

Columbus Sets Sail ; Weston, Beth; ; Cobblestone ; 09-01-2011 ;

Shortly after midnight on an October night in 1492, Rodrigo de Triana, the lookout on the small, square-rigged sailing ship, shouted, "Tierra!" ("Land!") The boom of a cannon signaled the sighting to the Pinta's two companion ships, the Nina and the Santa Maria. The three vessels lowered their sails to wait for daylight and the chance to investigate the landfall they had been sailing in search of since early August.

The ships were from Spain, sailing under Captain General Cristobal Colon. Not much is known about this man or the journey he made. He used different names during his lifetime - Cristoforo Colombo, Christobal Colom, and Xpoual de Colon, which is how he signed the beginning of the journal he kept of his 1492 voyage. Today we remember him as Christopher Columbus.

Columbus was a sailor most of his life, making many voyages on merchant ships first in the Mediterranean Sea and later along the Atlantic coasts of Europe and northern Africa. He also worked for a while as a cartographer in Lisbon, Portugal. He read books that told of the journeys of Marco Polo, an Italian merchant who had traveled to Asia in the 13th century, and other explorers, and discussed what was known about the lands and seas of the world at that time.

Perhaps inspired by the books on geography he had read, Columbus approached the king of Portugal in 1484 with an idea. He wished to sail in search of "islands and mainlands in the Ocean Sea" (the Atlantic Ocean). But he needed an investor to back what he called the Enterprise of the Indies. The king's advisors rejected Columbus's request for ships and money.

So Columbus traveled to Spain to try his luck there. In 1486, he obtained an audience with Queen Isabella. She was intrigued, but her advisors were not convinced of the success of Columbus's plan, so the queen told him to wait. After several years of waiting and negotiating, Queen Isabella finally agreed to finance a journey early in 1492.

Columbus was about 40 years old when his ships left the small Spanish port of Palos. It may be that, from the books he had read and the sailors he had met, he was convinced that Asia, called the Indies (for India), could be reached by sailing west. Until then, traders with these foreign lands had gone around Africa and then east, a long and difficult journey. Columbus's goal also may have been to search for fabled islands that sailors spoke of or other lands of great importance.

Columbus believed that he could carry Christianity to any lands he found, and he sailed with a command from Queen Isabella to "discover and acquire . . . Islands and Mainlands" in the Ocean Sea and to call himself "Viceroy and Governor-General" of the lands he discovered.

Whatever he considered to be his destination, Columbus knew that if he succeeded, he would achieve glory. In an era when trade with foreign lands was beginning to grow, the discovery of new lands and markets would bring wealth and fame to the person who claimed them.

After weeks of sailing on the open sea, struggling to encourage his nervous crew and quiet their fears that they would never see land again, Columbus recorded signs of land - floating branches and flocks of birds - in his journal. Then de Triana saw the moon shining on the cliffs and sandy beach of an island.

In truth, Columbus did not know exactly where he was, except in terms of the time he had traveled west from the Canary Islands off the African coast. He called his landfall the Indies and believed that he had reached the Asian mainland. It was several years before navigators realized that he had reached a group

of islands off the coasts of two new continents. Columbus established his first settlement, La Navidad, on Hispaniola, a major island in the Caribbean Sea, which today is comprised of the Dominican Republic and Haiti.

The native people of Haiti, the Tainos, initially were friendly with Columbus and his crew and helped the foreigners build their settlement. Upon Columbus's return to the island in 1493 and his discovery that the fort at La Navidad had been destroyed, he established a second settlement, La Isabela, in the Dominican Republic. By 1496, Columbus abandoned La Isabela for yet another new settlement in the Dominican Republic, Santo Domingo.

Columbus has been called a discoverer of new lands, but he was not the first to discover them. The various islands of the Caribbean Sea and two large continents that he "put on the map" already were inhabited by millions of native people (see page 4). Columbus was not even the first European to reach these lands, as the Vikings had made landfall some 500 years earlier (see page 7). Columbus was, however, the first European explorer to return to the Americas - he made a total of four voyages, bringing with him fresh men and supplies to strengthen his claims. And news of his explorations convinced Europeans of the existence of new lands to the west. About 25 years after Columbus made his first journey, Spanish explorers had begun to claim lands in North, Central, and South America for the Spanish empire. Rather than as a discoverer, Columbus perhaps is best considered as someone whose actions had a historic impact when he made the people of the Americas and the people of Europe aware of one another.

SIDEBAR

a cartographer is a maker of maps and sailing charts.

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After years of waiting, Christopher Columbus finally convinced the Spanish government to help finance his journey across the ocean.

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It is believed that Columbus's first landfall was on one of the Bahaman Islands.

Certain that he had reached India, Columbus claimed the new country for Spain and named the natives with whom he came in contact "Indians."

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