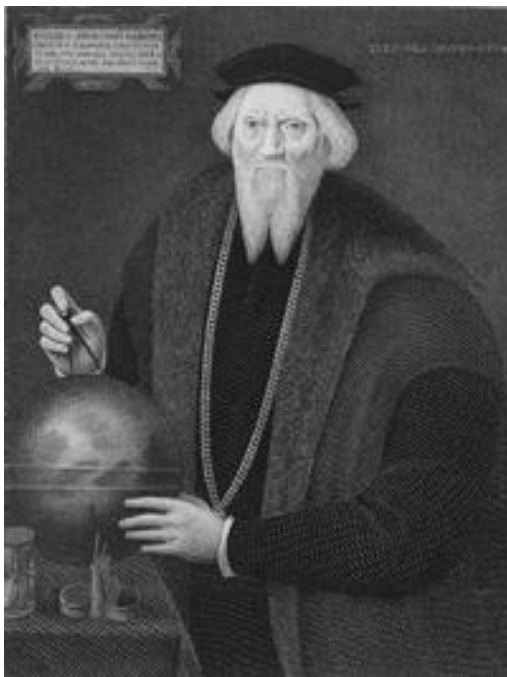




John Cabot,
(Giovanni Caboto)
C:1450-c:1499



Sebastian Cabot
(Sebastiano Caboto)
c:1475-1557

John and Sebastian Cabot:

Explorers

By

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Of all the major explorers of the “New World” in the 15th and 16th centuries, perhaps the least known are the father and son team of John and Sebastian Cabot. The reason for this may be the many contradictory and conflicting accounts of their lives and voyages written over the years, and therefore, the lack of reliable documentation.

Nevertheless, this much IS known: John (Giovanni) was born in the region of Genoa in Italy, moved as a child to Venice and became a Venetian citizen. (The name Caboto is dialect for “coastal seaman.”) He married a Venetian wife, Mattea, (after whom his ship “Matthew” was named), and had three sons, Ludovico, Sebastiano and Sancio, or Lewis, Sebastian and Santius, as they were later dubbed in English.

In 1484 John moved to Bristol, England, where a colony of Italian sailors joined the English in trade with Iceland. He soon got the idea of going to Asia by continuing to push westward, despite all the warnings of Map Makers and Navigators that such an attempt was ludicrous because of the distances to be travelled (not that the earth was flat!). Additionally, few people at this time were aware how

much wider in latitude a degree of longitude is near the Equator than it is in the north.

When John heard that Columbus had successfully reached the “Indies” by the southern route in 1492, he became inspired to make a similar journey, not by going south to avoid the trade winds as Columbus had, but by taking a northern route to search for Japan (Cipangu as Marco Polo had called it in the 14th Century). He convinced Henry VII of England that it was important for England’s prestige to join his competitors (especially Spain and Portugal) in searching for the best route to Asia.

In 1496 Henry granted John and his three “sonnes” formal “Letters of Patent” with “...full and free authority, leave and power, to sayle to all partes, countreys and seas, of the East, of the West, and of the North, under our banners and ensignes, upon their own proper costs and charges...to seeke out, discover and finde whatsoever iles, countreyes, regions or provinces of the heathen and infidelles, whatsoever they bee, and in what part of the world soever they be, whiche before this time have beene unknown to all Christians.” (Richard Hakluyt) Merchandise from these countries was to be allowed to enter the port of Bristol duty free, but with one-fifth of the net profits going to the Crown.

On May 20, 1497, John left with one small but fast ship, the Matthew, and 18 crew members, on a preliminary scouting trip, to see if his theory was correct. After fifty-two days (June 24) he landed on, some sources say, Cape Breton Island, while others say it was Labrador or Newfoundland, where John unfurled the English flag and claimed it in the name of the King. When he returned to England Henry gave him ten pounds (!) and a pension, and issued another Letter Patent for him to take as many as six ships and

return to find Japan. He did so in July of 1498 with five ships and 300 men.

It is not clear exactly where John went on his second voyage, probably because his son Sebastian later wrote an account claiming the first voyage as his own and confusing the outcome of both. It seems that John may have gone to Greenland first because Icelandic fishermen said it was so close. Then he (or Sebastian) went to Baffin Island in Canada. Finally, it is entirely possible that he also sailed as far south as the 38th parallel--Chesapeake Bay or even Cape Hatteras in the Carolinas (according to a chart made by Juan de la Cosa, one of the Captains of Columbus' own fleet!), but it is not clear if he did it on his first or second voyage! Whatever the truth, John did not return from the second voyage, but news of the abundant fish stocks off Newfoundland caused the area to be immediately targeted by fishermen from Northern Europe.

Nevertheless, John (and/or Sebastian) Cabot presumably discovered the mainland of the Americas before Columbus reached the mainland of Venezuela in August of 1498, and Amerigo Vespucci, a Florentine, explored the southern hemisphere in 1501. The German mapmaker, Waldseemuller, was so impressed by Vespucci's descriptions of his journeys in Latin that he named both continents "America" in his honor. (Giovanni da Verrazzano, another Florentine, did not explore New York Harbor until 1525; the Verrazzano Narrows Bridge is named in his honor.)

Sebastian Cabot was born in Venice around 1475, and after his father's death was employed first by Henry VIII as a mapmaker, and then was granted the rank of Captain and later that of Captain Major, by Ferdinand V of Spain. In 1526 he set sail for "Cathay"

(China) with three ships and 150 men, supposedly to find a shorter route than Magellan's 1520 treacherous journey around Cape Horn.

When he reached the mouth of the Rio de la Plata (between Argentina and Uruguay), he went ashore leaving his fellow Captains behind in order to search for gold and silver, as well as for a different route to Asia. He explored the Parana` River as far as Paraguay and built two forts, recognized today as the first settlements in Paraguay and Argentina.

When he returned to Spain in August of 1530 he was indicted for his conduct towards his fellow commanders and his failure to find any gold or silver. He was banished to Oran in Africa, a sentence that was never carried out, and after a year he was restored to his position and pension until his return to England in 1547. Emperor Charles V tried to get him back to Spain, but he remained in England where he received the title of Great Pilot and another pension.

In 1553 Sebastian reportedly counseled Chancellor and Willoughby on their search for a "northwest passage" to Asia. Despite the ice which claimed Willoughby's ship, Chancellor reached the "White Sea" (Beaufort?) and Russia, thereby opening trade between Russia and England, and eventually leading to Russia's exploration of Alaska. Sebastian lived as a mapmaker in England until his death in 1557.

So what should we conclude about the Cabots from this very confusing record? Presumably what both the British and the Canadians today conclude: that they did indeed claim much of North America for the English and enabled them to establish the

first English-Speaking territories in the New World, including The United States of America.