The expedition that Coronado both commanded and in considerable measure financed has become an integral part of American history. Members of the expedition discovered the Continental Divide, estimated the width of North America, traversed the Great Plains, saw the Rocky Mountains, and were the first to document the people and places of the Greater Southwest.

Many historians, anthropologists, geographers, and others responsible for bestowing place names in the American Southwest drew those names from the Coronado Expedition. Thus, we have Coronado National Forest, Alarcon Terrace, Cardenas Butte, Cibola National Forest, Gran Quivira, Coronado State Monument, and dozens of toponyms emanating directly or indirectly, correctly or incorrectly, from the expedition. Such place name geography has its own set of introduced errors. Grand Canyon National Park has its El Tovar Hotel at a place that was never visited by one of Coronado’s men, Pedro el Tovar, thus defrauding the real discoverer of the merit associated with the true discovery.

It was a group of Coronado’s men, led by López de Cárdenas, that discovered what is the best known scenic marvel of the area—the Grand Canyon of the Colorado River. It was clear at the time that the chasm was an insurmountable obstacle to further advance in that direction. Discovery of the canyon was not met with the admiration of modern tourists, but instead with disappointment. Preliminary reconnaissance was followed by leaving both the distant mesas and their intervening canyon lands untouched by Spaniards for over two centuries.

Between Zuni and Acoma, in New Mexico, Coronado was the first to recognize the Continental Divide. The width of the landmass would have been more evident if a contemporaneous expedition under Hernando de Soto had encountered the Coronado Expedition in 1542, when both parties were in the Arkansas River Valley, only about 300 miles apart. Also known to Coronado’s party was the existence of the great river that entered Pacific waters at the head of the Gulf of California—el Río del Tizón, as the Colorado River was called for many years. Another lasting effect on Spain’s colonial program was the knowledge that Pueblo Indian society was much more attractive to future colonization and missionizing.

Coronado’s fruitless trip eastward in search of Gran Quivira led to expanded geographical knowledge of the Llano Estacado of West Texas and eastern New Mexico, of the Buffalo Plains, habitat of great herds of wild bison, and of the Great Plains of the Trans-Mississippi West.

The cost of the Coronado Expedition was great, consuming much of Coronado’s wife’s fortune (see page 10), and even more of Viceroy Mendoza’s money. The expedition’s lack of material results made its co-sponsor unhappy; however, Mendoza’s disappointment and anger abated with the discovery, in 1546, of the Zacatecas mines. Mining this area became the impetus for the slow, stable, economic development of the northern frontier; this development could not have taken place without Coronado’s quest.