1501, again bound for unknown lands to the northwest. When they reached land after about 5 weeks, they found themselves on the shores of Labrador. They explored south along the coast, charting approximately 600 miles of shore.

At this point Miguel took two of the ships and returned to Portugal to report their findings. Gaspar, meanwhile, continued south and disappeared. Miguel, now back in Portugal, undertook an expedition to find him. This rescue mission was sanctioned by King Manoel, who also promised Miguel any new islands he might discover. Miguel set out in May 1502 with three ships. The three ships traveled together to Newfoundland, where they decided to divide and meet later. Two of them rendezvoused at the agreed-upon time, but Miguel Corte Real, like Gaspar, was never seen again, presumably lost in a storm.

King Manoel, a friend of the Corte Real family, financed a search expedition in 1503. He forbade a third brother, Vasqueanes, an important government official, from undertaking his own rescue attempt.