

***Welcome to THE MAKING OF A NATION – American history
in VOA Special English. I'm Steve Ember.***

Generations of schoolchildren have been taught that Christopher Columbus discovered the New World. In fact, the second Monday in October is celebrated as a national holiday, Columbus Day, to honor the European explorer.



But October's page on the calendar also has a lesser known observance. October ninth is Leif Erickson Day. Leif Erickson was a Norse explorer who sailed around the northeastern coast of what we now call North America about one thousand years ago. He and his crew returned to Greenland with news of a place he called "Vinland."

Following his explorations, a few settlements were built. Experts digging in eastern Canada in the nineteen sixties found the remains of a village with houses like those in Greenland, Iceland and Norway. But the Norse did not establish any permanent settlements in North America.

Today, as we relaunch our series, we begin with the story of early European explorers in North America.

In the eleventh century, Europe was beginning a period of great change. One reason was the religious wars known as the Crusades. These were military campaigns by Christians to force Muslims out of the Holy Land in the Middle East. The Crusades began at the end of the eleventh century. They continued for about two hundred years.

One effect of the presence of European armies in the Middle East was to increase trade. This trade was controlled by businessmen in Venice and other city-states in Italy. The businessmen earned large profits by supplying the warring armies and by bringing goods from the East into Europe.

When the European crusaders returned home, they brought with them some new and useful products. These included spices, perfumes, silk cloth and steel products. These goods became highly valued all over Europe. The increased trade with the East led to the creation and growth of towns along the supply roads. It also created a large number of rich European businessmen.

The European nations were growing. They developed armies and governments. These had to be paid for with taxes collected from the people. By the fifteenth century, European countries were ready to explore new parts of the world.

The first explorers were the Portuguese. By fourteen hundred, they wanted to control the Eastern spice trade. European businessmen did not want to continue paying Venetian and Arab traders for their costly spices. They wanted to set up trade themselves. If they could sail to Asia directly for these products, the resulting trade would bring huge profits.

The leader of Portugal's exploration efforts was Prince Henry, a son of King John the first. He was interested in sea travel and exploration. He became known as Henry the Navigator.

Prince Henry brought experts to his country and studied the sciences involved in exploration. He built an observatory to study the stars. Portuguese sea captains sailed their ships down the west coast of Africa hoping to find a path to India and East Asia. They finally found the end of the African continent, the area called the Cape of Good Hope.

It took the Portuguese only about fifty years to take control of the spice trade. They established trading colonies in Africa, the Persian Gulf, India and China.

Improvements in technology helped them succeed. One improvement was a new kind of ship. It could sail more easily through storms and winds.

Other inventions like the compass allowed them to sail out of sight of land. The Portuguese also armed their ships with modern cannon. They used these weapons to battle Muslim and East Asian traders.

The other European nations would not let Portugal control this spice trade for long, however. Spain's Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand agreed to provide ships, crew and supplies for an exploration by an Italian named Christopher Columbus.

Columbus thought the shortest way to reach the East was to sail west across the Atlantic Ocean. He was right. But he also was wrong. He believed the world was much smaller than it is. He did not imagine the existence of another continent -- and another huge ocean -- between Europe and East Asia.

Columbus and a crew of eighty-eight men left Spain on August third, fourteen ninety-two, in three ships: the Niña, the Pinta and the Santa Maria. By October twelfth, the sailors stood on land again on an island that Columbus named San Salvador.

He explored that island and the nearby islands of what are now known as Cuba and Hispaniola. He believed they were part of the coast of East Asia, which was then called the Indies. He called the people he found there Indians.

Columbus left about forty men on San Salvador island to build a fort from the wood of one of the ships. He returned to Spain with birds, plants, gold -- and people captured from the land he explored. Columbus was welcomed as a hero when he returned to Spain in March of fourteen ninety-three.

Columbus sailed again across the Atlantic to the Caribbean five months later. He found that the fort built by his men had been destroyed by fire. Columbus did not find any of his men. But this time, he had many more men and all the animals and equipment needed to start a colony on Hispaniola.

Seven months later, he sent five ships back to Spain. They carried Indians to be sold as slaves. Columbus himself also returned to Spain.

Christopher Columbus made another trip in fourteen ninety-eight. This time he saw the coast of South America.

But the settlers on Hispaniola were so unhappy with conditions in their new colony, they sent Columbus back to Spain as a prisoner. Spain's rulers pardoned him.

In fifteen two, Columbus made his final voyage to what some by then were calling the New World. He stayed on the island of Jamaica until he returned home two years later.

During all his trips, Columbus explored islands and waterways, searching for that passage to the Indies. He never found it. Nor did he find spices or great amounts of gold. Yet, he always believed that he had found the Indies. He refused to recognize that it really was a new world.

Evidence of this was all around him -- strange plants unknown in either Europe or Asia. And a different people who did not understand any language spoken in the East.

Columbus' voyages, however, opened up the new world. Others later explored all of North America.

You may be wondering about the name of this new land. If Christopher Columbus led the explorations, then why is it called "America"? The answer lies with the name of another Italian explorer, Amerigo Vespucci.

He visited the coast of South America in fourteen ninety-nine. He wrote stories about his experiences that were widely read in Europe.

In fifteen seven, a German mapmaker, Martin Waldseemüller, read Vespucci's stories. He decided that the writer had discovered the new world, and thought it should be called America in his honor. And so it was.

Spanish explorers sought to find gold and power in the New World. They also wanted to spread Christianity, which they considered the only true religion.

The first of these Spanish explorers was Juan Ponce de Leon. He landed in North America in fifteen thirteen. He explored the eastern coast of what is now the state of Florida. He was searching for a special kind of water that Europeans believed existed. They believed that this water could make old people young again. Ponce de Leon never did find the fountain of youth.

Also in fifteen thirteen, Vasco Nuñez de Balboa crossed the Isthmus of Panama and reached the Pacific Ocean. In fifteen nineteen, Hernan Cortes landed an army in Mexico. His army destroyed the ancient empire of the Aztec Indians.

That same year Ferdinand Magellan began his three-year voyage around the world. And in the fifteen thirties, the forces of Francisco Pizarro destroyed the Inca Indian empire in Peru.

Ten years later, Francisco Vasquez de Coronado had marched as far north as what is now the American state of Kansas and then west to the Grand Canyon. About the same time, Hernando de Soto reached the Mississippi River.

Fifty years after Columbus first landed at San Salvador, Spain claimed a huge area of America.

The riches of these new lands made Spain the greatest power in Europe, and the world. But other nations refused to accept Spanish claims to the New World. Explorers from England, France and Holland were also sailing to North America. That will be our story next week.

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