

500<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF COLUMBUS' DISCOVERY OF AMERICA

by

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Good afternoon, it is a pleasure to be with you this afternoon and to present a paper on Christopher Columbus. I want to thank Brother Berglass publicly for his suggestion. Through it I have learned a great deal about the events that surrounded that significant time which changed forever the course of history. To be more specific, I have learned a great deal about the legends, or conjectures, or possibilities, or probabilities about that period. This will become clearer as I proceed.

In preparation for this paper, I read and/or studied the following:

The Mysterious History of Columbus – An exploration of the Man, the Myth, the Legacy, by John Noble Wilford – Author, lecturer and correspondent – Published in 1991 by the Alfred A. Knoph firm in New York.

Columbus – For Gold, God, and Glory, by John Dyson – Author, and roving editor for Readers' Digest – Published in 1991 by Simon and Shuster, Inc. of New York.

Christopher Columbus – Admiral of the Ocean Sea, by Jim Haskins – Author – Published in 1990 by Scholastic Inc.

I would highly recommend Wilford's book – The Mysterious History of Columbus to anyone interested.

One final note about the books. I have plagiarized liberally from them and since I am not a scholar, I have not given a particular author credit for his specific contributions to this paper. You are assured that whatever knowledge is imparted today comes from one of these source materials.

The first thing I learned or had reconfirmed as I read these books was that I am not a linguist. I speak only the English language and at times poorly, so let me apologize at the outset for any mispronunciations of names or places which are of Italian, Spanish, or Portuguese origin.

Now with that preamble, let us begin to explore the events leading up to that momentous happening in 1492 and beyond.

There is much we know, but there is a lot of factual data missing, or has been rearranged to suit the times. As John Wilford states:

“The familiarity of the story is deceptive, leaving the impression that it is firmly grounded in fact and that the historians agree on those facts and their interpretations. Nothing could be further from the truth. The history of Columbus is frustratingly

incomplete. History has given us many Columbuses and left us an incomplete record for which to reconstruct the Columbus that really was.”

Also the image of Columbus has changed through the years, sometimes as a result of new information, but most often because of the changes in the lens through which we view him.

History is not only what happened long ago, but it is also the perception by succeeding generations of these events and those people. It was probably in the eighteenth century and certainly in the nineteenth century when Columbus' popularity and stature reached its zenith. Although no continent was named for Columbus, there were a great number of places and things that bear his name. In South America there is the nation of Columbia. In North America, there are cities and towns named Columbus or Columbia in 16 states. Our capital is located in the District of Columbia (so named in 1791), and Columbia University in New York was named in 1784. In celebration of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Columbus's landing in the new world, President Benjamin Harrison issued a proclamation urging schools to hold special festivals honoring Columbus. In Chicago a great world's Columbian Exposition was planned at which 71 portraits of Columbus were exhibited. All were artistic interpretations since none were ever painted from life. We do not know what Columbus looked like, and the descriptions from the various biographers from the early period differ in hair color, facial features, and stature.

Brother Francis Bellamy, a Baptist Minister and teacher, wrote the Pledge of Allegiance as part of the celebration in 1892. During this period the Knights of Columbus urged the establishment of October 12 as a national holiday. Also, there was an effort to have the Catholic Church elevate Columbus to Sainthood. The list of places, things, and events named for Columbus is not complete but it will give you an idea of how venerated he was 100 or more years ago. With the approach of the quincentennial we are being overwhelmed by the efforts of current historians to destroy the legends of yesteryear, create new myths, and rewrite history to match the moods and sensitivities of the 1990s.

Columbus was born in 1451 in the Republic of Genoa, which is now part of Italy, and which in the fifteenth century and earlier was an important seaport. Armies and fleets of the first crusade departed from there. His father was a wool weaver, tavern keeper, and warder of the east gate of Genoa. His two younger brothers, Bartholomew and Diego, also were born there and took part in the adventures of Columbus. According to the historians, Columbus was reticent about his family and origins and although in his writings he acknowledged Genoa as his native city, he withheld any details of his family. There has been a string of assertions that he was of Greek, Portuguese, Castilian, German, Corsican, or Jewish origin among others. No one knows for certain.

As a young lad he is supposed to have helped his father in the wool business, but as he wrote, "At a tender age" he cast his lot with those who go to sea. He sailed the Mediterranean until 1476 sailing east to the Aegean Sea off the coast of Turkey. In 1476 he signed on to sail westward to the Atlantic. He was on one of five ships attacked off the coast of Portugal by French/Portuguese warships. Three were sunk but Columbus was able to save himself and struggled to shore near Lagos and made his way to Lisbon, Portugal where a large Genoese

community had been established. For the next eight or nine years he sailed out of Portugal to the Madeira Islands, the Canary Islands, Cape Verde Islands, the Azores, England, and possibly Iceland.

The idea of sailing west across the Ocean to reach the east seized his imagination at some point during this period. No one knows when. Portugal had been engaged in sea exploration for many years prior to that time. The organizing and guiding force behind this activity was a legendary figure known in history as Prince Henry, the Navigator, whose efforts were directed toward exploring the Atlantic along the western African Coast. By 1460, the year Prince Henry died, Portuguese ships had sailed southward to within 10° of the Equator. Medieval superstition had it that the region near the Equator was composed of boiling water and any attempt to cross it would lead to certain death. This superstition was put to rest in 1473 when Goncalves safely crossed the Equator and penetrated the Southern Hemisphere.

John II ascended the throne in 1481 and renewed with vigor the work of his great Uncle Henry. It became state policy to find a way through or around Africa to reach India. The Portuguese court had even been advised by a Florentine Cosmographer that it should be possible to reach India by sailing West. Such was the atmosphere that Columbus breathed in Lisbon.

Why this great zeal for exploration? It is explained as a mixture of religious, economic and political factors. One motive was a crusading zeal against the Muslims, the Infidels who controlled much of known Africa and were ever expanding their power. Another motive was the desire for the gold of Guinea. Another motive was the search for a new route to India circumventing the routes controlled by the Turks. The objective was to procure the spices of the east to which the Europeans had been introduced as a result of the journey of Marco Polo.

The maps at that time were not works of geography in the modern sense, but were philosophical statements based on Christian Dogma, depicting a three continent land mass with Jerusalem at the center and surrounded by the ocean. However, with the rediscovery of Ptolemy's writings of the second century, and through the knowledge gained as a result of the overland travels to the east and explorations by sailing ships, the cartographers started depicting a northern and a southern hemisphere with a water route around Africa. A Florentine by the name of Toscanelli, a physician, mathematician, and geographer proposed in 1474 that by sailing west, Asia could be reached. In his correspondence, he included a map and some calculations of distances. Historians believe that Columbus saw or obtained a copy of that proposal.

Just when Columbus became inflamed with the idea of sailing west to reach India it is not known. It has been assumed by some historians to have occurred in 1479 or 1480 when he married and settled for a time on one of the Madeira Islands. (By the way there was one son by that marriage. The son's name was Diego.) It is generally agreed that by late 1483 or early 1484 he had prepared his case and presented it to John II. In building his case, he chose estimates of distances so that his proposal had the benefit of every doubt. He accounted for 283 degrees of land out of the 360 degree circumference and he estimated the circumference ten percent smaller than Ptolemy and twenty-five percent less than actual – thus figuring that there was only 2760 miles of open water between the Canaries and Japan. This was more than 9500 miles less than

the actual distance. If America had not existed, Columbus would almost certainly have sailed in to oblivion, never reaching land and perhaps never returning to Europe. John II rejected Columbus's proposal for reasons not fully explained. However, it is assumed that the experts whom John appointed to review Columbus's calculations and plans concluded that the plan was not feasible and recommended its rejection.

Columbus then took his proposal to Spain, traveling there with his son, Diego. While awaiting an audience with Ferdinand and Isabella, the Spanish Crown heads, he continued to bolster his arguments through further studies and research. As a devout Christian and Catholic, he began to depend more and more on religious considerations as a motivation and argument for his scheme. "Esdras (considered to be the prophet) says that six parts of the globe are habitable and the seventh is covered with water." The books of Esdras appear in the Hebrew Bible, parts of which appear in the English Bible in the Book of Ezra. Finding support from biblical scholars was very important in that century when you consider that the inquisition had started a few years earlier in Spain.

Columbus had his audience with the monarchs in 1486, and once again his proposal was referred to a group of experts. While awaiting their decision, he took up with a peasant woman who gave birth to their son, Ferdinand in 1488. Records indicate that he had another audience with Isabella in 1489, and it is assumed by many that he learned then his plan had been again rejected. He was, however, given some encouragement, and he again tried in 1491. It is assumed that at that meeting he outlined the compensation he expected.

- (1) Rank of Nobility at the outset.
- (2) Upon success – rank of Admiral equal to the Grand Admiral of Castille.
- (3) Admiral of the Ocean Sea.
- (4) Viceroy and Governor of the lands he might discover.
- (5) All titles to be hereditary.
- (6) A commission of ten percent of the proceeds from all commerce with the new lands.

He was again rejected and he decided to try his luck in France (his brother Bartholemew had already appealed to England). He was on his way when messengers overtook him with a summons from the Queen. His backers had apparently convinced the Monarchs that the risk inherent in Columbus's demands were minimal even if he succeeded. They therefore agreed to back him, however, they ultimately reneged on most of the conditions. They authorized three ships, payment of provisions and wages for the crew. The estimated cost in today's dollars is less than ten thousand dollars. Two of the ships, the Nina and the Pinta were forfeited from Palos for past crimes; the Santa Maria was chartered.

We do not know the precise measurements and construction of the three ships – notwithstanding the fact three sailing vessels said to be replicas have been touring the United States. The experts believe that they were between 65 to 80 feet long with a beam of 20 to 28 feet. We do not know how many men sailed on the first voyage; the best guess is between 90 and 120 men, most were of Spanish origin. Only four were criminals contrary to popular legend. We know that Columbus set sail on 9 September and sighted land on October 12 according to the Julian

calendar; under the Gregorian calendar of today the date is October 21. We do not know for certain who first sighted land, Juan Rodriquiz Bermejo or Columbus – Columbus claimed the life time award for doing so. We do not know what course he sailed heading west since his log book is full of discrepancies and inaccuracies. In the book Columbus, for Gold, God, and Glory, Dr. Coin makes the case that Columbus sailed southwest into Portuguese waters – so decreed by the Pope – before he turned west. Dr. Coin and others constructed a replica of the Nina and followed the route in 1990 that he believed Columbus had sailed.

Did Columbus have a map? Dr. Coin believes that he did. We do know that Columbus was not the first to touch the shores of the New World. The inhabitants arrived many thousand years ago from Asia. Legend has it that Brendan, an Irish Monk sailed to the western shores and returned in the sixth century. We know that the Norsemen explored the eastern seacoast possibly as far south as New England. A rumor of the fifteenth and sixteenth century is that a Portuguese ship sailed to the west and returned only to be shipwrecked. All died but the map came into Columbus' hands. We will never know.

We do not know what land was sighted other than it was one of the Islands of the Bahamas. (The most likely choice is San Salvador) We do not know where the first colony was established because it had been destroyed by the natives before Columbus's return on his second voyage. We do know that Columbus made four round trips to what he finally called the "New World." After having sailed along the coast of Venezuela and the Central Americas, he finally came to believe, contrary to Biblical teachings, that there probably existed a fourth continent. One interesting note of his fourth trip, based upon the action of his compass, he postulated that the earth was not spherical, but shaped like a pear. It was only after we launched satellites in the 1970's and 1980's that this was confirmed.

It is not known where Columbus is buried – Spain, Cuba, or the Dominican Republic, because his body or that of someone else has been shifted several times.

Today the rewriters of history are engaged in laying onto Columbus a heavy guilt trip.

He did not discover the Americas – others had been here before.

He introduced diseases that wiped out a people.

He enslaved and robbed harmless people of their freedom

He was an invader bringing to an end the history of an independent people – they had no recorded history before his arrival.

He was a grasping fortune hunter whose legacy was the destruction of the native population and the rape of the land that continues to this day.

Whatever the final judgement will be, one must have the opinion that Columbus irrevocably changed the course of history when he issued the order, "In the name of God make sail."