Naming California

This map, published in the year 1650, shows California as an island. This is because European explorers once thought that a long sliver of the Pacific Ocean separated California from the mainland of North America.

In 1510, Spaniard Garcia Ordoñez de Montalvo wrote a romantic novel that described the people who lived in this mythical land. He wrote: “Know that to the right hand of the Indies exists an island called California, very near the Terrestrial Paradise. It was inhabited by black women... who were brave and very strong... their arms were all of gold... without there being any men among them. Their island was the strongest of the World, with its cliffs and rocky shores. And there ruled over that land a queen of majestic proportions... Queen Califa.”

In 1539, explorer Hernándo Cortés sent navigator Francisco de Ulloa north up what is today called the Gulf of California (also the Sea of Cortez). This expedition reached the mouth of the Colorado River, proving that California was not an island. Despite this finding, the error continued to appear on maps until the 1800s.

And while there are no records of anyone actually meeting Queen Califa, the paradise of Spanish imagination is today named California — the Golden State.