

This Day in History... August 3, 1492

Christopher Columbus Sets Sail

On August 3, 1492, Christopher Columbus sailed from southern Spain in search of a westward route to the valuable trading centers of Asia. The voyage did not lead to China as he expected, but carried three small ships across an ocean far wider than his calculations suggested.

Columbus was a Genoese mariner with years of experience in the Mediterranean and Atlantic. European merchants valued Asian pepper, cinnamon, silk, gold, and other luxury goods. Portuguese navigators were exploring a route around Africa, but Columbus argued that Asia could be reached more quickly by sailing west. Contrary to a familiar legend, educated Europeans already knew Earth was round. Columbus's mistake was greatly underestimating its size and the distance between Europe and Asia.

Columbus first offered his plan to King John II of Portugal, whose advisers rejected it. He then sought support from Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile. The Spanish monarchs hesitated while completing their long war against Granada, the last Muslim-ruled kingdom on the Iberian Peninsula. Granada surrendered in January 1492. On April 17, the monarchs approved the Capitulations of Santa Fe, which promised Columbus titles, authority over lands he might claim, and a share of future profits.

Columbus assembled his expedition at Palos de la Frontera. His flagship, the *Santa María*, was a larger cargo vessel. The *Pinta* and *Niña* were smaller caravels, which were faster and easier to maneuver. The *Niña* was formally named the *Santa Clara*. Martín Alonso Pinzón commanded the *Pinta*, while his brother Vicente Yáñez Pinzón commanded the *Niña*. Roughly 90 officers and sailors joined the expedition.

The fleet left Palos before sunrise on August 3. Within days, the *Pinta* developed rudder trouble. The ships stopped in the Canary Islands for repairs and supplies. Workers also changed the arrangement of the *Niña*'s sails to make the vessel better suited for sailing west. On September 6, the expedition departed La Gomera and entered the open Atlantic.

Columbus used the northeast trade winds to carry the fleet westward. The sailors crossed long stretches of unfamiliar water and passed through the floating seaweed of the Sargasso Sea. As the weeks passed without land, the crews became increasingly uneasy. Columbus's surviving journal records complaints and arguments, although later stories of a full-scale

mutiny appear exaggerated. Birds, branches, and pieces of carved wood eventually suggested that land was nearby.

At about 2 a.m. on October 12, Rodrigo de Triana, a lookout aboard the *Pinta*, sighted land. The ships had reached an island in the Bahamas called Guanahani by its Lucayan Taíno inhabitants. Columbus renamed it San Salvador and claimed it for Spain, believing he had reached islands near Asia. Historians still debate which modern island was Guanahani.

The expedition continued to Cuba and Hispaniola. On Christmas night, the *Santa María* ran aground off Hispaniola. Its timbers were used to build a small settlement called La Navidad, where 39 men remained. Columbus sailed for Europe in January and reached Palos on March 15, 1493, carrying reports of new lands, small amounts of gold, unfamiliar plants and animals, and several Indigenous captives.

Columbus never reached Asia, nor was he the first person or first European to reach the Americas. His voyage did begin sustained contact between Europe and the Caribbean. It led to further exploration and trade, but also conquest, forced labor, disease, and profound disruption for the Indigenous peoples already living there.



The Type I stamp was sold for less than two months because misalignments between the frame and vignette were noticeable. It was replaced by the Type II stamp, which added extra bands of lines around the inside of the frame surrounding the vignette to make any slight misalignment less obvious.



Just 1,981 of these stamps were sold at the 1875 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia.



Joint Issue with Italy commemorating the 500th Anniversary of Columbus's First Voyage

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