



The Discovery of America



In this article you will read about two explorers: Christopher Columbus and Leif Ericson. These two men have a lot in common, but one is more famous than the other. Both Columbus and Ericson loved the sea and were great explorers. They both came to the shores of North America before any other Europeans. As you may already know, Columbus is famous for the discovery of North America. What many people don't know, though, is that Leif Ericson landed on North American soil almost 500 years earlier than Columbus. As you continue through this article you will read about the voyages of Columbus and Ericson. As you read think about the following question. If Leif Ericson came to America before Columbus, why is Columbus famous for the discovery America instead of Ericson?

Christopher Columbus

Christopher Columbus is credited with the discovery of the New World; but, Columbus was not looking for a new world when he sailed from Spain in 1492. In fact, he was looking for an old world. To be more precise, Columbus was looking for a shorter route from Europe to the orient. What he found, though, was the Americas. Columbus was not convinced that he had discovered a new world and in four separate voyages to the Caribbean from 1492 to 1504, he remained convinced that he had found the lands that Marco Polo reached in his overland travels to China at the end of the 13th century. Columbus believed it was only a matter of time before a passage was found through the Caribbean islands to the fabled cities of Asia.

Born in Genoa, Italy in 1451, Christopher Columbus loved the sea and became a sailor at the age of fifteen. Growing up he had heard stories of Marco Polo and the Far East. Even though the rest of the world believed the world was flat, Columbus thought the world was round. He also knew that Europeans depended on the Far East for items like silk, gems and rare spices. Obtaining these luxuries was difficult and costly because of the long land route that had to be traveled to the orient and back again. So, Columbus decided to sail west in order to find a shorter route to the Far East.

Columbus first went to King Henry of Portugal to ask for ships and money to make his exploration, but King Henry didn't believe that Columbus could make it to the east by going west, so he denied Columbus' request. Columbus didn't give up, though. Instead he went to Spain and asked King Ferdinand and Queen Isabelle for ships, men, and money. The Queen said

yes, but because there was a war going on at that time, she told him he would have to wait until the war was over.

Columbus waited patiently until the war ended in 1492. Then Queen Isabelle gave Columbus three ships, 90 men, and the money he needed for his trip. On the third of August, 1492, Columbus set sail with the three ships, the Nina, the Pinta and the Santa Maria. These ships were nothing like the modern ocean liners of today. These little ships were made of wood and were very uncomfortable on long voyages. They had no sophisticated navigation devices so, Columbus had to navigate by using the stars and the moon.

Columbus and his crew first sailed to the Canary Islands where they took on fresh supplies before heading for the open seas. Columbus and his three ships had been at sea for about four weeks when the crew began to get worried. No one had ever been at sea for so long without seeing land and the sailors were afraid they would fall off the edge of the world and die. Columbus had to be strong in the face of a possible mutiny. He told his men that if they did not see land in three days they would turn back. He also offered a reward to the first man who spotted land.

On the thirty-fifth day they saw birds flying overhead. That was a very good sign since birds do not fly to far away from land. Then at about 2 a.m. a sailor on the Pinta sighted land. On the morning of October 12, 1492 the men went ashore on an island in the Caribbean sea. They named the island San Salvador. Today, this island is shared by two countries, Hatti and The Dominican Republic.

Leif Ericson

Even though Christopher Columbus is credited with discovering America, there was another man who reached American soil long before Columbus, his name is Leif Ericson. Born in 975, Leif Ericson was a Viking sailor who lived in Greenland.

According to one legend, Leif left Greenland around the year 1000 and sailed to his native country of Norway. While in Norway he was converted to Christianity and was told to go back to Greenland and convert the rest of his Viking clansmen to the Christian faith. Leif began his journey back to Greenland, but was blown off course and lost his way. The next time he and his crew saw land it was the North American shore.

Another story states that an Icelandic trader by the name of Bjarni first sighted land in North America but did not come ashore. He later met Leif and told him of his sighting. Afterward Leif retraced Bjarni's voyage and landed somewhere in what is now Canada. The precise location of Leif Ericson's landing is unknown but remains of a Viking type settlement found in Newfoundland in 1963 lead many to believe he settled there at least for a while.

You have just read about two men. One, Christopher Columbus, has been heralded as the discoverer of "A New World." From grade school through university, Americans in the United States are taught that Columbus discovered America. The other, Leif Ericson, is hardly ever mentioned in history or history class; yet, he was actually the first European to land in North America. So, why is it that Columbus receives the credit for discovering America even though Leif Ericson landed in America almost 500 years earlier than Columbus?

There are many theories. One is that Columbus brought greater change to the Americas than Ericson. This is especially true when you remember that Columbus made 4 voyages to the Americas from 1492 to 1504. Each time he brought with him new settlers and had more interaction with the native inhabitants.

On the other hand, it is not known how long Leif Ericson stayed in North America before returning to his home in Greenland. It is also not clear exactly how much, if any, interaction he had with native Americans. Some people believe that Ericson left North America because of attacks by native Americans against him and his family. Whether this is true or not is not clear; but, one thing is clear, Columbus had a much greater impact on America and its settlement than Ericson which is why he receives the credit for discovering "The New World."

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