



Columbus reaches America 1492

As a young sailor, Christopher Columbus envisioned sailing westward across the Atlantic Ocean to reach the much sought-after riches of the Orient. Such a voyage, Columbus reasoned, would be much shorter than the route around the tip of Africa then used to reach China.

Although his idea seems logical to us today, most of the people scoffed at the red-headed Italian sailor's idea. Some even laughed in his face—not because they thought the world was flat as is often believed, but simply because no one had ever before attempted such a voyage. Nevertheless, for nearly 10 years Columbus tried to get others to accept his idea. Finally in 1492 he set out to prove that he was right and completed the most important voyage of discovery in all history.

By the late 1480s Columbus had proven himself to be a very capable sea captain and navigator. He had been a master mariner

for years in a great merchant fleet and had sailed throughout much of the known world. In addition, he and his brother Bartholomew were among the leading map makers in Portugal. With these highly regarded credentials, Columbus approached the king of Portugal, seeking financial backing for his voyage to the East. The Portuguese king refused to help him. But Columbus didn't give up. He even sought the backing of the king of England and the king of France. Both flatly turned him down.

Then Queen Isabella of Spain, who was impressed by his determination and spirit, agreed to pay for the proposed exploration. On August 3, 1492 the three small ships—the *Niña*, *Pinta* and *Santa María*—of Spain's "China Fleet" sailed west under the command of Columbus, who was given the rank of captain-general. They had sailed for more than two months when, during the early morning hours of October 12, 1492,

the lookout aboard the *Pinta* sighted land. Just after sunrise small boats were lowered into the clear water of the Caribbean Sea and rowed ashore.

Columbus stepped onto the warm, white sand of a tropical island and paused to thank God for the safe voyage. He then claimed the island, which he called San Salvador, in the name of Spain. The explorers thought they had landed in the East Indies, a group of islands just off the mainland of China. But due to a major miscalculation in estimating the size of the earth, he was many thousands of miles from the Orient. Actually, through no fault of his own, Columbus' charts were so inaccurate that they showed Peking, China somewhere near the present site of Topeka, Kansas. However, on that day, Columbus had accidentally made an astounding discovery. He found a new world which no one in 15th-century Europe even knew existed.

Columbus and the crews of his ships were well received by the Arawak people, who lived on San Salvador and the many nearby islands. Thinking he was in the East Indies, Columbus mistakenly called these people

Indians — a name which became associated with all the native inhabitants of the New World. In the spring of 1493 he returned to Spain and spread the news of his journey. It wasn't long before many explorers from several countries sailed westward to behold the land Columbus thought was the Orient. Columbus himself returned three more times looking for the golden cities of China. In fact, he died in 1506 still believing he had reached the Orient and never realized the true significance of his voyage.

Of course Columbus and his crew weren't the first men to see America. Its native inhabitants — the Indians — had lived there for thousands of years. And about the year 1000, Vikings from Scandinavia had explored and even settled for a while in this western land they called Vinland. But it was Columbus who revealed the presence of the New World to the people of Europe.

Strangely enough, although Columbus truly deserved the honor, North and South America were named for a later explorer — Amerigo Vespucci. Nevertheless, he earned lasting distinction as discoverer of the New World.