

## This Day in History... October 12, 1492

# Christopher Columbus Makes Landfall

After more than two months at sea, Christopher Columbus reached what he believed was the edge of East Asia on October 12, 1492. In reality, he had arrived in the islands of the Caribbean, but at the time he thought he had discovered a new route to the riches of India and China. The voyage marked the beginning of sustained European exploration and colonization in the Americas, changing the course of world history.

Christopher Columbus was born in 1451 in Genoa, Italy, and spent most of his early life as a sailor and navigator. From a young age, he was fascinated by maps and tales of exploration. At the time, European traders had to travel overland or around Africa to reach Asia's valuable markets for silk, spices, and gold. Columbus became convinced that the Earth was smaller than most believed and that Asia could be reached more easily by sailing west across the Atlantic Ocean. His idea was bold and risky—no one knew how far the ocean extended, and there was no proof that land lay in between.

Columbus first presented his plan, which he called the "Enterprise to the Indies," to King John II of Portugal in the 1480s. Portugal, however, was already focused on exploring the coast of Africa and rounding the Cape of Good Hope, and the king refused to support Columbus's westward idea. Undeterred, Columbus turned to Spain's monarchs, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, who also rejected his proposal several times. They were initially hesitant because Spain had just ended its costly war to drive the Moors from the Iberian Peninsula. But after years of persistence, Columbus finally convinced them that his plan could bring great wealth and spread Christianity to new lands. In April 1492, the Spanish crown agreed to fund his expedition, granting him three ships: the *Niña*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa María*.



*An additional line was cut in the frame around the vignette, distinguishing this Type II Landing of Columbus stamp from the Type I.*

Columbus and his crews set sail from Palos, Spain, on August 3, 1492. They first stopped at the Canary Islands for supplies and repairs, then headed west into the unknown. The journey was longer than Columbus had predicted. As weeks passed and no land appeared, the men grew increasingly anxious and fearful that they might never see home again. To keep order, Columbus devised a clever trick—he kept two journals. In his private log, he recorded the true distances they traveled each day. In a second, more optimistic version that he shared with the crew, he wrote smaller distances, hoping to reassure them that they had not strayed too far from Spain.

Still, by October 10, frustration and fear nearly led to mutiny. The sailors demanded to turn back if they didn't find land soon. Columbus promised that if they saw no sign of land within three days, they would return home. The tension eased when, on October 11, the crew began noticing encouraging signs—floating branches, carved wooden poles, and small birds that typically stayed close to shore. Late that night, Columbus himself saw a faint light flickering in the distance. He called one of his men to confirm it, but it soon disappeared. Still, Columbus was sure they were near land.



*Based on a painting by William H. Powell, this stamp pictures Columbus in sight of land. This was the first US stamp to picture Native Americans.*

He offered a reward to the first sailor who spotted land, and at about 2:00 a.m. on October 12, Rodrigo de Triana, a lookout aboard the *Pinta*, shouted, "Tierra! Tierra!" ("Land! Land!").

At dawn, the crew saw a stretch of white sand and green vegetation ahead of them. Columbus ordered the ships to anchor offshore and waited until morning light to go ashore.

Later that day, Columbus and about 90 crewmen rowed to shore carrying the flag of Spain. As they stepped onto the island, Columbus knelt, said a prayer, and claimed the land for King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. The people who lived there were the Lucayan Taino, who called the island Guanahani. Columbus named it San Salvador, meaning "Holy Savior." The two groups exchanged gifts—Columbus gave the islanders red caps, beads, and small trinkets, while the Lucayans offered parrots, cotton thread, and food. Though friendly at first, this encounter marked the beginning of centuries of European exploration, colonization, exploitation, and profound change for the indigenous peoples of the Americas.

Historians are still uncertain which island Columbus landed on, but most believe it was Watling Island in the Bahamas, which has since been renamed San Salvador Island in his honor. Over the next several months, Columbus explored parts of the Caribbean, including present-day Cuba and Hispaniola, still believing he had reached islands off the coast of Asia.

Columbus's voyage had an enormous impact. It opened the way for the Age of Exploration, linking Europe and the Americas for the first time. Although Columbus never realized he had encountered a "New World," his journey reshaped global trade, culture, and history. Three hundred years later, in 1792, the United States marked the anniversary of his landing with the first Columbus Day celebration, and in 1892, the holiday became official nationwide.

**Mystic Stamp Company • Camden, NY 13316**



*Picturing Columbus's landing, this image is based on John Vanderlyn's painting that hangs in the Rotunda of the United States Capitol.*



*1875 Reissue for the Centennial Exposition – just 1,981 were issued.*



*This "Broken Hat" variety occurred during printing – when a break developed in the printing press's transfer roll. The flaw caused a piece to be missing from the hat of the foreground figure to the left of Columbus.*

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