

Why “America” and not “Columbia”?

By

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Did you ever wonder why “The New World” was named after Amerigo Vespucci and not Christopher Columbus? After all, wasn’t it Columbus who discovered “America” and not Vespucci??

Columbus, a staunch Genoese Catholic and member of the Third Order of St. Francis, wanted to reach Cathay (China) by sailing west instead of east, first, because he knew the earth was round and believed that a trip by sea would be quicker than the overland “Silk Road” pursued by Marco Polo in the thirteenth century. Unfortunately, his calculation of the circumference of the earth was far, far smaller than we know it to be today. Second, he deeply wanted to fulfill Marco Polo’s promise to the Great Kahn to bring the knowledge of Christianity to the Chinese people, thereby preventing the further expansion of the Muslim faith to the Far East.

Nevertheless, after trying several times unsuccessfully to get Portugal to finance his proposal once the Portuguese explorer, Bartolomeo Dias, had rounded the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa in 1488, Columbus hoped that the newly united kingdom of Spain under Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile following their defeat of the Muslims in Grenada, might welcome his quest to actually arrive in Cathay and initiate a trade project that might not only bring back to Spain much needed gold and other valuable assets, but in the process fulfill Marco Polo’s promise to bring Christianity to Cathay.

Because of the staggering costs of their war against the Muslims, the Monarchs of the newly united Spain lacked the funds to support Columbus’ proposal themselves, but they were able to procure

funding from a number of Crusading societies throughout the Mediterranean who supported the importance of spreading Christianity beyond the borders of Europe. In a letter to Pope Alexander VI Columbus stated that the purpose of his mission was to spend any profits “...for the redemption of the (Holy) Sepulcher (of Christ) and the Temple Mount (of Jerusalem) to the Holy Church.”

In April, 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella promised Columbus that if he succeeded in his task of shortening the journey to the Far East he would be declared “Admiral of the Ocean Sea” and appointed Viceroy/Governor of whatever lands he might claim for Spain, and would receive ten percent of all the revenues derived from those lands in perpetuity. In August of that year Columbus was given charge of three ships: the large Santa Maria and two smaller ones, the Nina and the Pinta. He set sail for the Canary Islands off the coast of Morocco (one of Spain’s possessions) to stock up on as many provisions as possible, then on September 6, he departed on a five-week voyage across the ocean.

On October 6, land was sighted off the coast of what is today known as the Bahamas, and Columbus named the island “San Salvador” (Holy Savior). Some of the friendly natives who greeted them were seen to be wearing gold earrings and other decorations but had no weapons of metal, like swords or pikes. So he rounded up a number of them and insisted they show him the source of their gold. On October 22, he visited the northeast coast of Cuba (which in a letter written as late as 1502 to Pope Alexander VI, he declared was the east coast of Asia) and on November 22, one of his Captains took the Pinta to search for gold while he continued to the coast of an island he called Hispaniola (known today as Santo Domingo and Haiti). It was there that the Santa Maria ran aground on Christmas Day and had to be abandoned.

Columbus left 39 men in Haiti and continued along the Caribbean until January of 1493 when he finally decided to head back to Spain on the Nina. A storm along the way separated him from the Pinta so he stopped at the Azores to recuperate, then sailed again to reach Spain. Another storm forced him to stop in Lisbon, where he was threatened by assassins. He escaped and finally got back to Spain on March 15. Word of his discovery of “new lands” quickly spread throughout Europe, but Columbus still thought he had discovered them off the coast of Asia. Nevertheless, his reputation as a Genoese navigator became unrivaled in the European world.

On September 21 of 1493, Columbus left Spain once again to establish permanent “colonies” in the “new lands” with seventeen ships and twelve hundred men, including priests, farmers and soldiers. The priests, of course, would bring Christianity to the native peoples (and hopefully to Cathay), while the farmers would establish large landholdings and the soldiers would serve as their protectors. This time Columbus sailed through the lesser Antilles, the Virgin Islands (named for the Blessed Mother), the greater Antilles, and landed in Puerto Rico, whose capital was later named San Juan. When he arrived at Haiti he found that the fort established by those previously left behind had been destroyed with eleven bodies left at the site. He established a new colony in what is today called the Dominican Republic. That colony was also short-lived.

On his third voyage in May of 1498, Columbus sailed with six ships, three of which went to Hispaniola with badly needed supplies. The other three Columbus took to explore the southern Caribbean in the hope of finding a clear passage to Asia. On July 23 he arrived at what he called Trinidad (Trinity) and then the coast of what was later named Venezuela (after Venice, because of its large port) near the mouth of the Orinoco River. Seeing the amount of fresh water flowing from the river he correctly concluded that he had reached a

large landmass and speculated that this might be the Garden of Eden!!

When he returned to Hispaniola in August he discovered that many of the colonists he had left there were in rebellion, accusing him of deceiving them about the riches they would find, and of being an incompetent governor. He was forced to make peace with them on rather humiliating terms, and in 1500 was placed in chains, forced to return to Spain and removed as Governor. Eventually he was freed and allowed to return to those “new lands,” but not as Governor.

In May of 1502 he sailed on his fourth voyage to find the Straits of Malacca to the Indian Ocean (!). This time he was accompanied by his brother Bartolomeo, and his thirteen-year-old son Ferdinand. When he arrived at Santo Domingo, he was not permitted to land by the current Governor who also refused to believe him when he predicted a powerful storm was on the way. Then, while he took shelter in the mouth of a nearby river, the first Spanish ship on its journey home bearing treasure, sailed into a hurricane along with 29 others; they were all destroyed on July 1, causing 500 lives to be lost as well as an immense cargo of gold.

Columbus then stopped briefly at Jamaica and sailed to Central America where he spent two months exploring lands that were later called Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, and arrived at Panama on October 16. He continued looking for gold until his ships received even greater storm damage and were stranded in Jamaica. In February 1504 he gained the assistance of some natives by predicting a lunar eclipse would happen on February 29!! With their willingness to provide him with supplies, he and his men were able to leave for Spain and arrived on June 29, 1504.

On May 20, 1506 Columbus died from a number of diseases (some believed to be sexually related) caused by food poisoning, poor sanitation, etc. The anniversary of his landing in America was

eventually established as October 12 (Columbus Day), or the second Monday in October. Many stamps were later issued in America and abroad celebrating his accomplishments, but only after they were finally recognized for what they truly were.

The first person to actually recognize that a “New World” (Mundus Novus, as he called it) had been discovered, was, of course, Amerigo Vespucci!! A Florentine with a good relationship with one of the richest families in Italy, the Medici, and supported by Portugal, sailed west in 1497, not long after Columbus’ second voyage. In his journals published in 1502-4, which included descriptions of the four voyages he engaged in overall (including to Brazil in 1499, and perhaps even the Amazon River), he declared that these lands were not part of Asia but part of an entirely new continent totally unknown to Europeans. The German cartographer, Martin Waldseemuller, was convinced by the details contained in these journals, and in 1507, a year after Columbus’ death, published a world map calling the new land “America,” a Latinized female version of Vespucci’s first name. (Referring to lands in a female context was common at the time: e.g: Europa, Italia, Francia, etc.)

It is entirely possible that Vespucci was totally unaware at first, that Waldseemuller had in fact done so. And amazingly, when Columbus himself first heard of Vespucci’s voyages, he never believed Vespucci was trying to “steal his laurels” as some claimed, and wrote to his son, Diego in 1505, that Amerigo had always “...wished to please me; he is a man of good will; fortune has been unkind to him...his labors have not brought him the rewards he in justice should have.” (Not then, maybe! But really??)

Vespucci was later summoned to Spain to serve as a consultant for several commercial enterprises, and in 1508 was appointed Chief Navigator, interpreting, planning, mapping, and coordinating all the training and licensing that pilots and Captains needed for their

journeys to the New World. However, despite the fact that the New World now carried his name and not that of Columbus, he himself never returned to “America” again. He eventually was granted Spanish citizenship and spent the rest of his life there.

So here, in Columbus, we have a man so committed to his goal of achieving the expansion of Christianity throughout the Far East that never for a moment could he doubt that he had in fact discovered a western route to Cathay. And he truly believed he had fulfilled his purpose in life inspired by his Christian name, “The Christ Bearer” (Christofero/Christopher). So, to this day, astonishingly, it is not he, but the man who clearly saw what had actually been discovered, “The New World,” Amerigo Vespucci, for whom that discovery was and still is named.

Columbus himself, has not been completely ignored, however. Witness such titles as: “The District of Columbia”, “Columbus, Ohio”, “Columbia University”, etc. He may have been slighted somewhat over the centuries immediately following his achievements--perhaps because he himself failed to realize (or did not want to realize?) what he had accomplished. But five hundred years later, no one can dispute that it was he indeed who discovered America--- not Vespucci!



**Map of the World, published by
Martin Waldseemuller, 1507**