**AUGUST 01, 1498 : COLUMBUS LANDS IN SOUTH AMERICA**

Italian explorer Christopher Columbus sets foot on the American mainland for the first time, at the Paria Peninsula in present-day Venezuela. Thinking it an island, he christened it Isla Santa and claimed it for Spain.

Columbus was born in Genoa, Italy, in 1451. Little is known of his early life, but he worked as a seaman and then a sailing entrepreneur. He became obsessed with the possibility of pioneering a western sea route to Cathay (China), India, and the fabled gold and spice islands of Asia. At the time, Europeans knew no direct sea route to southern Asia, and the route via Egypt and the Red Sea was closed to Europeans by the Ottoman Empire, as were many land routes. Contrary to popular legend, educated Europeans of Columbus’ day did believe that the world was round, as argued by St. Isidore in the seventh century. However, Columbus, and most others, underestimated the world’s size, calculating that East Asia must lie approximately where North America sits on the globe (they did not yet know that the Pacific Ocean existed).

With only the Atlantic Ocean, he thought, lying between Europe and the riches of the East Indies, Columbus met with King John II of Portugal and tried to persuade him to back his “Enterprise of the Indies,” as he called his plan. He was rebuffed and went to Spain, where King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella also rejected him at least twice. However, after the Spanish conquest of the Moorish kingdom of Granada in January 1492, the Spanish monarchs, flush with victory, agreed to support his voyage.

On August 3, 1492, Columbus set sail from Palos, Spain, with three small ships, the Santa María, the Pinta, and the Niña. On October 12, the expedition sighted land, probably Watling Island in the Bahamas, and went ashore the same day, claiming it for Spain. Later that month, Columbus sighted Cuba, which he thought was mainland China, and in December the expedition landed on Hispaniola, which Columbus thought might be Japan. He established a small colony there with 39 of his men. The explorer returned to Spain with gold, spices, and “Indian” captives in March 1493 and was received with the highest honors by the Spanish court. He was given the title “admiral of the ocean sea,” and a second expedition was promptly organized. He was the first European to explore the Americas since the Vikings set up colonies in Greenland and Newfoundland in the 10th century.

Fitted out with a large fleet of 17 ships with 1,500 colonists aboard, Columbus set out from Cádiz in September 1493 on his second voyage to the New World. Landfall was made in the Lesser Antilles in November. Returning to Hispaniola, he found the men he left there slaughtered by the natives, and he founded a second colony. Sailing on, he explored Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and numerous smaller islands in the Caribbean. Columbus returned to Spain in June 1496 and was greeted less warmly, as the yield from the second voyage had fallen well short of its costs.

Isabella and Ferdinand, still greedy for the riches of the East, agreed to a smaller third voyage and instructed Columbus to find a strait to India. In May 1498, Columbus left Spain with six ships, three filled with colonists and three with provisions for the colony on Hispaniola. This time, he made landfall on Trinidad. He entered the Gulf of Paria in Venezuela and planted the Spanish flag in South America on August 1, 1498. He explored the Orinoco River of Venezuela and, given its scope, soon realized he had stumbled upon another continent. Columbus, a deeply religious man, decided after careful thought that Venezuela was the outer regions of the Garden of Eden.

Returning to Hispaniola, he found that conditions on the island had deteriorated under the rule of his brothers, Diego and Bartholomew. Columbus’ efforts to restore order were marked by brutality, and his rule came to be deeply resented by both the colonists and the native Taino chiefs. In 1500, Spanish chief justice Francisco de Bobadilla arrived at Hispaniola, sent by Isabella and Ferdinand to investigate complaints, and Columbus and his brothers were sent back to Spain in chains.

He was immediately released upon his return, and Ferdinand and Isabella agreed to finance a fourth voyage, in which he was to search for the earthly paradise and the realms of gold said to lie nearby. He was also to continue looking for a passage to India. In May 1502, Columbus left Cádiz on his fourth and final voyage to the New World. After returning to Hispaniola, against his patrons’ wishes, he explored the coast of Central America looking for a strait and for gold. Attempting to return to Hispaniola, his ships, in poor condition, had to be beached on Jamaica. Columbus and his men were marooned, but two of his captains succeed in canoeing the 450 miles to Hispaniola. Columbus was a castaway on Jamaica for a year before a rescue ship arrived.

In November 1504, Columbus returned to Spain. Queen Isabella, his chief patron, died less than three weeks later. Although Columbus enjoyed substantial revenue from Hispaniola gold during the last years of his life, he repeatedly attempted (unsuccessfully) to gain an audience with King Ferdinand, whom he felt owed him further redress. Columbus died in Valladolid on May 20, 1506, without realizing the great scope of his achievement: He had discovered for Europe the New World, whose riches over the next century would help make Spain the wealthiest and most powerful nation on earth.