

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

(ca. 1451-1506)

Christopher Columbus, the first modern European explorer of the Americas, was born at Genoa, a seaport of Italy, around the year 1451. His father was a wool-comber.¹ Christopher did not care to learn that trade, but wanted to become a sailor. Seeing the boy's strong liking for the sea, his father sent him to a school where he could learn geography, map-drawing, and whatever else might help him to become someday commander of a vessel.

1. Christopher Columbus was born in _____, Italy.
 - a. Florence
 - b. Genoa
 - c. Rome
 - d. Turin

When he was fourteen, Columbus went to sea. In those days,

the Mediterranean Sea swarmed with warships and pirates. Every sailor, no matter if he was but a boy, had to stand ready to fight his way from port to port.

In this exciting life, full of adventure and of danger, Columbus grew to adulthood. The rough experiences he then had did much toward making him the determined captain and explorer² that he afterwards became.

2. Young Christopher Columbus learned sailing in the _____.
 - a. Arctic Ocean
 - b. Bay of Bengal
 - c. Mediterranean Sea
 - d. Pacific Ocean

According to some accounts, Columbus once had a desperate battle with a vessel off the coast of Portugal. The fight lasted, it is said, all day. At length both vessels were _____

¹ Wool-comber: before wool can be spun into thread and woven into cloth, the tangled locks must be combed out straight and smooth; once this was all done by hand.

² Explorer: one who explores or discovers new countries.

found to be on fire. Columbus jumped from his blazing ship into the sea, and catching hold of a floating oar, managed, with its help, to swim to the shore, about six miles away.



Left: Columbus as a boy. From a statue in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

He then went to the port of Lisbon.³ There he married the daughter of a famous sea-captain. For a long time after his marriage Columbus earned his living partly by drawing maps, which he sold to commanders of vessels visiting Lisbon, and partly by making voyages to Africa, Iceland, and other countries.

Columbus Columbus

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voyage voyage voyage

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The maps which Columbus made and sold were very different

³ Lisbon is the capital city of Portugal.

from those we now have. At that time, half of the world was unknown to Europeans. Europe, Asia, and a small part of Africa were the chief countries known. The maps of Columbus may have shown the earth shaped like a ball, but he supposed it to be much smaller than it really is. No one then had sailed round the globe. No one then knew what lands lay west of the broad Atlantic; for this reason we should look in vain, on one of the maps drawn by Columbus, for the great continents of North and South America or for Australia or the Pacific Ocean.



The white parts of the map above show areas of the globe familiar to Europeans during the late 1400s.

3. Color the Mediterranean Sea blue on the map above.

While living in Lisbon, Columbus made up his mind to try to

do what no other person, at that time, dared attempt. That was to cross the Atlantic Ocean. He thought that by doing so, he could get directly to Asia and the Indies, which, he believed, were opposite Portugal and Spain. If successful, he could open up a very profitable trade with the rich countries of the East, from which spices, drugs, and silk were brought to Europe. The people of Europe could not reach those countries directly by ships, because they had not then found their way round the southern point of Africa.



This map shows how Christopher Columbus (not knowing that the Americas lay in the way) hoped to reach Asia and the East Indies by sailing west.

trade trade trade trade

profitable profitable

Columbus was too poor to fit out even a single ship to undertake

such a voyage as he had planned. He asked the king of Portugal to furnish some money or vessels toward it, but he received no encouragement. At length he determined to go to Spain and see if he could get help there.

4. The king of Portugal agreed to furnish Columbus' voyage across the Atlantic Ocean.

a. True

b. False

furnish furnish furnish

vessels vessels vessels

On the southern coast of Spain, there is a small port named Palos. Within sight of the village of Palos, and also within plain sight of the ocean, there was a convent called the Convent of Saint Mary.

One morning a tall, fine-looking man, leading a little boy by the hand, knocked at the door of this convent and begged for a piece of bread and a cup of water for the child. The man was Columbus—whose wife was now dead—and the boy was his son.

It chanced that the guardian of the convent noticed Columbus standing at the door. He liked his appearance, and coming up, began to talk with him. Columbus frankly told him what he was trying to do. The guardian of the convent⁴ listened with great interest; then he gave him a letter to a friend he thought would help him to lay his plans before Ferdinand and Isabella, the king and queen of Spain.

Isabella Isabella Isabella

Ferdinand Ferdinand

Columbus left his son at the convent, and set forward on his journey full of bright hopes. But Ferdinand and Isabella could not then see him; and after waiting a long time, the traveler was told that he might go before a number of learned men and tell them about his proposed voyage across the Atlantic.

After hearing what Columbus had to say, these men thought that it

would be foolish to spend money in trying to reach the other side of the ocean.

5. Who was the queen of Spain at this time?

6. Imagine that you are Christopher Columbus, and have just traveled to Spain to meet the king and queen. How might you feel, speaking to a group of learned men who laugh at your idea?

People who heard what this captain from Lisbon wanted to do began to think that he had lost his reason, and the boys in the streets laughed at him and called him crazy. Columbus waited for help seven years; he then made up his mind that he would wait no longer. Just as he was about to leave Spain, Queen Isabella, who had always felt interested in the brave sailor,

⁴ Convent: a house in which a number of people live, typically nuns, who devote themselves to a religious life.

resolved to aid him. Two rich sea-captains who lived in Palos also decided to take part in the voyage. With the assistance which Columbus now got he was able to fit out three small vessels. He went in the largest of the vessels—the only one which had an entire deck—as admiral or commander of the fleet.

assistance assistance

admiral admiral admiral

commander commander



Columbus leaving Palos on the *Niña*, *Pinta*, and *Santa Maria* (August 3, 1492).

Early on Friday morning, August 3, 1492, Columbus started from Palos to attempt to cross that

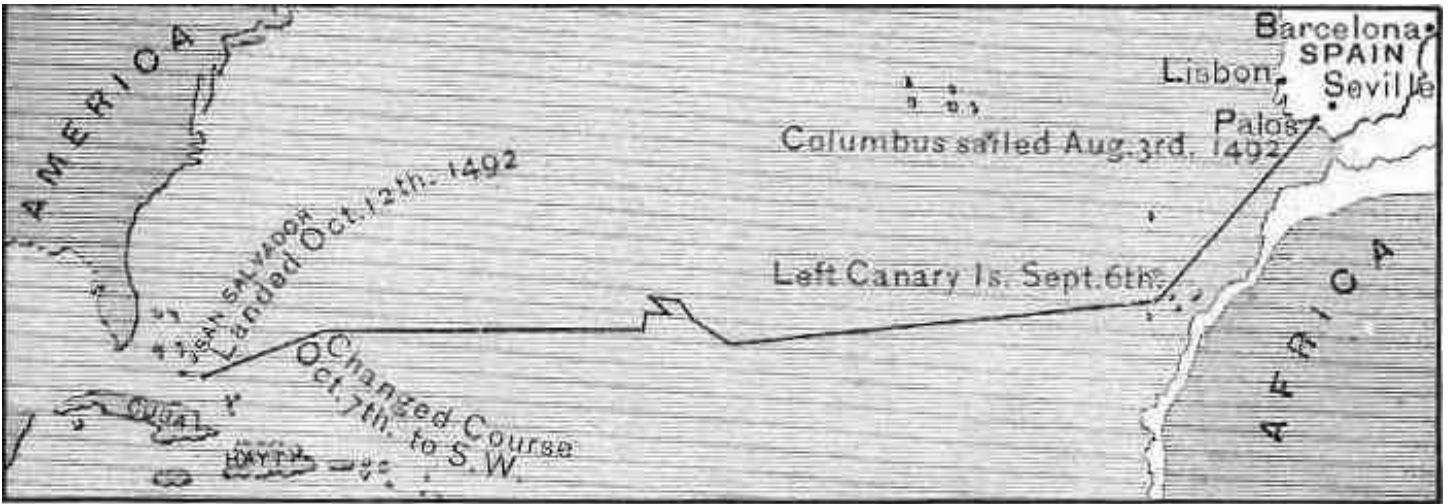
ocean which people then called the "Sea of Darkness"—a name which showed how little they knew of it, and how much they dreaded it.

7. Sea of Darkness :

- Atlantic Ocean
- Indian Ocean
- Mediterranean Sea
- Pacific Ocean

We may be pretty sure that the guardian of the convent was one of those who watched the sailing of the little fleet. From the upper windows of the convent he could plainly see the vessels as they left the harbor of Palos.

8. "We may be pretty sure that the guardian of the convent was one of those who watched the sailing of the little fleet." Is this a statement of fact, or conjecture (a guess or assumption)? Explain.



This map shows the direction in which Columbus sailed on his famous voyage across the Atlantic Ocean.

Columbus sailed first for the Canary Islands, because from there it would be a straight line, as he thought, across to Japan and Asia. He was obliged to stop at the Canaries more than three weeks, in order to make a new rudder for one of his vessels and to alter the sails of another.

At length all was ready, and he again set out on his voyage toward the west. When the sailors got so far out on the ocean that they could no longer see any of the islands, they were overcome with fear. They made up their minds that they should never be able to get back to Palos again. They were rough men, used to the sea, but now they bowed down their heads and cried like children.

Columbus had hard work to quiet their fears and to encourage them to go forward with the voyage which they already wanted to give up.

Canaries Canaries

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encourage encourage

.....

overcome overcome

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For more than thirty days, the three ships kept on their way toward the west. To the crew every day seemed a year. From sunrise to sunset, nothing was to be seen but water and sky. At last the men began to think that they were sailing on an ocean which had no end. They whispered among themselves that Columbus had gone mad, and that if they kept on with him in command they should all be lost.

Twice, indeed, there was a joyful cry of: "Land! Land!" But when they got nearer, they saw that what they had thought was land was nothing but banks of clouds. Then some of the sailors said, "Let us go to the admiral and tell him that we must turn back."

"What if he will not listen to us?" asked others.

"Then we will throw him overboard and say, when we reach Palos, that he fell into the sea and was drowned."

But when the crew went to Columbus and told him that they would go no further, he sternly ordered them to their work, declaring that whatever might happen, he would not now give up the voyage.

ordered ordered ordered

The very next day, such certain signs of land were seen that the most faint-hearted took courage. The men had already noticed great flocks of land-birds flying toward the west, as if to guide them. Now some of the men on one vessel saw a branch of a thorn-bush float by. It was plain that it had not long been broken off from the bush, and it was full of red berries.

But one of the crew on the other vessel found something better even than the thorn-branch; for he drew out of the water a carved walking-stick. Every one saw that such a stick must have been cut and carved by human hands. These two signs could not be doubted. The men now felt sure that they were approaching the shore, and what was more, that there were people living in that strange country.

approaching approaching

9. Where was Columbus forced to stay for three weeks as he awaited a new rudder?
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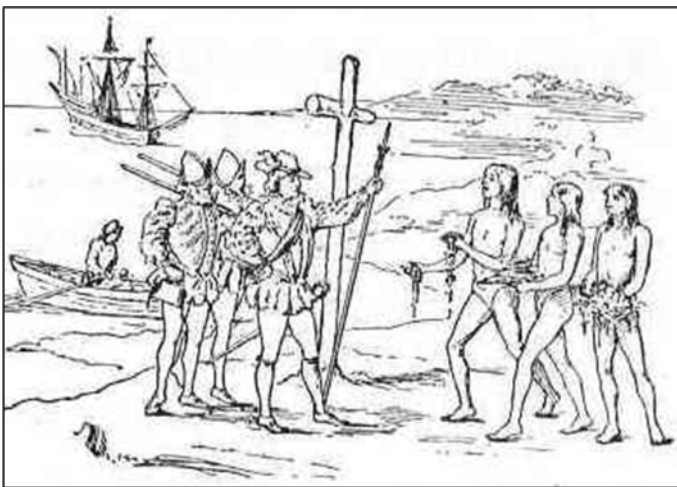
That evening, Columbus begged his crew to keep a sharp lookout, and he promised a velvet coat to the one who should first see land. All was now excitement; and no man closed his eyes in sleep that night.

Columbus himself stood on a high part of his ship, looking steadily toward the west. About ten o'clock he saw a moving light; it seemed like a torch carried in a man's hand. He called to a companion and asked him if he could see anything of the kind. Yes,

he, too, plainly saw the moving light, but presently it disappeared.

Two hours after midnight, a cannon was fired from the foremost vessel. It was the glad signal that the long-looked-for land was actually in sight. There it lay directly ahead, about six miles away.

Then Columbus gave the order to furl sails, and the three vessels came to a stop and waited for the dawn. When the sun rose on Friday, October 12, 1492, Columbus saw a beautiful island with many trees growing on it. That was his first sight of what was thereafter referred to as the "New World."



Columbus lands in the "New World."

Attended by the captains of the other two vessels, and by their crews, Columbus set out in a boat for the island. When they landed, all fell on their knees, kissed the ground for joy,

and gave thanks to God. Columbus named the island San Salvador⁵ and took possession of it,⁶ by right of discovery, for the king and queen of Spain.

Columbus found that it was inhabited by a people who spoke a language he could not understand. These people had never seen a ship or a European before. They wore no clothing, but painted their bodies with bright colors. The Spaniards made them presents of strings of glass beads and red caps. In return, the native islanders, a people who called themselves the Taino, gave the Spaniards skeins of cotton yarn, tame parrots, and small ornaments of gold.

After staying here a short time, Columbus set sail toward the south, in search of more land and in the hope of finding out where these people got their gold.

10. When did Columbus first spot San Salvador?

As Columbus sailed on, he saw many islands in every direction. He

⁵ San Salvador: meaning the Holy Redeemer or Savior.

⁶ Took possession of it: Columbus claimed ownership of the island in the names of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain. No attention was paid to the fact that people already lived on the island.

thought that they must be a part of the Indies which he was seeking. Since he had reached these Caribbean islands by coming west from Spain, he called them the West Indies, and to the people who lived on them he gave the name of Indians.

11. How did native peoples of the Americas come to be called *Indians*?

12. Caribbean islands :

- a. East Indies
- b. Shangri-la
- c. South America
- d. West Indies

In the course of the next six weeks, Columbus came to the island of Cuba. At first he thought that it must be Japan, but afterward he came to the conclusion that it was not an island at all, but part of the mainland of Asia. This was one of the many geographical errors which Columbus made.

Next, he came to the island of San Domingo. Here his ship was wrecked. He took the timber of the wreck and built a fort on the shore. Leaving about forty of his crew in this fort, Columbus set sail for Palos in one of the two remaining vessels.

This map shows where Cuba and San Domingo are located. The island of San Domingo is today home to two countries—Haiti in the west, and the Dominican Republic in the east.

13. On the map above, color Cuba green.

14. On the map above, color San Domingo blue.

Cuba Cuba Cuba Cuba

San Domingo San Domingo

When the vessel of Columbus was seen entering the harbor of Palos, the whole village was wild with

excitement. More than seven months had gone by since he sailed away from that port, and as nothing had been heard from him, many supposed that the vessels and all on board were lost.

Now that they saw their friends and neighbors coming back, all was joy. The bells of the churches rang a merry peal of welcome; the people thronged the streets, shouting to each other that Columbus, the great navigator, had crossed the "Sea of Darkness" and had returned in safety.

harbor harbor harbor

thronged thronged

The king and queen were then in the city of Barcelona, a long distance from Palos. To that city Columbus now went. He entered it on horseback, attended by the proudest and richest noblemen of Spain. He brought with him six native people from the West Indies. They were brightly painted and wore bright feathers in their hair. A number of men followed, carrying rare birds and plants, with gold and silver ornaments, all found in the New World.

These were presents for the king and queen. Ferdinand and Isabella received Columbus with great honor. When he had told them the story of his wonderful voyage, they sank on their knees and gave praise to God; all who were present followed their example.



Columbus received by the king and queen of Spain, Ferdinand and Isabella, in Barcelona.

Columbus made three more voyages across the Atlantic. He discovered more islands near the coast of America, and he touched the coast of Central America and of South America, but that was all. He never set foot on any part of what is now the United States, and he always thought that the land he had reached was part of Asia. He had found a new world, but he did not know it: all that he knew was how to get to it and how to show others the way. His treatment of native peoples was marked by greed and cruelty.

15. Christopher Columbus reached what is now the United States of America.

- a. True
- b. False

West Indies West Indies

The last days of this famous man were very sorrowful. The king was disappointed because he brought back no gold to amount to anything. The Spanish governor of San Domingo hated Columbus, and when he landed at that island on one of his voyages, he arrested him and sent him back to Spain in chains. He was at once set at liberty; but he could not forget the insult. He kept the chains hanging on the wall of his room, and asked to have them buried with him.

sorrowful sorrowful

disappointed disappointed

Columbus was now an old man; his health was broken, he was poor, in

debt, and without a home. Once he wrote to the king and queen, saying, "I have not a hair upon me that is not gray, my body is weak, and all that was left to me...has been taken away and sold, even to the coat which I wore."

Not long after he had come back to Spain to stay, the queen died. Then Columbus felt that he had lost his best friend. He gave up hope, and said, "I have done all that I could do: I leave the rest to God."

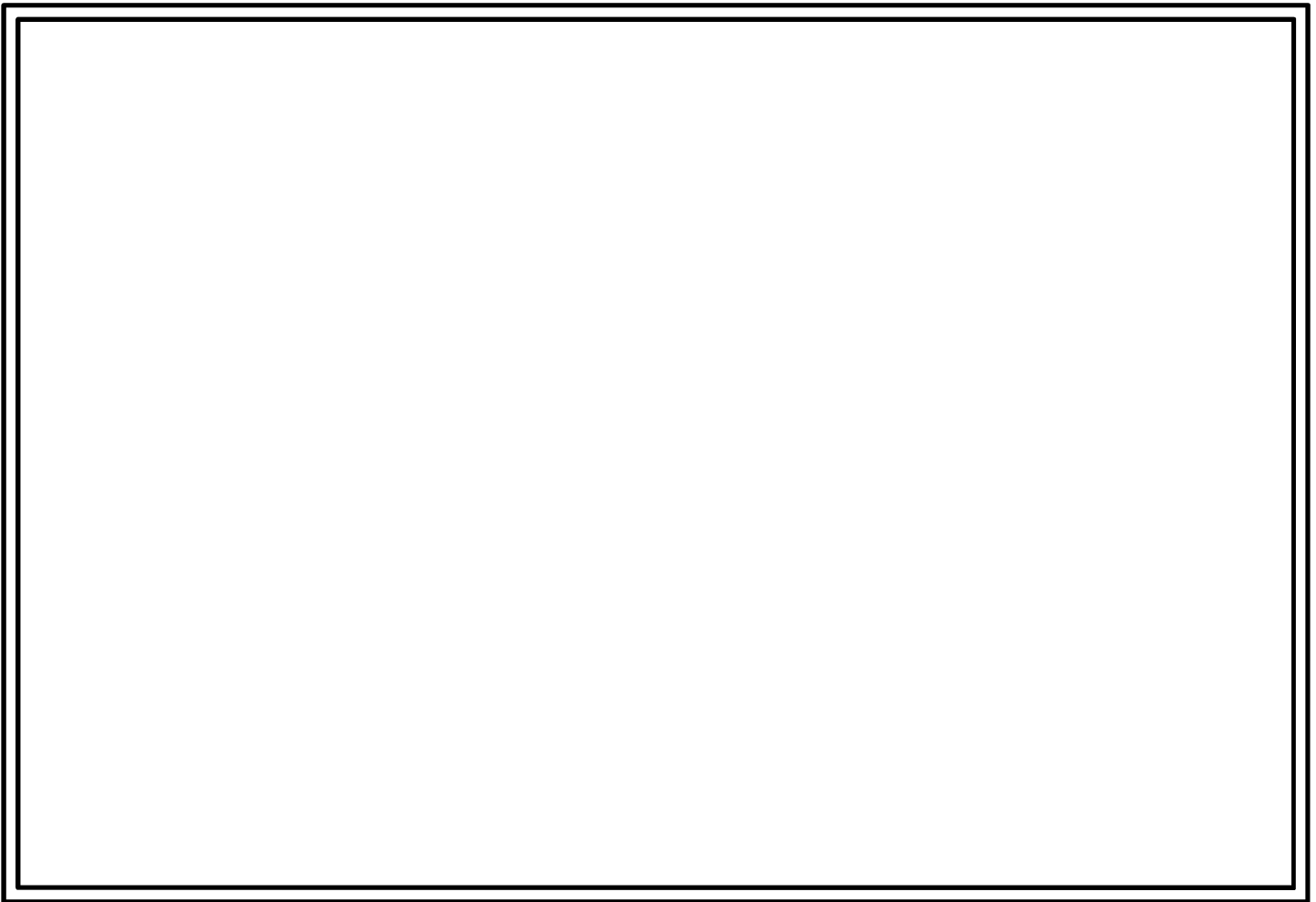
Spain Spain Spain

Columbus died in 1506 full of disappointment and sorrow. Perhaps it would not be too much to say that he died, a broken man, of a broken heart.

He was at first buried in Spain. Then, his body was taken up and carried to San Domingo, where he had wished to be buried. Whether it truly rested there, or whether it was carried to Havana and deposited in the cathedral (great church) of that city, no one can positively say. But wherever the true grave of the famous sailor may be, his memory—both good and bad—will live forever.

THE END

Illustrate a scene from the life of Columbus.



Was Christopher Columbus a hero or a villain? List four pros (good things) and four cons (bad things) of this famous sailor.

Pros



Cons

