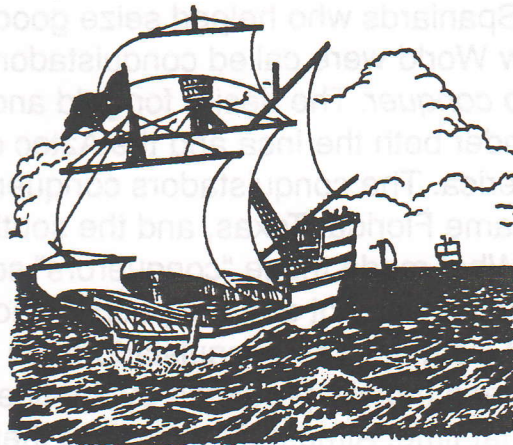


Christopher Columbus (1451–1506)

Christopher Columbus was born in Genoa, Italy, in 1451. At that time, Genoa was an important European seaport. People throughout Europe had grown used to having the spices and silks that were imported from the Far East through Constantinople. In 1453, however, the Turks conquered Constantinople. Because Constantinople was a major trade center between Asia and Europe, trade to western Europe was cut off. Traders who wished to bring goods to western Europe were forced to find new, longer routes. This caused the price of imports to soar. Christopher Columbus would eventually try to solve this problem.



As a boy, Columbus spent a great deal of time on the docks, watching ships load and unload. He became very interested in sailing and mapmaking, and at age fourteen he went to sea. Columbus spent his teenage years sailing most of the areas that were known to exist at that time. Eventually he became a sea captain and was employed by Portugal.

Columbus decided that by sailing west he could find a shorter trade route to the Far East. Since he did not have enough money to pay for the trip, he asked King John II of Portugal for help. The king's advisors rejected the idea. They believed Columbus had underestimated the length of the trip. Columbus had calculated that the trip from Europe to the Indies (China, Japan, India, and the East Indies) was about 2400 miles long. (In fact, the actual distance was much larger than that!) King John II turned down Columbus's request for aid.

It took several more years for Columbus to find a sponsor. King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain finally agreed to support the journey. Preparations were made and three ships—the *Santa María*, the *Pinta*, and the *Niña*—set sail from Palos, Spain, on August 3, 1492.

After several weeks at sea, Columbus's crew began to worry because they had not reached the islands that Columbus had said they would reach. Their ships had traveled farther from land than any ship had before them, and they could see no signs of land. In October the crew was about to force Columbus to return to Spain when they began to see bits of wood and other signs of land. On October 12, they landed on San Salvador, an island in the Bahamas. Columbus believed the island was part of the Indies, so he named the people living there *Indians*. Eventually this name was used to refer to all the native people of North and South America.

Columbus made three other voyages to the "New World" he had found. His discoveries paved the way for many explorers who would live after him.