

Don't Know Much About American History

Chapter One: Brave New World

E Pluribus Unum ("Out of Many, One")
— Motto for the Great Seal of the United States

Setting it Straight.

Who discovered America?

- a) Christopher Columbus
- b) Leif Eriksson
- c) Amerigo Vespucci
- d) the Pilgrims
- e) none of the above

The answer is letter e. It's true that all the people above came to the Americas. But these Europeans didn't discover what they came to call the "New World" any more than bears discovered honey. The land was just new to them because they hadn't known it existed.

Thousands of years before any European set foot in North America, groups of hunter-gatherers followed bison or woolly mammoths over a land bridge from Asia to present-day Alaska. (Today that land is underwater, but America and Asia are still only fifty-two miles apart near the Arctic Circle.) These people might have arrived as many as thirty thousand or forty thousand years ago. They were certainly here fifteen thousand years ago. Their descendants are called Native Americans or American Indians.

Over thousands of years, American Indians spread through North and South America. Each group adapted to its surroundings and climate. In North America, Indians in the East, upper Midwest, and Northwest hunted in the forests and mountains and fished in the lakes, streams, and oceans. Some farmed the land. They lived in wigwams or wood houses. On the plains many Indian tribes hunted the bison that roamed the open prairies. They lived in teepees or thatched grass houses. And in the Southwest some farmed and carved houses and cities into the sides of cliffs. There may have been between 50 million and 100 million Indians and more than two thousand distinct cultures in North and South America.

Was Christopher Columbus the first European in the Americas?

Nope. As far as historians know, that title goes to the Norseman Erik the Red, who beat Columbus by a good five hundred years. Erik the Red sailed west from Scandinavia and came upon Greenland in the year 982. He started a small colony there. Then around the year 1000, his son Leif Eriksson (get it -- son of Erik?) sailed even farther west to what is now Canada. Leif and his men spent the winter before returning to Greenland. Other Norse colonists stayed for three years or so but, finding the native people none too friendly, eventually returned as well. The remains of what was probably their settlement -- some houses, workshops, and a forge -- can be seen today at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland. Though this was the first known European settlement in the New World, the Norse didn't leave a lasting impression. That was left to an enterprising sailor named Christopher Columbus.

Why don't all Americans celebrate Columbus Day?

Columbus landed in the islands of the Caribbean in 1492, hundreds of years after the Norsemen came to North America and thousands of years after American Indians reached the continent. So what's Columbus Day all about, aside from getting a day off from school?

Columbus's "discovery" of a land previously unknown to most Europeans changed the world forever. His arrival in the New World marked the beginning of an extraordinary era of European discovery, conquest, and colonization in the Americas. What's been called the "Columbian exchange" brought together people who'd been separated for fifteen thousand years. These people began sharing ideas, foods, crops, animals, languages, cultures, and religions, enriching both the Old and New Worlds.

Yet not everyone thinks this is something to celebrate. What was good for Europeans was devastating to American Indians. Europeans brought deadly diseases to the Americas that the natives couldn't fight off. Within 150 years, an estimated 85 percent of the American population had died -- perhaps 64 million to 85 million Indians. Nor did Africans benefit from Columbus's discovery, since many were later taken from their homelands to work as slaves in the New World. So Columbus Day marks a meeting of cultures that had both good and bad effects on the people of the world.

Why isn't America called Columbia?

Because a mapmaker didn't think of him in time. Columbus died thinking he'd reached the East Indies. (That's why he named the native people "Indians.") But explorers who came after him soon realized the land across the Atlantic was entirely new to them. The first person to put this into writing was an Italian businessman named Amerigo Vespucci, who sailed to South America in 1499, 1501, and 1503. In a letter Vespucci claimed to have found a "Mundus Novus," or New World. The idea of a New World was exciting, and Vespucci's travels became more famous in his day than Columbus's.

When a mapmaker named Martin Waldseemüller created an updated map of the world in 1507, he named South America in honor of Vespucci. Afterward Waldseemüller felt he'd made a mistake in doing so and removed the name from a later map. But it was too late. The name "America" was already being used all over Europe, and it became attached to the North American continent as well.

Who followed Columbus to America?

Several European countries sent sailors on the heels of Columbus. Some of these sailors began to search for a "Northwest Passage," or an all-water route through the Americas to the East. (The only practical Northwest Passage that exists is so far north that its waters are frozen most of the year, but Europeans didn't know that yet.) The search led them into the interior of North and South America, where they realized that the land was not a roadblock to Asia but a major opportunity. There were riches to plunder, land to claim, and natives to convert to Christianity.

The key players in the exploration of the Americas were the Spanish, French, and English; the Portuguese, Dutch, and Swedes had minor roles.

- The Spanish explored, claimed land, or started settlements in present-day California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Florida, Mexico, and much of South and Central America in the 1500s.
- The Portuguese began to settle Brazil in 1532.
- The English made a claim in the 1580s. Within seventy-five years, thirteen British colonies would line the east coast of what would become the United States.

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