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COLUMBUS AND OTHER DISCOVERERS OF AMERICA 1492 and earlier

When Christopher Columbus encountered the “New World” in 1492, it was already home to an estimated 40–80 million people. The first Americans had splintered into tribes spanning the continents: from the Inuit in the north to the Yaghan of the Tierra del Fuego.

Until recently it was held that, when the Bering Land Bridge disappeared, American tribes were cut off from the rest of the world until Columbus’s arrival. This neat history is now widely contested, undermined by discoveries such as that of an eleventh-century Viking settlement led by Leif Ericsson in what the fifteenth-century Italian adventurer John Cabot named “New Found Land.” There are also claims that both Ireland’s Saint Brendan and a Welsh prince called Madoc discovered America, while more convincing theories involve seafaring West Africans making it across the Atlantic.

Although Columbus, an Italian, was certainly not the first European on American soil, his seamanship and fearless determination were nonetheless remarkable. Funded by Queen Isabella of Spain, Columbus and his crew set sail aboard the *Niña*, the *Pinta* and the *Santa Maria* in search of a faster trade route from Europe to the spice riches of Asia, traveling west rather than east. Instead, he landed in the Bahamas, mistakenly referring to its inhabitants as “Indios” since he thought he was in East Asia.

Columbus is credited with advancing a general European awareness of the American continents; the anniversary of his voyage is observed on October 12 in Spain and on the second Monday of October in the United States.

THE CONQUISTADORS AND THE RISING CREOLE POPULATION

1500s

News of Columbus's New World quickly spread across Europe, inspiring many to follow his lead, including another Italian, Amerigo Vespucci, whose forename gave the Americas their name. The Spanish crown backed the Conquistadors—adventurers hardened to conflict as a way of life—led variously by Hernán Cortés and Francisco Pizarro. Pursuing personal glory, the Conquistadors colonized and subjugated the New World. Vast numbers of Native Americans were annihilated through violence, overwork, and European diseases to which they had no resistance.



By 1550, Conquistadors had claimed most of South and Central America, as well as Cuba, Mexico, and Florida. At first, Florida was simply a naval base, protecting the valuable Spanish treasure fleet from rampant piracy. But when, in 1562, a small colony of French Protestants settled there, the Spanish crown ordered their massacre and made Florida the first Spanish colony in America.

Throughout the seventeenth century, Spain's influence slackened as recession and the Thirty Years War in Europe drained its resources. Culturally liberated, Spanish America developed its own "Creole" identity and the population exploded. During the eighteenth century, new Spanish settlements were established in California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas.

Spanish ascendancy was eventually curbed by the British, who took control of Florida in 1763. At the same time, the Creoles, inspired by revolutionary politics, clamored for independence. The days of Spain's American Empire were numbered.

THE ENGLISH QUEST FOR COLONIES AND A NORTHWEST PASSAGE 1558–1609

When the Protestant Queen Elizabeth I came to the English throne in 1558, the fiercely Catholic King Philip II of Spain, grown wealthy from his New World colonies, saw England as his biggest threat. Elizabeth, ambitious for an empire, fanned the flames, sponsoring piracy against the Spanish treasure fleet.

The English also wanted to defeat Spain in the search for a faster trade route to India and China. Convinced that a Northwest Passage could be found by sailing up the coast of the New World and through the Arctic, several French and English explorers tried and failed. Later, in 1609, the Dutch hired Englishman Henry Hudson to try. Hudson gave his name to the bay and the river, and the area provided the English with a lucrative trade in fur, but he never found the elusive passage, and later disappeared when his crew mutinied following a grueling Arctic winter.

In 1585, Elizabeth gave her blessing to an English expedition to claim colonies in the New World, from which it was hoped Spanish treasure ships might be intercepted and raided. Sir Walter Raleigh—and Sir Francis Drake a year later—founded a very small English colony on Roanoke Island on North Carolina’s Outer Banks. But English supply ships, preoccupied with the Spanish Armada in 1588 and further delayed by bad weather and piracy, were unable to return to America until 1590, by which time the colonists had mysteriously vanished.

The Lost Colony was Queen Elizabeth I’s last American venture, although Virginia was named after her (the “Virgin Queen”) by Raleigh.

JAMESTOWN: THE FIRST ENGLISH SETTLEMENT IN AMERICA

1607

By the end of Elizabeth I's reign, adventurers were far more attracted to plundering Spanish treasure than to costly colonization. But in 1605, during the reign of James I, two wealthy English merchant groups merged to form the Virginia Company, and provided the vast capital needed to establish an American colony.

In 1607, 500 English colonists landed at Chesapeake Bay and built Jamestown. A malarial swamp and undrinkable river water made the site a bad choice, and drought, famine, and disease all but exterminated the colony and drove some to cannibalism. By 1610, only sixty survived.

Colonist John Smith soon took leadership. According to legend, Smith's life was saved in 1608 by eleven-year-old Pocahontas, daughter of the chief of the Powhatan. Smith quickly earned the trust of Chief Powhatan—whose assistance initially kept the colonists alive—but hostilities returned when local tribes felt threatened by the colonists' expansion, and continued long after Smith left to found New England in 1609. A temporary peace was achieved when settler John Rolfe married Pocahontas in 1614.

Rolfe transformed Jamestown's fortunes with a new, exportable strain of tobacco, and the colony grew. Meanwhile, the Virginia Company was making gradual improvements in colonists' rights in an attempt to draw more people to the settlement. In 1619, Jamestown's House of Burgesses—a sort of parliament—became the first elected governing body in Virginia, and indeed in the New World. It was North America's first step toward democratic government.