

COLUMBUS DAY

SECOND MONDAY IN OCTOBER

COLUMBUS DAY is a legal federal holiday that commemorates the first voyage of Christopher Columbus, who sailed west from Spain in 1492 and reached the islands of present day Bahamas. This region was little known to Europeans, although it had been explored and inhabited by Native peoples for over 30,000 years.

Columbus mistakenly thought that he had found a new route to the East, which at the time meant China, Japan, India, and the Indies. So he called the islands the “West Indies,” and the indigenous inhabitants “Indians.”

Columbus was not the first European to set foot on this land—Scandinavian Vikings, Irish missionaries, and others may have been there as early as 1,000 AD. Nor did Columbus “discover America” as many American schoolchildren were taught. Yet, the first voyage of Columbus was historically significant for a number of reasons. It confirmed that there were rich lands across the Atlantic Ocean, and it inspired a wave of exploration and colonization of the Americas—including land that eventually became the United States. For the approximately 10 million Indians, spread throughout the Americas at the time, the arrival of Columbus was significant in a different way—it changed the course of their lives, and eventually led to their near extinction and the decimation of their cultures.

In the 15th century, European merchants were looking for a new and shorter trade route to the East, where they could get spices, gems, gold, and other “exotic” goods. The main route was overland, but it was long and dangerous. Portuguese sailors had explored an ocean route, sailing down the coast of Africa, around the Cape of Good Hope, on the southern tip of Africa, then across the Indian Ocean to Asia. But this too was a very long and treacherous journey.

Christopher Columbus (or Cristóbal Colón, as he called himself) was an Italian seaman, living in Portugal. He believed that Japan was only 3,000 miles west of Europe, and China and India were not far beyond. Educated men of the time knew that Columbus had underestimated the size of the Atlantic Ocean, and the world. Still, Columbus insisted that by sailing west, he would find a shorter route to the East. He would then set up

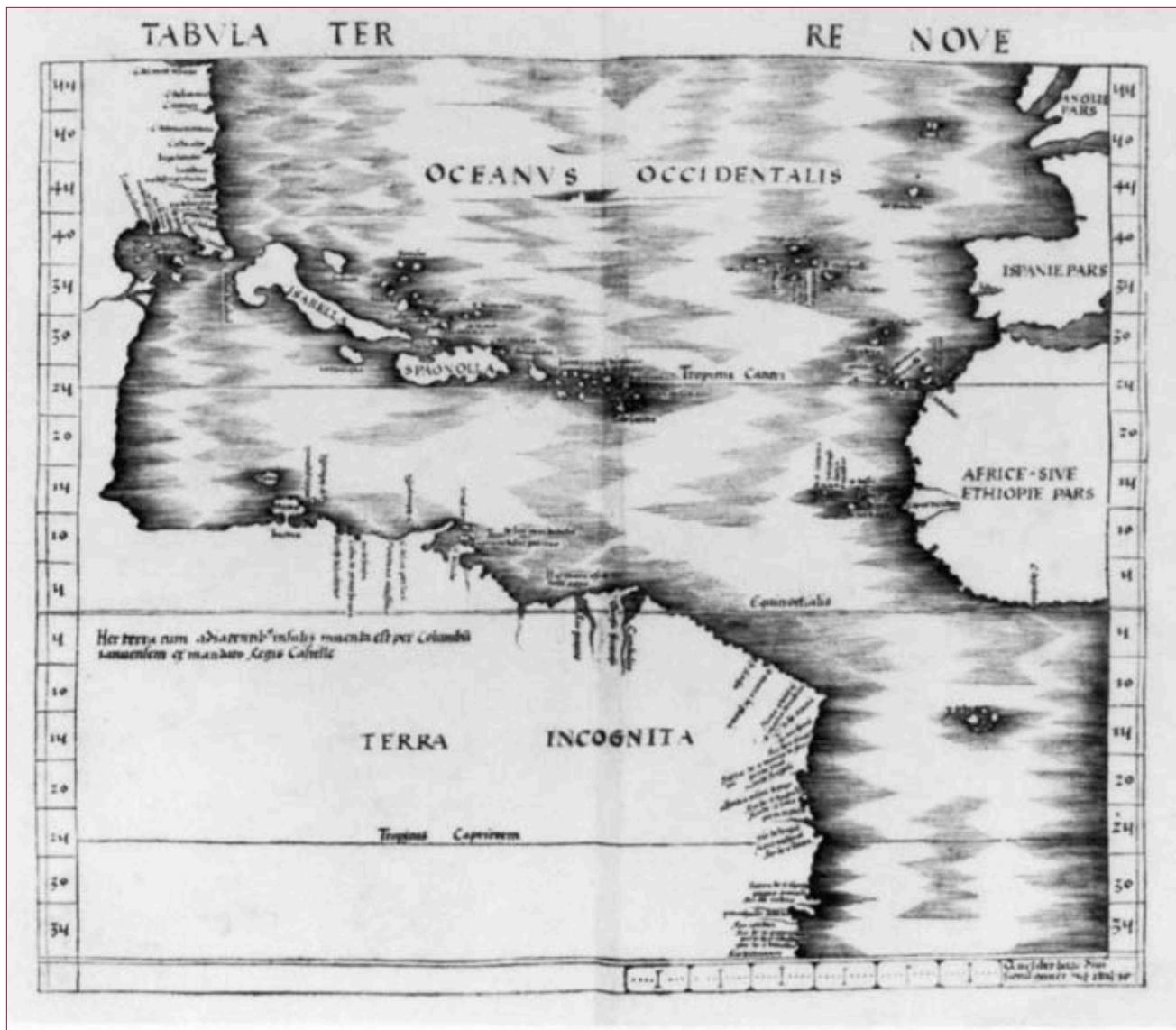
a major trading port for the exchange of goods between east and west. All he needed were ships and money. He asked the kings of Portugal, England, and France for financial support, but all refused. Columbus was a skilled seaman and navigator, but no one wanted to invest in such a fool-hearty venture.

Eventually, Columbus convinced Queen Isabella of Spain. She and King Ferdinand agreed to all his requests. Finally, on August



PREVIOUS PAGE: Christopher Columbus, an Italian seaman living in Portugal, convinced Queen Isabella of Spain to fund his first voyage west across the Atlantic Ocean in 1492.

ABOVE: A monument in Sevilla, Spain is dedicated to Christopher Columbus, with King Ferdinand on one side and Queen Isabella on the other.



3, 1492, he and ninety men set sail from Spain on the ship, the *Santa Maria*. Two other ships, the *Niña* and the *Pinta*, accompanied him. They sailed west. Two long months went by. His men became tired and sick, and threatened to turn the ships back. Columbus encouraged them, certain that they were close to Asia. Finally, on October 11th they sighted land. The next morning they landed on a lush island, and Columbus thought he had succeeded in his mission. He was not aware of his true location. On the island he encountered the native inhabitants, the Arawak. From them he learned that the island was named "Guanahani." Columbus christened it "San Salvador" and claimed it

immediately for Spain. A few days later, he landed on an island near present-day Cuba, which he thought was part of China.

The Arawak were helpful to Columbus and his crew at first, but their feelings quickly changed when Columbus captured some of their members to take back to the Queen.

When he returned to Spain on March 15, 1493, Isabella and Ferdinand received him with great celebration and honor. He was granted the title of "Admiral of All the Ocean Seas," was given funding for more voyages, and ordered to colonize the new region for Spain. Columbus made a number of voyages to

ABOVE: An early map indicates the lands in the region visited by Christopher Columbus.

the Americas, and expanded Spain's empire, yet he never learned the region's true identity. At his death, he still believed he had found a route to Asia.

The Making of a Holiday

Few celebrations marked the voyage of Columbus until hundreds of years later. In 1792, a ceremony was held in New York honoring Columbus, and a **monument** was **dedicated** to him. Soon afterward, the city of Washington was officially named the District of Columbia, and made the capital of the United States. In the next century, statues, streets, rivers, and cities were named for Columbus. The Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1892 displayed **replicas** of Columbus's three ships.

Columbus Day became a holiday, due in part to the efforts of Italians in New York City and elsewhere. Out of pride for their “**native son**,” a group of New York Italians organized the first celebration of “The Discovery of America” on October 12, 1866. In following years, Italians in other cities held similar events with **banquets**, parades, and dances. In 1869, San Francisco Italians celebrated October 12, and called it “Columbus Day.” President Franklin Roosevelt officially **proclaimed** October 12 as Columbus Day in 1937. Now, it is celebrated on the second Monday in October, allowing for a long holiday weekend.

In recent decades Columbus Day has generated much **controversy**. Native American groups and others began to speak out against the claim that Columbus had discovered America. They proposed that Native Americans, not Columbus, should be recognized as the first and true discoverers of America. They felt that in the spirit of **reconciliation** the day should celebrate Native Americans. People **petitioned** their state and local governments to establish an official Native American Day holiday, or to replace Columbus Day with Native American Day. As a result, in schools across the country, Columbus Day curricula began to include information on Native Americans, and on the impact of European contact. Some states now call the holiday by the dual name, Columbus Day/Native American Day. Other states have established a separate Native American Day holiday. The state of South Dakota has officially replaced Columbus Day with Native American Day in recognition of indigenous people.

Glossary

- commemorate(s):** *v.* to honor and remember with a ceremony or holiday
- inhabit(ed):** *v.* to live in; to reside in
- mistakenly:** *adv.* in error
- indigenous:** *adj.* native to a region
- set foot:** *v. phrase.* to step upon land or property
- significant:** *adj.* important; meaningful
- confirm(ed):** *v.* to establish as true
- extinction:** *n.* dying off of all members of a group or species
- decimation:** *n.* destruction or killing of a large part of
- merchant(s):** *n.* person who buys and sells items
- spice(s):** *n.* flavoring for food, such as, pepper, nutmeg, cinnamon
- gem(s):** *n.* precious stone such as ruby, emerald, diamond
- exotic:** *adj.* strange or different in a way that is fascinating, interesting, beautiful; foreign
- treacherous:** *adj.* difficult and dangerous
- insist(ed):** *v.* to be firm in one's opinion, request, or belief
- invest:** *v.* to put money into, for future gain
- fool-hearty:** *adj.* foolish; unwise
- venture:** *n.* plan; undertaking
- convince(d):** *v.* to persuade; to make someone agree
- accompany(-ied):** *v.* to go with
- encourage(d):** *v.* to inspire; to make others feel braver
- lush:** *adj.* green and abundant with plant life
- mission:** *n.* goal; important plan or aim
- inhabitant(s):** *n.* person who lives in a certain place
- christen(ed):** *v.* to name ceremoniously
- funding:** *n.* money for a project or venture
- monument:** *n.* a stone, building, or some structure (large or small) created to remember a person or event
- dedicate(d):** *v.* designed specifically for a person or purpose
- replica(s):** *n.* exact copy; likeness
- native son:** *n. phrase.* man native to a particular place, often one's same country
- banquet(s):** *n.* a special meal held in honor of an important event, usually a large meal for many people
- proclaim(ed):** *v.* to declare officially and publicly
- controversy:** *n.* issue for which people have strong opinions on both sides
- reconciliation:** *n.* renewed friendliness or relationship
- petition(ed):** *v.* to request with an official letter or statement