Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo was born in Palma de Micer Gilio (later called Palma del Río), a village located near Córdoba in southern Spain.

At about age 15, he joined the expedition of Pedrarias Dávila (Pedro Arias de Ávila) and sailed from Seville to Tierra Firme as a crossbowman (ballestero). Although 15 seems young to us, he would have been considered a man on that expedition.

At some point, he left Tierra Firme and ended up in Cuba, from where he may have joined in short expeditions to the Mexican coast, helping to establish Spanish bases or handling supplies. He may also have helped with ship repair in Cuba’s busy Puerto de Carenas (now Havana). He then joined the expedition of Pánfilo de Narváez, which was dispatched to the Mexican coast by the governor of Cuba to arrest Hernán Cortés for disobeying orders.

Narváez landed his army on the Yucatan coast and soon clashed with the forces of his rival Cortés. Thereafter, Cabrillo switched sides and joined the army of Cortés in his sweep across Mexico through Aztec territory. He helped with construction of the barges used to transport Cortés’s invading force across Lake Texcoco to the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán (now Mexico City).

After the conquest of Mexico, Cabrillo went south as a trusted lieutenant to Pedro de Alvarado when he conquered the Province of Guatemala. For his services, Cabrillo was awarded vast land holdings there. In 1532 he returned to Seville, Spain, to marry the sister of his best friend and bring her back to Guatemala. Records from 1532 reveal his use of the name Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo for the first time. Before that, documents record his name simply as Juan Rodríguez.

At the port of Acajutla, Guatemala (now part of El Salvador), Cabrillo built the galleon Santiago, a vessel he intended to use for shipping Spanish trade goods to markets in Peru. He had set up this business venture with his father-in-law; however, Alvarado commandeered the galleon for his own use.

By age 37, Cabrillo was a successful land owner, thanks in part to Alvarado’s patronage. At Alvarado’s request, Cabrillo established a shipyard on the coast of Guatemala near the town of Ixtapa. This became the site for
building and repairing vessels to be used in Alvarado’s proposed plans to
explore the Pacific Ocean and establish a trade route to Asia.

1539  
San Salvador, which Cabrillo built as his own vessel, was the largest of the
six or seven ships that he built at the shipyard. It was about the same size as
his first vessel Santiago and was likewise designed to carry trade goods as
well as sailors, soldiers, and arms. Experts often call such ships ‘merchant
galleons’ to distinguish them from later galleons that were usually larger,
sleeker, and designed more for speed and military uses than for carrying
cargo.

1540  
Sent by Alvarado to locate a departure point for expeditions to the northern
and western Pacific, Cabrillo located a bay and lagoon about 600 miles north
of Acapulco that he named La Navidad (now Barra de Navidad, a few miles
north of present-day Manzanillo).

1542  
Appointed captain-general of a fleet of three vessels, Cabrillo departed La
Navidad on June 27. The primary goal of this voyage of exploration was to
reach Asia by sailing northwest along the cost of Alta California.

On September 28, he entered and explored what he described as a well
protected harbor, which he named San Miguel (present-day San Diego). In
eyear October, continuing north, Cabrillo explored the Channel Islands and
the central coast of Alta California north to a river (now the Russian River) a
few miles beyond Cabo de Pinos (now Point Reyes), before strong winter
storms forced their return south.

Mid-November found them exploring the Baya de los Pinos (now Monterey
Bay) before returning to the Channel Islands to rest, make repairs, and
prepare for another push north in the spring as weather improved.

1543  
On January 3, Cabrillo died, due probably to gangrene that developed from an
injury he sustained 10 days earlier during an encounter with natives in the
Channel Islands, perhaps from an accidental fall. Just before his death he
turned command of the little fleet over to the pilot Bartolomé Ferrer, who
pledged to make another attempt to complete the expedition.
On February 22 repairs had been made and, taking advantage of a strong south-southeast wind, the fleet again headed north. As the storms became more severe, their highest recorded latitude indicates they may have reached as far north as Cape Mendocino before the wind shifted sharply to the north. With huge waves washing over the deck, Ferrer gave up and turned the fleet south.

On April 14 the San Salvador expedition returned to La Navidad. Later in the year the three vessels were dispatched to Peru. There is no further record of the three ships after this date.