

B. 1492: The Year *Everything* Changed

1. Christopher Columbus arrived in America in 1492, but not everyone agrees that he “discovered” America.
 - a) Some people say that because Indians (or “Native Americans”) were living here, it could not be “discovered.”
 - b) Others prefer to give credit for the discovery of America to a Viking named Leif Ericson, who found part of North America around the year 1000.
2. In the end, however, it does not really matter who the first person to come to America was. The important story of America – the story of how the United States and other modern countries came to exist – only begins in 1492, with the arrival of Columbus and Europeans in America.

C. The Story of Christopher Columbus

1. Columbus’s Early Life
 - a) Christopher Columbus was one of many young men in Europe inspired by the story of Marco Polo.
 - b) As a young boy, living in Genoa, Italy, he began to travel on trading vessels in the Mediterranean.
 - c) On a trading expedition to northern Europe, his ship was attacked by pirates and destroyed off the coast of Portugal. He barely made it ashore alive, and joined his brother Bartholomeu in Portugal.
2. Columbus’s New Idea
 - a) Columbus taught himself to read and to make maps.
 - b) By studying the works of ancient geographers, he came to believe that the earth was round, and that it was small enough that it was possible to sail west to get to Asia.
3. Convincing the World
 - a) Columbus first tried to convince the King of Portugal of his idea. The king was busy fighting a Crusade against the Muslims in Africa, and he was still hoping that his explorers would find a way around Africa.
 - b) Columbus next turned to Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile. Isabella insisted that her advisors be allowed to judge Columbus’s plan.
 - c) Columbus returned to Portugal to try one more time, however while he waited for the King’s decision, a Portuguese explorer named Bartholomeu Diaz returned in 1488 with the news that he had sailed around the bottom of Africa. Portugal was no longer interested in Columbus’s idea.
 - d) When he returned to Spain, Columbus learned that the Council of Salamanca had judged that sailing west to Asia was impossible, so they rejected Columbus’s plan.
 - e) Just then, however, Isabella and Ferdinand completed the Reconquista, and Isabella decided to let Columbus try.
 - f) In 1492, he set off with three ships: the Nina, Pinta, and Santa Maria.
4. The First Voyage
 - a) Columbus left Spain on August 2, 1492.
 - b) From the Canary Islands, he sailed west, using the “trade winds” that blow westward.
 - c) As the weeks passed, the men grew mutinous. No one had ever sailed for an entire month without sighting land.
 - d) Columbus tried to calm the men by telling them they had not sailed as far as they actually had, and he kept them motivated to continue on by offering a cash prize to the first man who sighted land.

e) Finally, on October 12, 1492, Columbus reached the Bahamas.

5. The Indies?

- a) Columbus believed that he had found an island that was a part of the Indies (eastern Asia), so he called the people “Indians.”
- b) He was surprised to find them naked and with painted bodies, like the primitive people of Africa. He was expecting to make contact with the wealthy and powerful empires of Asia.
- c) He sailed on to Cuba and Hispaniola (the two largest islands of the Caribbean), but still found no Asian empire.

6. The Triumphant Return

- a) One of his ships was destroyed on a reef, and Columbus left forty men behind to create a settlement. He told the men to find gold, but to treat the natives kindly.
- b) He returned to Spain where Ferdinand and Isabella were impressed with the Indians, gold, tobacco, animals, and strange foods such as corn and potatoes he had brought back.
- c) Columbus was made an Admiral and governor of the new lands he had found. He was also put in charge of a second, larger expedition.

7. The Second Voyage

- a) Columbus was sent with 17 ships and 1200 men. Many of these men were young adventurers and former soldiers of the Reconquista.
- b) The purposes of this trip were:
 - i) to find gold
 - ii) to convert the natives to Christianity
 - iii) to find the empires of Asia and set up a trading post
- c) When Columbus returned to the Caribbean, a tribe of cannibals called “Caribs” attacked his men, and then he found that the 40 sailors he had left behind had been killed. The Spanish adventurers, now more than ever, expected to fight the natives, rather than live peacefully with them.
- d) Above all, Columbus wanted to find Asia, so he left his brother in charge of Hispaniola and continued to sail westward. He explored Cuba and found Jamaica.
- e) Meanwhile the Spanish adventurers were getting into more struggles with the Indians over the search for gold. After each side attacked the other a number of times, the Spanish finally conquered the entire island of Hispaniola.
- f) Even though Columbus was disappointed with his second trip, Ferdinand and Isabella still believed he would reach Asia, and they sent him on a third expedition.

8. The Third and Fourth Voyages

- a) On his third voyage Columbus was still looking for Asia, but he came to believe that he had found a new continent when he discovered the Orinoco River of South America.
- b) He thought that such a large river could only be found on a continent, since a large land area was needed to collect enough rain to create it.
- c) Ferdinand and Isabella were disappointed with the results of Columbus’s work so far, so they sent an investigator to find out the cause of the problems. He blamed Columbus, and sent him home a prisoner.
- d) Ferdinand and Isabella were sorry Columbus had been treated so roughly and they gave him one last chance to find Asia.
- e) On his fourth voyage, Columbus sailed far as Central America.
- f) When he returned to Spain, Isabella died and Ferdinand unjustly refused to give him all his promised wealth and titles.