

# ARTICLE #1

## Columbus: Intrepid explorer or accidental navigator?

**August 3, 1492: Nina, Pinta, Santa Maria set sail**

By Steve Almasy  
CNN

Wednesday, August 4, 2004 Posted: 2146 GMT (0546 HKT)

**(CNN) -- Christopher Columbus never thought -- even to the day he died -- that he helped "discover" the Americas, two continents thousands of miles from his intended destination of Asia.**

Imagine his surprise, then, if Columbus knew the United States had a holiday honoring him -- even though he never actually set foot in any of the now superpower's 50 states.

"In a sense, we remember him because he's a guy that made a mistake but had good luck," said Patricia Seed, a history professor at Rice University and author of "Ceremonies of Possession in Europe's Conquest of the New World."

Seed said Columbus miscalculated the distance between Europe and Asia.

"But he happened to run into Caribbean islands [full of] gold," said Seed, the financial windfall soon overriding concerns that he didn't reach his planned goal. "The gold had actually come to the surface and was in the rivers. It was very easily accessible."

For better or worse, Christopher Columbus has come to symbolize the bridge between the "New World," defined by the Americas, and the "Old World," generally seen as Europe. His accidental "discovery" has reshaped the course of history in the more than five centuries since.

Few deny his courage in setting out on a then unprecedented, dangerous journey and -- while others may have reached America before him -- of charting a bold cross-Atlantic course that helped open up, and therefore transform, modern civilization.

"It is nearly impossible to over-exaggerate the historical significance of Christopher Columbus," former Millersville University professor Thomas Tirado wrote in 2000, crediting the navigator for helping set the stage for an intellectual revolution. "The ultimate expression of the Columbian Legacy has been nothing less than global in its impact."

### **A bold request**

Columbus and his men had high hopes when they departed from Spain on August 3, 1492. What exactly happened after -- in terms of the famed navigator's actions, intentions and importance -- has been subject to intense debate for centuries. In that time, it has become even more difficult to separate the real Columbus from the legend.

Most historians agree Columbus was a risk-taker and a brave man. To sail west, deep into uncharted waters of the Atlantic, in the late 15th century was no small undertaking, given the huge element of the unknown.

Still, contrary to some assertions, Columbus and his crew didn't fear falling off the edge of the Earth.

"It is true that a lot of ordinary people thought the world was flat," Seed said. "But in Portugal [where Columbus trained as a sailor] the first thing that they did was a little demonstration to prove that the Earth was round. All of the scientists and intellectuals believed that the Earth was round."

Now monsters were a different story.

"There were all kinds of things that lived in the ocean," Seed said. "They were also out there for the first time in a area that hadn't been mapped before. They were understandably fearful."

Columbus had ample experience sailing, having taken many trips -- including some tied to the slave trade -- along the Western coast of Africa.

Of course, he had never sailed west across the Atlantic, and could only speculate about how long it would take to reach Asia or exactly what lay in the way.

Using calculations by Paolo Toscanelli, a mathematician and geographer from Florence, Italy, Columbus thought there were about 2,800 nautical miles between the Canary Islands and Japan -- short by about 9,000 miles, according to Seed.

## **Fateful voyage**

Portuguese King João II, thinking that such a westward route was extremely long, rejected Columbus's first request -- made in 1484 -- to fund such a trip.

Columbus moved to Spain in 1485, a nation far behind its neighbor in exploration. King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella denied his first appeal for backing, instead focusing their efforts on ending the 700-year rule of the Moors in Spain, and driving them from their last foothold in the country.

But by 1492, major changes gripped Europe, and particularly Spain, according to Seed. The Moors surrendered in January, returning to North Africa.

In his third attempt, Columbus finally received approval to make the voyage west to India. The about 100-man crew of the Nina, Pinta and Santa Maria set sail that summer.

On October 12, 1492, a crewman spotted land in what is now the Bahamas. Exactly where he set foot remains a subject of much contention, but he named the island San Salvador.

Columbus called the native inhabitants of the islands Indians, under the belief he had reached Asia, or "The Indies" as it was then known. On what is now Hispaniola, he made first contact with the Taino Indians.

He would return to the area on three more voyages.

## **Intense controversy**

Eventually Columbus was named governor of the area, a short-lived and ill-fated venture. In the summer of 1500, Spanish authorities removed him from his post after the queen sent an administrator to check on complaints about his governance.

This history -- as well as the deaths, mainly by disease brought over by European settlers, of hundreds of thousands of Native Americans since 1492 -- has made Columbus a villain to some.

In recent years, many Columbus Day celebrations have been accompanied by protests, many led by American Indians and their supporters who link Columbus with the decimation of their people.

"They want to celebrate Columbus," Lisa Simms, who helped organize an anti-Columbus march in Denver, told The Associated Press in 2002. "We are here to commemorate the lives of our ancestors, the indigenous people who were already here."

Yet not all Native Americans condemn Columbus. Conservative commentator David Yeagley, who traces his lineage to Comanche warrior Bad Eagle, calls him "really just a front man."

"Columbus was simply a courageous man," Yeagley wrote in a 2003 edition of FrontPage, a conservative online magazine. "Columbus was willing to go to a place where, as far as he knew, no man had gone before. This is momentous. This is all I see in Columbus. This is all I need to see."

## **Mixed legacy**

Columbus died in Spain in 1506 and within 50 years of his death, his name vanished into obscurity.

In the United States, American writer Washington Irving brought Columbus into the spotlight with his 1828 biography of the explorer, written while Irving was living in Spain.

It wasn't until 1937 that the United States, under President Franklin Roosevelt, declared October 12 Columbus Day. President Nixon made Columbus Day a national holiday in 1971.

Columbus lives on in America's classrooms, street names and institutions, with both the positive and negative aspects of his voyage and its repercussions spurring the debate.

"It has to be done carefully," said noted historian Howard Zinn, author of "A People's History of the United States, 1492-Present," of the challenge of properly explaining to students Columbus and the effect European exploration had on the Americas.

"You don't want to crowd into their minds horrible pictures of violence and blood," he said. "And yes at the same time, we must not hide the truth."

## **ARTICLE #2: *"Who in Future Generations Will Believe This?"***

### **Rethinking Columbus Day**

By PATRICK W. GAVIN

**I**t's not easy to score a federal holiday. There are only ten of them, and only two are named for a specific individual: Martin Luther King, Jr. and today's celebrant, Christopher Columbus. (Although the holiday "Washington's Birthday" still remains on the federal books, it is more commonly referred to as "President's Day," since it symbolizes the birthdays of both Washington and Lincoln.).

Given this high honor bestowed upon Columbus, today is a fitting time to explore both Columbus's legacy and our own commemoration of the late explorer. A deeper look reveals that it may be time to reassess this annual celebration.

Most everyone knows why it is that we honor Columbus: He "discovered" America. But this claim only holds water if we don't count the natives already on American soil at the time. The claim also fails to pass muster in light of research and scholarship that casts doubt on Columbus being the first European to smack into America, and which also suggests that others outside of Europe may have beaten Columbus to the punch. Evidence suggests that Europeans may have made it over to the Americans in the early 15th century (which is to say nothing of Leif Eriksson's journey in the 11th century). Gavin Menzies, in his book, *1421: The Year the Chinese Discovered America*, argues-albeit imperfectly-that the Chinese made their way to America 72 years before Columbus.

Although the evidence isn't conclusive (understandably), it is at least as strong as it is weak, and historians ought to know better than to stake such ground on such shaky data. The truth of the matter is that we don't know who discovered America, and we should resist the temptation of historical certainty, and exchange opt for the truth by conveying the evidence of other discoverers that we do have, and what conclusions we can, or cannot, draw from that evidence.

What makes Columbus's voyage unique isn't that he was the first to bump into America, but that he was the first (thanks to the powerful and wealthy monarchy backing him) to be able to take advantage of his trip by colonizing the new land for imperial gain. He wasn't the first to discover it, but he was the first to discover it for the people that mattered at the time: Europe.

If the case for Columbus's discovery isn't water-tight, then, are there other reasons to honor him? Probably not. Columbus's behavior (and that of his subordinates) upon landing on shore sticks out as some of the most repulsive and vile in all of American history. This isn't revisionist history: we have Columbus's own journal to tell the tale.

He describes the overwhelmingly hospitable greeting he received from the natives upon his arrival. "They are the best people in the world and above all the gentlest-without knowledge of what is evil-nor do they murder or steal...they love their neighbors as themselves and they have the sweetest talk in the world...always laughing."

But in a letter he later wrote to a friend back in Spain, Columbus revealed his true feelings during the first encounters with the natives.

"With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want."

And so he did.

So appalling were the exploits that Bartolome de las Casas, a Spanish priest who accompanied Columbus on his voyages, later wrote, "What we have committed in the Indies stands out among the most unpardonable offenses ever committed against God and mankind and this trade [Indian slavery] as one of the most unjust, evil and cruel among them." Natives who did not deliver enough gold had their hands cut off. Those who ran away were hunted down by dogs. Prisoners were burned to death. Las Casas wrote that his countrymen "thought nothing of knifing Indians by tens and twenties and of cutting slices off them to test the sharpness of their blades." To avoid such treatment, many natives committed suicide, and mothers killed their children to spare them from such an abject life.

Within a very short period of time, virtually the entire native population of Hispaniola had been decimated. Las Casas said, in 1508, "There were 60,000 people living on this island, including the Indians; so that from 1494 to 1508, over three million people had perished from war, slavery, and the mines. Who in future generations will believe this?"

History, as always, has two sides. Columbus was certainly under enormous pressure to bring back-at any costs-wealth, gold, and imperial conquests to the King and Queen. Failure to do so would have cost him his head.

Yes, his journey was a bold and dangerous one (but on the other hand, should federal holidays be dispensed like Fear Factor trophies?)

And, true, Columbus can't be blamed for killing millions of Native Americans simply because he and his crew brought diseases with them from Europe from which the natives had no immunity (how could he have known?)

Lastly, history is plump with imperfect icons and examples of the high and tragic price of humanity's march.

In the final analysis, however, Columbus's disputed discovery claims, his horrific behavior towards the natives, and our increasingly enlightened and embracing culture suggests that we may be doing more harm than good in our praise of him.

A nation's soul can be seen in whom it chooses to revere. By celebrating Columbus-with our nation's highest possible gesture-we honor the history of some at the expense of others, and we bestow praise on a man who never possessed, what we like to consider, traditional American values. Indeed, a closer examination of the evidence, Columbus's life, and his heritage, proves that the annual celebration is outdated, unjustified, and un-American.

On Columbus Day, we shouldn't discard Mr. Columbus and his voyage, but we should be honest with ourselves and our children about the true happenings of 1492 and use this holiday to celebrate not just Columbus, but all of our early visitors. Call it, "Explorer's Day."

**Patrick Gavin** taught history for three years in Princeton, New Jersey. Currently, he is a writer living in Washington, DC.

## **ARTICLE #3**

# **Hero-making, Christopher Columbus**

**excerpted from the book**

## **Lies My Teacher Told Me**

### **Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong**

**by James W. Loewen**

**Touchstone Books, 1995, paper**



p38

Bartolome de las Casas

"What we committed in the Indies stands out among the most unpardonable offenses ever committed against God and mankind and this trade [in Indian slaves] as one of the most unjust, evil, and cruel among them."

p60

Christopher Columbus introduced two phenomena that revolutionized race relations and transformed the modern world: the taking of land, wealth, and labor from indigenous peoples, leading to their near extermination, and the transatlantic slave trade, which created a racial underclass.

Columbus's initial impression of the Arawaks, who inhabited most of the islands in the Caribbean, was quite favorable. He wrote in his journal on October 13, 1492: "At daybreak great multitudes of men came to the shore, all young and of fine shapes, and very handsome. Their hair was not curly but loose and coarse like horse-hair. All have foreheads much broader than any people I had hitherto seen. Their eyes are large and very beautiful. They are not black, but the color of the inhabitants of the Canaries." (This reference to the Canaries was ominous, for Spain was then in the process of exterminating the aboriginal people of those islands.)

Finally, he got down to business: "I was very attentive to them, and strove to learn if they had any gold. Seeing some of them with little bits of metal hanging at their noses, I gathered from them by signs that by going southward or steering round the island in that direction, there would be found a king who possessed great cups full of gold." He ended his description of them with these menacing words: "I could conquer the whole of them with fifty men and govern them as I pleased."

On his first voyage, Columbus kidnapped some ten to twenty-five Indians and took them back with him to Spain. Only seven or eight of the Indians arrived alive, but they caused quite a stir. Ferdinand and Isabella provided Columbus with seventeen ships, 1,200 to 1,500 men, cannons, crossbows, guns, cavalry, and attack dogs for a second voyage.

When Columbus and his men returned to Haiti in 1493, they demanded food, gold, spun cotton-whatever the Indians had that they wanted, including sex with their women. To ensure cooperation, Columbus used punishment by example. When an Indian committed even a minor offense, the Spanish cut off his ears or nose. Disfigured, the person was sent back to his village as living evidence of the brutality the Spaniards were capable of.

After a while, the Indians had had enough. At first their resistance was mostly passive. They refused to plant food for the Spanish to take. They abandoned towns near the Spanish settlements. Finally, the Arawaks fought back. Their sticks and stones were no more effective against the armed and clothed Spanish, however, than the earthlings' rifles against the aliens' death rays in War of the Worlds.

The attempts at resistance gave Columbus an excuse to make war. On March 24, 1495, he set out to conquer the Arawaks. Bartolome de Las Casas described the force Columbus assembled to put down the rebellion. "Since the people of the land were taking up arms, ridiculous weapons in reality . . . he hastened to proceed to the subdue, by force of arms, the people of the entire island . . . For this he chose 200 foot soldiers and 20 cavalry, with many crossbows and small cannon, lances, and swords, and a still more terrible weapon against the Indians, in addition to the horses: this was 20 hunting dogs, who were turned loose and immediately tore the Indians apart." Naturally, the Spanish won.

Having as yet found no fields of gold, Columbus had to return some kind of dividend to Spain. In 1495 the Spanish on Haiti initiated a great slave raid. They rounded up 1,500 Arawaks, then selected the 500 best specimens (of whom 200 would die en route to Spain). Another 500 were chosen as slaves for the Spaniards staying on the island. The rest were released. A Spanish eyewitness described the event: "Among them were many women who had infants at the breast. They, in order the better to escape us, since they were afraid we would turn to catch them again, left their infants anywhere on the ground and started to flee like desperate people; and some fled so far that they were removed from our settlement of Isabela seven or eight days beyond mountains and across huge rivers; wherefore from now on scarcely any will be had." Columbus was excited. "In the name of the Holy Trinity, we can send from here all the slaves and brazil-wood which could be sold," he wrote to Ferdinand and Isabella in 1496. He viewed the Indian death rate optimistically: "Although they die now, they will not always die. The Negroes and Canary Islanders died at first."

In the words of Hans Koning, "There now began a reign of terror in Hispaniola." Spaniards hunted Indians for sport and murdered them for dog food. Columbus, upset because he could not locate the gold he was certain was on the island, set up a tribute system (the Indians would find and collect gold for the Spanish). Columbus neglected to mention how the Spanish punished those whose tokens had expired: they cut off their hands.

All of these gruesome facts are available in primary source material- letters by Columbus and by other members of his expeditions-and in the work of Las Casas, the first great historian of the Americas, who relied on primary materials and helped preserve them.

The tribute system eventually broke down because what it demanded was impossible. To replace it, Columbus installed the *encomienda* system, in which he granted or "commended" entire Indian villages to individual colonists or groups of colonists. Since it was not called slavery, this forced-labor system escaped the moral

censure that slavery received. Following Columbus's example, Spain made the encomienda system official policy on Haiti in 1502; other conquistadors subsequently introduced it to Mexico, Peru, and Florida.

The tribute and encomienda systems caused incredible depopulation. On Haiti the colonists made the Indians mine gold for them, raise Spanish food, and even carry them everywhere they went. The Indians couldn't stand it. Pedro de Cordoba wrote in a letter to King Ferdinand in 1517, "As a result of the sufferings and hard labor they endured, the Indians choose and have chosen suicide. Occasionally a hundred have committed mass suicide. The women, exhausted by labor, have shunned conception and childbirth . . . "

Beyond acts of individual cruelty, the Spanish disrupted the Indian ecosystem and culture. Forcing Indians to work in mines rather than in their gardens led to widespread malnutrition. The intrusion of rabbits and livestock caused further ecological disaster. Diseases new to the Indians played a role, although smallpox, usually the big killer, did not appear on the island until after 1516. Some of the Indians tried fleeing to Cuba, but the Spanish soon followed them there. Estimates of Haiti's pre-Columbian population range as high as 8,000,000 people. When Christopher Columbus returned to Spain, he left his brother Bartholomew in charge of the island. Bartholomew took a census of Indian adults in 1496 and came up with 1,100,000. The Spanish did not count children under fourteen and could not count Arawaks who had escaped into the mountains. Kirkpatrick Sale estimates that a more accurate total would probably be in the neighborhood of 3,000,000. "By 1516," according to Benjamin Keen, "thanks to the sinister Indian slave trade and labor policies initiated by Columbus, only some 12,000 remained." Las Casas tells us that fewer than 200 Indians were alive in 1542. By 1555, they were all gone....

The slave trade destroyed whole Indian nations. Enslaved Indians died. To replace the dying Haitians, the Spanish imported tens of thousands more Indians from the Bahamas, which "are now deserted," in the words of the Spanish historian Peter Martyr, reporting in 1516. Packed in below deck, with hatchways closed to prevent their escape, so many slaves died on the trip that "a ship without a compass, chart, or guide, but only following the trail of dead Indians who had been thrown from the ships could find its way from the Bahamas to Hispaniola." Puerto Rico and Cuba were next.

Because the Indians died, Indian slavery then led to the massive slave trade the other way across the Atlantic, from Africa. This trade also began on Haiti, initiated by Columbus's son in 1505. Predictably, Haiti then became the site of the first large-scale slave revolt, when blacks and Indians banded together in 1519. The uprising lasted more than a decade and was finally brought to an end by the Spanish in the 1530s....

...As Kirkpatrick Sale poetically sums up, Columbus's "second voyage marks the first extended encounter of European and Indian societies, the clash of cultures that was to echo down through five centuries." The methods unleashed by Columbus are, in fact, the larger part of his legacy.

Columbus's own writings reflect this increasing racism. When Columbus was selling Queen Isabella on the wonders of the Americas, the Indians were "well built" and "of quick intelligence." "They have very good customs," he wrote, "and the king maintains a very marvelous state, of a style so orderly that it is a pleasure to see it, and they have good memories and they wish to see everything and ask what it is and for what it is used." Later, when Columbus was justifying his wars and his enslavement of the Indians, they became "cruel" and "stupid," "a people warlike and numerous, whose customs and religion are very different from ours."