

Routes Not Chains: African Travelers and the Making of Early North America



Reframing the Arrival Narrative

The dominant narrative of African presence in North America begins in 1619, when a Dutch ship delivered roughly twenty captive Africans to the shore of Point Comfort, Virginia. That date has settled into popular memory as the beginning - the moment when Black life in what would become the United States commenced. This essay argues that the beginning had already passed decades, and in some threads centuries, before that ship appeared.

A word on terms is needed at the outset. When this essay speaks of “North America,” it does not mean the territory later claimed by the United States, nor the boundaries a modern map would draw. It means the imperial geographic space that Spanish, French, and other colonial powers moved through and contested in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries - the deserts and pueblos of the Southwest, the Gulf Coast, the settlements of Acadia and New France, the river corridors of the Mississippi Valley, and the New Spain frontier that reached far north of present-day borders. This is a continent understood in the terms of its own era, before national lines carved it into the shapes we now recognize. Reading it this way matters, because the people at the center of this essay moved through a world whose borders were still being drawn around them.

Between the 1520s and the early 1600s, African people moved through this space as explorers, interpreters, guides, healers, conquistadors, and traders. They crossed deserts, followed rivers, negotiated with Indigenous nations, worked within colonial legal systems, and left traces - some vivid, some fragmentary - in the documentary record. Many did not arrive in chains. Some arrived on their feet, and they walked.

These were not isolated anomalies whose stories somehow prove a rule of universal subjugation. They were participants in patterns of movement, exchange, and negotiation that the conventional narrative has obscured. The archive does not lack all evidence of their presence. Often, the record keepers lacked the framework to see what stood in front of them. This essay works to recover what was there - and to be honest about where the evidence is firm, where it rests on institutional traces, and where it reaches toward patterns the record only partly preserves.

That honesty shapes the essay's structure. The argument moves through three tiers of proof, and it names them plainly, so the reader always knows the ground beneath each claim:

- **Tier one: documented individuals.** People whose lives survive in named sources - chronicles, petitions, contracts - that we can point to directly.
- **Tier two: legal records and institutional traces.** Laws, licenses, property deeds, and administrative documents that register African presence within colonial systems, even when they do not name every individual.
- **Tier three: inferred wider patterns and archival silences.** The larger networks the evidence implies but does not fully document - where the honest work is to reconstruct carefully and to name the silence as itself a kind of evidence.

This ordering is deliberate. It begins with the firmest ground and moves outward toward the harder questions, so the essay earns its broader claims rather than assuming them. The people who walked this land before 1619 carried skills, languages, and cosmological frameworks already mature when they stepped onto terrain no European map had yet rendered accurately. Slavery, when it came in full force, interrupted a story already in motion. It did not begin it.

Tier One: The Documented Lives

Estevanico: The Explorer the Record Tried to Forget

The story of African movement through this continent begins with a Moroccan man whose name survives in fragments. He was born in the town of Azemmour, on Morocco's Atlantic coast, around 1500. Contemporary Spanish accounts described him as a negro alárabe - an Arabic-speaking Black man. Some scholars have proposed that his given name may have been Mustafa Zemmouri, connecting him to the naming conventions of his hometown, though this remains a reasoned suggestion rather than a settled fact. What is known with confidence is that in 1522 he was sold into slavery to the Spanish nobleman Andrés Dorantes de Carranza in the Portuguese-controlled Moroccan port of Azemmour. Five years later he crossed the Atlantic - not as cargo in a slave ship's hold but as a member of a Spanish expedition, accompanying his enslaver into one of the most disastrous colonial ventures in North American history.

The Narváez expedition of 1527 was commissioned by Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor and King of Spain, to claim and colonize the territory of Florida. Pánfilo de Narváez - a seasoned but catastrophically unlucky commander - led approximately three hundred men, Estevanico among them, to a landfall near present-day Tampa Bay in April 1528. From the outset the venture was doomed. Narváez separated his land force from his support ships, marched inland in search of a golden kingdom called Apalachen, and by late summer found his men starving, diseased, and stranded on the Florida panhandle near the mouth of the Wakulla River.

Desperate to survive, the remaining men built five crude barges - melting down their equipment for nails, forging tools from their armor - and launched into the Gulf of Mexico, hoping to reach Spanish settlements in Mexico. The barges drifted along the Texas coast through the autumn and winter of 1528. One, carrying Estevanico, Dorantes, Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, and Alonso del Castillo, grounded near what is now Galveston Island - a place Cabeza de Vaca named Isla de Malhado, the Isle of Misfortune. By spring 1529, only fifteen survivors remained. Narváez himself had perished at sea.

What followed was one of the most remarkable journeys in the history of North American exploration. The four survivors were captured and held by Indigenous communities along the Texas coast, laboring for years among Coahuiltecan peoples southwest of the Guadalupe River. During this captivity, something extraordinary took hold. Cabeza de Vaca and Estevanico began to function as healers within the communities that held them - combining Christian prayers, the sign of the cross, herbal remedies, and practical medical knowledge such as wound binding to treat illness and injury. The communities they encountered granted them a standing that transcended captivity. They became figures of practical and spiritual power, men whose touch was believed to cure.

Cabeza de Vaca documented this journey in *La Relación*, published in 1542 - among the earliest European-authored accounts of the North American interior. In it he describes the four survivors moving among multiple Indigenous nations - Avavares, Arbadaos, and others - sometimes as captives, sometimes as healers, always negotiating survival across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Estevanico's role was not peripheral. As a multilingual man - Arabic-speaking, conversant in Spanish and Portuguese, and quick to learn Indigenous languages - he served as interpreter and intermediary. His capacity to communicate, build trust, and adapt was the infrastructure on which the survivors' endurance depended.

By 1536 the four men had traveled - on foot, across years and roughly two thousand miles - from the Texas Gulf Coast through the interior to Spanish settlements in northern Mexico. Estevanico was among the first people of African descent to traverse the region that would become the American Southwest, and his crossing is often described as part of the first documented traverse of the continent's southern expanse by survivors of a European expedition - nearly three centuries before Lewis and Clark.

The survivors' accounts of northern lands captivated Spanish authorities in Mexico City. Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza commissioned a follow-up expedition to search for the legendary Seven Cities of Cíbola, and Estevanico - whose frontier experience made him

uniquely qualified - was assigned to guide and scout ahead for the party led by Fray Marcos de Niza in 1539. He traveled in advance, accompanied by Sonoran guides and carrying trade goods, moving through what is now Sonora and Arizona, sending word back through Indigenous messengers. By the time he reached the Zuni pueblo of Hawikuh, in present-day western New Mexico, he was operating largely as an independent agent.

His arrival at Hawikuh ended in his death. The circumstances remain debated. Spanish accounts - filtered through Marcos de Niza, who himself may never have reached the pueblo - report that Estevanico was killed by Zuni warriors, though the reasons are uncertain. What is certain is that an African-born man, formerly enslaved, walked from the Gulf Coast of Florida to the pueblos of New Mexico over more than a decade, and died on terrain Europeans would not map for years.

How to read Estevanico is not simple, and the honest answer resists easy resolution. He was legally enslaved. His movement was enabled by his status as property assigned to an expedition. Yet his function - interpreter, healer, scout, first-contact envoy - exceeded the category that defined him. He operated in frontier spaces where Spanish authority was nominal, and survival depended on competence rather than rank. The colonial record preserves him through the chronicles of others; his own voice is absent. We know where he went, but not what he thought about being there. The Archive refuses both extremes: he was neither a passive victim swept into another's story, nor a liberated hero who transcended his condition. He was a man whose movements leave a trace precisely because they created friction - with Spanish authority, with Indigenous sovereignty, with the very category of "enslaved" that he functionally exceeded.

Mathieu da Costa: The Interpreter Who Spoke Across Worlds

If Estevanico's story places African presence in the Southwest, Mathieu da Costa's shifts the frame northward - to the Atlantic coast of what is now Canada and the waterways of New France. And where Estevanico was enslaved, da Costa was free. Where Estevanico moved by assignment, da Costa moved by contract - a legally binding agreement between a free African man and the leaders of a French colonial venture.

Da Costa was likely born in West Africa, possibly in the Benin region, around the late sixteenth century. The details of his early life are sparse, but by the early 1600s he was active as an interpreter among European merchants along the West African coast - work that demanded fluency across languages and familiarity with the protocols of intercultural trade. He is understood to have spoken French, Dutch, and Portuguese, along with pidgin forms - including a Basque-based trade jargon that served as a lingua franca in North Atlantic fishing and trading communities. Whether he also spoke specific Indigenous languages of the Northeast, or relied on pidgin to communicate, remains uncertain. But his linguistic capacity was remarkable enough that competing European powers sought his services.

Da Costa was contracted by Pierre Dugua, Sieur de Monts - the French entrepreneur who held a royal monopoly on North American trade - to serve as interpreter for French expeditions in what is now Atlantic Canada. He worked in the orbit of Samuel de Champlain during the years around 1604 to 1608, present in the settlements of Acadia - encompassing present-day Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island - and

along the St. Lawrence. French records reference him in terms that likely understate his role, but by available evidence he was among the first recorded free Black people to live in what is now Canada.

His value to the French project was not marginal. The survival of early Acadian settlements depended on successful trade with Indigenous nations - the Mi'kmaq, Maliseet, and others whose cooperation determined whether the colonies would eat, receive furs, or face attack. Da Costa stood between these worlds, translating not only words but intentions and cultural protocols. A mistranslation in a trade negotiation could mean the difference between alliance and violence. His competence was not optional. It was infrastructure.

His story also illuminates the legal complexity of free Black life in the early colonial world. He was a free man who contracted his labor, negotiated terms, and operated as a professional. Yet his freedom was not uncomplicated. During a commercial dispute, Dutch rivals seized Dugua de Monts's ships near Tadoussac on the St. Lawrence, and da Costa was caught up in the conflict; he was later imprisoned as a result of a legal dispute with a merchant. After the late 1610s the record goes silent. His later life, his death, and his own account of his experiences are lost.

What survives is a name in administrative documents - a contract, a reference in correspondence, the record of a legal conflict. Da Costa exists in the archive as a professional whose services competing powers sought, and whose legal freedom was tested by the same colonial system that profited from his skills. The absence of his own voice is itself significant. We know which languages he spoke, but not how he described his work or his experience of being a free African man in a colonial world both dependent on and hostile to his presence. Naming that absence - insisting the silence is itself evidence - is part of the Archive's method.

Tier Two: The Legal Traces

Juan Garrido: The Petitioner Who Defined Himself

Juan Garrido appeared in the first essay of this collection, where his life illustrated the range of African roles in early Caribbean and Atlantic colonial expansion — a free man crossing the ocean as a member of Spanish expeditions, sharing in the founding of settlements, building a life in the colonial world. That was his function there: to widen our sense of what African participation in the early Americas looked like.

His purpose in this essay is different, and the distinction matters. Here, Garrido is not evidence of movement or occupational range. Here he is evidence of something more specific and, for this collection, more pointed: **Black legal self-authorship within continental imperial space.** In Essay 1 he helped us see where Africans went and what they did. In Essay 2 he helps us see how an African man used the machinery of empire to define himself, on paper, in his own words, on the North American mainland. The first was a story of presence. This is a story of authorship.

Garrido's probanza de méritos y servicios - his formal petition to the Spanish Crown, dated September 27, 1538 - is one of the most striking documents in the history of African presence in the Americas. It is an African-authored legal text: a Black man,

writing through the conventions of Spanish law, addressing the Crown and asserting his own claims to recognition and standing. The petition opens with a declaration of identity, in which Garrido names himself as a Black resident of Mexico City appearing before the court to record how he served the Crown in the conquest and settlement of New Spain.

In that opening, Garrido does something quietly profound. He names himself. He states his race not as a mark of subordination but as a fact within a legal instrument. He locates himself in place - a resident of Mexico City, a man with standing. And he frames his request within the bureaucratic architecture of empire - a *probanza*, the very mechanism every other conquistador used to seek reward.

The petition recounts his service across decades: his role in Ponce de León's 1508 expedition to Puerto Rico and the founding of Caparra; his presence in Cuba and the wider Caribbean; his participation in the campaign against the Aztec capital; his claim to have been the first to cultivate wheat in New Spain, at his own expense; his civic roles in Mexico City, including guardianship of the Chapultepec aqueduct that supplied the capital's water. Each claim is an assertion: I was there. I contributed. I built. I served.

What makes the *probanza* matter for this essay is not its content alone but its function within continental space. Garrido used the Spanish colonial legal system - designed to administer conquest and manage hierarchy - to assert his rights as a man of African descent on the North American mainland. He did not petition as a supplicant begging mercy. He petitioned as a conquistador demanding recognition, through the same legal instrument and rhetorical framework Spanish conquistadors used. The document, preserved among historical collections of early American manuscripts, survives as evidence that Black legal agency in North America predates emancipation by centuries - and that the impulse to claim recognition through law is as old as African presence on this continent.

The Code Noir and the Legal Ground of Free Black Life

Individual petitions like Garrido's show what one person could do within colonial law. But the legal traces extend further - into the statutes and administrative frameworks that structured African life across whole territories, and that registered African presence even where they aimed to constrain it.

The clearest example on the North American mainland is the Code Noir. First enacted in 1685 for the French Caribbean and extended to Louisiana in 1724, this body of law imposed a harsh racial order and severe punishments. Its intent was control. Yet the same code contained provisions that recognized certain rights of freed people - the capacity to own property, to conduct business, to marry, to participate in commercial life. These were not generous concessions; they were the byproducts of a legal system trying to manage a population it could neither ignore nor fully suppress. And precisely because the law recognized these rights, it generated records - the deeds, licenses, and contracts through which free people of color, the *gens de couleur libres*, entered the documentary account.

This is the essential point about tier-two evidence: the law that sought to bind African life also inscribed it. Every property deed registered to a free Black owner, every trading license issued, every marriage recorded is a trace the colonial system produced almost

against its own intent. The Code Noir is both an instrument of subordination and, read carefully, an archive of the very people it tried to constrain.

Tier Three: The Wider Patterns and the Silences

The Fur Trade as a Three-Way Contact Zone

The documented lives of Estevanico, da Costa, and Garrido, and the legal frameworks that registered free Black life, bring us to the harder and more expansive question: was African presence in the continental interior systemic rather than exceptional? Here the essay moves onto its most inferential ground, and it is important to say so plainly. The evidence in this tier is real, but it is scattered, fragmentary, and often preserved only in the margins of records kept for other purposes. What follows is careful reconstruction, not settled proof - and the distinction is part of the argument.

The conventional narrative of the North American fur trade treats it as a two-sided relationship: European traders and Indigenous nations, sometimes mediated by mixed-race intermediaries, most often identified as French-Indigenous Métis. But the trade spanned roughly three centuries and an enormous territory - from the St. Lawrence Valley through the Great Lakes, down the Mississippi to the Gulf, across the Plains toward the Pacific. Given the documented African presence in adjacent colonial contexts - Estevanico in the Southwest in the 1530s, da Costa in New France in the early 1600s, free Black communities across the Spanish and French Americas throughout - the question is less whether Africans were present in these networks than whether historians have looked for them.

French Louisiana offers the firmest documentary footing. Under French rule, the gens de couleur libres held a legal status more flexible than that of their counterparts in the British colonies to the east. Within the constraints of the Code Noir, free people of color could obtain trading licenses, hold property, and conduct commerce with Indigenous nations. The colonial archives of Louisiana - the notarial records of New Orleans, the sacramental registers of St. Louis Cathedral, and the administrative correspondence of French and later Spanish officials - preserve the names and transactions of free Black residents who lived within this legal world.

Among the most instructive documented cases is that of the man remembered as Jean Baptiste Point du Sable, of African descent, who by the 1780s and 1790s operated a substantial trading establishment at the mouth of the Chicago River - a post that dealt in furs and goods along the Great Lakes network and that later British and American records describe in some detail, including an inventory of his property taken at its sale in 1800. His establishment stands as one of the most fully documented examples of an African-descended trader operating as a principal, not a laborer, within the continental trade. He was not an anomaly conjured to prove a point; he was a documented proprietor whose holdings the record itself enumerates.

The genre of the gens de couleur libres trader extends beyond any single figure. In the lower Mississippi Valley, free families of color such as the descendants of Marie Thérèse Coincoin along the Cane River - who by the late eighteenth century held land, livestock, and commercial interests in the Natchitoches district - appear in Louisiana's colonial and territorial records as property holders and participants in the regional economy that the

fur and hide trade helped sustain. Their standing is documented in deeds, censuses, and church registers that survive in Louisiana archives. These are tier-two traces feeding a tier-three argument: named families, real records, pointing toward a broader participation the full extent of which the archive only partly preserves.

Enslaved Africans participated in the trade as well, and here the evidence grows thinner and the honest reconstruction more demanding. Their labor hauled goods, maintained posts, interpreted, and performed the physical work of an enterprise that ran across thousands of miles of river and wilderness. They surface in the record mainly as unnamed presences - line items in provisioning accounts, references in expedition narratives, entries in the ledgers of trading companies. The colonial records document African participation when it intersected with the institutions' interests - a license, a deed, a legal dispute - and pass over it in silence when it did not. A trader who owned property enters the archive. A laborer who hauled that trader's cargo often does not.

This asymmetry is the heart of the tier-three argument, and it must be stated as inference, not certainty. If African-descended people were present as documented traders like Point du Sable, as property-holding free families along the Cane River, as licensed merchants under the Code Noir, and as enslaved laborers whose presence the records barely register - then the map of Black spatial history in North America is likely far larger than the plantation-and-coast narrative allows. It reasonably extends into the continental interior, along river systems and trade corridors, into contact zones where African, European, and Indigenous peoples met under conditions colonial authority could define but never fully control.

The strength of this claim rests on accumulation rather than any single decisive document. No lone source proves that Africans were woven throughout the fur trade. But the pattern - documented principals, property-holding free families, the legal architecture of the Code Noir, and the broader context of African presence in adjacent settings - points toward a conclusion the conventional narrative has not permitted. Where the record falls silent, the honest response is not to fill the gap with certainty, but to name the silence as itself a finding: evidence not of absence, but of an archive that recorded some lives and overlooked others.

Naming that silence opens real questions rather than closing them. What did African commercial traditions look like before contact, and did they shape how African-descended traders operated here? What traces of African presence survive in Indigenous oral histories of the trade? What might archaeological work at fur trade sites reveal about populations the documents overlooked? These are lines of inquiry the Archive intends to pursue. The fur trade argument is not a closed case. It is an opening - a recognition that the territory of Black history in North America has not been fully mapped, and that the unmapped spaces may hold some of the most important evidence.

Synthesis: What Changes When We Remember This

The cases in this essay - Estevanico's trek from Florida to New Mexico, da Costa's contracted interpreting in Acadia, Garrido's legal self-authorship in Mexico City, the documented traders and inferred laborers of the Mississippi Valley and Great Lakes - are

not a collection of curiosities. Read across the three tiers, they reveal a pattern with three characteristics worth naming.

First, African movement through early North America was tied to specialized knowledge. Estevanico's healing and interpreting. Da Costa's multilingual fluency. Garrido's command of legal procedure. Point du Sable's commercial acumen. These were not unskilled bodies extracted for brute labor. They were people carrying capabilities colonial enterprises depended on - translation, navigation, diplomacy, healing, route-finding, trade. The dependency ran in a direction the official narrative rarely acknowledges: colonial projects needed African skill to function.

Second, African movement was shaped by legal status but not wholly determined by it. Estevanico was enslaved yet functioned as an independent frontier agent. Da Costa was free yet was imprisoned through colonial legal process. Garrido was free and used the law to assert his standing. The fur trade's participants occupied a spectrum, from licensed free traders under the Code Noir to enslaved laborers with no standing at all. Colonial law on this continent was not a single system applied evenly. It was a patchwork of improvisations, exceptions, and contradictions, which African people navigated in real time - sometimes leveraging, sometimes being crushed by it.

Third, the land these figures crossed was never empty. Estevanico moved through Coahuiltecan, Zuni, and other territories. Da Costa worked among the Mi'kmaq and Maliseet. The fur trade ran across the homelands of dozens of Indigenous nations. African movement created contact zones - places where African, European, and Indigenous worlds met, negotiated, and marked one another. Those relationships are part of this continent's history, and they predate the plantation system that would later dominate the story of Black-Indigenous interaction.

Before the Beginning

The year 1619 is not the beginning of African presence in North America. It is the beginning of a particular chapter - institutionalized chattel slavery in the English colonies, a system that would shape four centuries of American history. That chapter is real, and its weight cannot be minimized. But it is not the first chapter, and treating it as such narrows the archive in ways that serve no one - not the descendants of the enslaved, not the communities whose history reaches further back than they have been told, not the scholars whose work has documented this earlier presence only to see it set aside.

The people who walked this land before 1619 - Estevanico crossing the Southwest, da Costa translating in Acadia, Garrido authoring himself into the legal record in Mexico City, the documented traders and the unnamed laborers of the interior trade - were not precursors to a story that had not yet begun. They were participants in a story already in motion. They carried skills that were mature, languages that were working, legal understandings that were operative. They came from a world already full - full of meaning, full of knowledge, full of the determination to claim standing on ground they had chosen to walk.

The next essay in this collection widens the frame further, moving beyond the North American mainland to trace African presence, settlement, and sovereignty across the hemisphere. The patterns documented here - movement, skill, legal agency, multi-ethnic

contact - repeat and elaborate across the Americas. The Caribbean was the birthplace. The North American interior was the next threshold. The hemisphere is the fuller map.

But the story also moves backward, toward what these travelers carried with them. The linguistic fluency, the healing knowledge, the commercial instinct, the diplomatic framework, the legal literacy - none of these were born on American soil. They came from civilizations already ancient when the ships appeared on the horizon. The Archive will reach toward that deeper past in time. Here, on this ground, the evidence is clear where it is firm and honest where it is not: African feet touched North American soil long before the chains arrived, and the land remembers what the record forgot.

The Wisdom Born Archive is a publication of Wisdom Born Creative Consulting.