Discovery and Colonization of the New World  
(1492 - 1763)

Review of the first nine Video Lessons

THE AGE OF DISCOVERY

It is not known how long humans have wandered the expanse of land that came to be known as America. The earliest identified inhabitants, those now recognized as American Indians, are believed to have entered the North American continent through an icy Siberian passageway that once existed between northeastern Asia and the region now called Alaska. Many archeologists believe Viking ships explored the far northeastern coast of North America around the year 1000 A.D. In terms of recorded history, the story of the American nation and its culture begins with the 1492 discovery of the New World by Italian explorer Christopher Columbus.

Columbus was a mapmaker who believed that Europeans could reach the Orient more efficiently by ocean travel than across land. Two hundred years earlier, another Italian explorer, Marco Polo, had taken the eastward, overland route to Asia, returning with spices and other exotic items. At the time, spices were highly valued, as they were the only means of hindering bacterial spoilage in food during warm seasons. The Turkish city of Constantinople was the primary supplier of spices, rice, fruits, and silk fabrics to such Italian city-states such as Marco Polo’s home of Venice and Columbus’ home of Genoa.

By the mid-to-late 1400s, Europeans began to build sturdier ships than before, and Portugal’s Henry the Navigator was among the first to apply the direction-finding principles of Ptolemy, the ancient astronomer, to long-distance sea voyages. While there remained a number of potential dangers to such excursions over water, Christopher Columbus believed that God directed him to set forth on a westward journey across the Atlantic Ocean. In a journal, he wrote, “It was the Lord who put into my mind (I could feel His hand upon me) the fact that it would be possible to sail from here to the Indies…. There is no question that the inspiration was from the Holy Spirit, because he comforted me with rays of marvelous illumination from the Holy Scriptures.” Columbus’ personal vision was limited to finding a water-route to India. The actual outcome had far greater impact on mankind than he could ever imagine.

As a prominent seafaring nation, Portugal initially appeared to be the best possible site where Columbus could raise money for shipbuilding. It took a decade of rejections, broken promises and failed deals to compel him to move onward to Spain, where his proposal drew the interest of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. Though the Spanish monarchs were skeptical, they yearned to break Italy’s trade monopoly with Asia. After a four-year period of deliberation, Queen Isabella consented to support the venture.
On August 3rd, 1492, Christopher Columbus’s fleet of three ships set sail from the Spanish port of Palos. Eighty-seven men onboard the Santa Maria, the Pinta, and the Santa Clara—nicknamed the Nina—traveled for more than two months across a seemingly endless Atlantic Ocean. At a point where hope of success had virtually vanished, and with the crew threatening mutiny, land was finally sighted. On October 12th, 1492, Christopher Columbus set foot upon the beach of a Caribbean island in what was later known as the Bahamas. Planting a cross in the soil, he christened the island San Salvador, meaning “Holy Savior.” Because Columbus was convinced he had reached the Indies, he referred to the island’s brown-skinned inhabitants as Indians.

At the time, it was common for seafaring crews to be comprised of unscrupulous adventurers, fugitives from justice, and societal rejects. Columbus was therefore stern in ordering his men to behave kindly and respectfully to the natives. His goal was to exemplify the Christian faith through demonstrations of friendship and trust.

Venturing onward to explore other islands (and wrecking the Santa Maria in the process) Christopher Columbus returned to a hero’s welcome in Spain during April of 1493. Enthralled with the Caribbean gold set before them, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella claimed permanent possession of the lands Columbus discovered. To encourage Portuguese explorers to respect the claim, the Spanish monarchs entered an agreement with Portugal called the Treaty of Tordesillas. Pope Alexander the Sixth was commissioned to draw a line of demarcation, dividing the known non-European world. Portugal’s half consisted mainly of Africa’s northern and western coastlines, while the region of Columbus’ discovery went to Spain. Since the enormous geographical expanse of the New World had yet to be discovered, no one at the time realized the treaty’s favorable ramifications for Spain.

Whereas the first voyage of Columbus was a profound event that changed the world, his next two expeditions ended disastrously. Preoccupied with dreams of finding enough gold to finance a Catholic takeover of Jerusalem, Columbus continued to explore the Caribbean, leaving fellow Spaniards behind to govern the claimed islands. Many of these men raped island women and robbed native inhabitants of gold ornaments. Death came quickly to those islanders who resisted the well-armed Europeans. When Columbus hanged several of the culprits at Hispaniola in 1498, fellow Spaniards rebelled, returning him to Spain in chains. Respecting his previous accomplishments, the King and Queen allowed Columbus to embark on a fourth expedition in 1502. Though he discovered vast gold deposits in what is now known as Central America, severe storms caused a temporary stranding and cargo loss. In November of 1504, Columbus returned to Spain in poor health, never to sail again. At the time of his death in 1506, his popularity in Europe had waned.
Christopher Columbus never realized that the land he discovered was not Asia. In the end, the New World would not bear his name. That honor went to an Italian adventurer, Amerigo Vespucci, who enthralled Europeans with broadly embellished tales of his own travels to the New World in 1497. Vespucci was first to assert that the New World was not Asia, but rather an entirely different continent altogether. In the decade that followed, other explorations substantiated his claim, and in honor of Amerigo Vespucci, German map-maker Martin Waldseemuller named the region “America.”

Like Christopher Columbus, Giovanni Caboto—better known as John Cabot—was born in Genoa, Italy, yet made his voyage to the New World on behalf of another country. In the service of England, Cabot made the 1497 discovery of the large North Atlantic island that came to be known as Newfoundland.

The first landing on the actual mainland of North America was made by Juan Ponce de Leon, who explored the eastern coastline of the Florida peninsula in 1513. That same year, Vasco Nunez Balboa arrived at what is now Panama, crossing the Central American isthmus on foot to make the first European sighting of the Pacific Ocean. By this time, it was apparent that the earth was larger than previously imagined.

A more complete assessment of the earth’s expanse was gained through the first around-the-world voyage, launched by Ferdinand Magellan in 1519, and completed by Juan Sebastian in 1522, after Magellan was killed in the Philippines.

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