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CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS PROGRAM

By 1400, the seafaring Portuguese were poised to challenge the world for control of the Eastern spice and luxury trade. Prior to this, it had been in the hands of the Arabs, Levantines, Venetians, and other traders who raised prices to exorbitant levels. Bypassing the middlemen in the East-West trade became an urgent problem for the European countries. The renowned navigational skills of Portuguese sea captains enabled their merchant fleet to inch south along the west coast of Africa, probing for a way around the continent and a free path to India and East Asia. They finally found the southern tip of that mysterious continent, a seafarer's landmark now known as the Cape of Good Hope. The Portuguese had developed the three-masted caravel, a ship able to deal with ocean currents and winds better than ships designed to sail the Mediterranean. The mariner's compass allowed them to tell directions far from land, and the quadrant and astrolabe gave them a fix on their latitude north or south of the equator. Most important, their ships were equipped with cannons that made them formidable engines of war, and invariably gave them the edge in encounters with Moslem and East Asian rivals. With the help of this new technology, the Portuguese, within fifty years, had wrested the lucrative eastern trade from the Mediterranean middlemen and had established an empire of far-flung commercial posts in Africa, the Persian Gulf, India, China, and Java.

Under the joint rulers Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon, Spain too yearned to grow rich. The Spanish crown's agent was a mariner from the city of Genoa in Italy, Christopher Columbus. He was a wool merchant's son, and not surprisingly, a dreamer. He thought the shortest way by sea to the East was due west across the Atlantic. Unaware of the barrier of the Americas, and believing the world was far smaller than it turned out to be, he presumed that only a few weeks of sailing westward would bring Europeans to the Indies. He had peddled this unlikely idea for years, seeking sponsorship and funding from virtually every European ruler. Finally, in 1492, the bold or perhaps just gullible, Queen Isabella agreed to provide Columbus with ships, crew, and supplies. In return, the crown would share in the profits of the voyage. Columbus set sail with three small vessels scarcely bigger than a weekend sport fishing boat plus the kind of crew members you wouldn't take home to mother. That is, many of the lads who joined this voyage to the edge of the Earth were probably men who saw her majesty's jails as their only alternative. The vessels left Palos in Spain in early August and six weeks later touched land in what is now the Bahamas. The "Admiral" explored the Bahamas and the islands of Cuba and Hispaniola. Believing he had touched lands off the coast of East Asia, Columbus called the inhabitants Indians. He returned to Spain in March, 1493 with captive natives, exotic birds and plants, and a little gold. The man who had spent years pitching his scheme to skeptical princes all over Europe was now showered with honors.

The First Voyage, the Nina, the Pinta and the Santa Maria, with a total of 88 men, left Spain on August 3, 1492 and landed at San Salvador (probably Watling Island) on October 12th. Forty-four men were left to build a fort out of the remains of the Santa Maria, which ran aground off Hispaniola. The rest of the men returned to Lisbon aboard the Nina.

From 1493 to 1503, Columbus made three more trips to the Central American coast and the Caribbean Basin, areas that he incorrectly referred to as the Indies.

On September 23, 1493, Columbus left on his Second Voyage with three large caravels and 14 frigates with 1,500 men and all the animals and equipment necessary to start a colony, including 12 missionaries. They sighted land on November 3rd, discovering Guadalupe, Antigua, St. Martin, and a dozen other islands. They found the fort erected by members of the first voyage burned, and its inhabitants dispersed. On June 24, 1494, five shiploads of Indians were sent off to Seville to be sold as slaves. Columbus sailed back to Spain, reaching Cadiz on June 11, 1496.

On the Third Voyage, Columbus spotted the coast of South America for the first time. Colonization wasn't fairing well, and Columbus returned to Spain in chains after the appointment of a new governor.

Columbus set sail for the last time on May 9, 1502 with 150 men on four caravels, sighting land on July 30. He stayed in Jamaica until June 28, 1504 and arrived in Spain on November 7th. He charted the islands of the Caribbean and combed the bays, peninsulas, the river mouths of the Americas in search of a passage to Asia. In a few hundred years, the Panama Canal would have solved his problems, but as it was, he never did find the far-eastern spices and gold for which he had quested. Glory on Earth can be fleeting. Though he figures preeminently in today's accounts of the period, the achievements of other New World explorers would in time divert the public eye. Columbus died in relative obscurity. Happy for the citizens of the Americas, his voyages spurred other Spanish conquistadors and explorers to follow his lead, exploring every cranny of the two American continents. By 1500 or so, roving journalists like Amerigo Vespucci, a Florentine who accompanied several Spanish captains in trans-Atlantic voyages, began to describe the western lands as a "new world," rather than an extension of Asia. For all of Columbus' trouble, the mapmakers named the new lands after Amerigo instead of the man whose deeds earn some of us a day off every October.