



Amerigo Vespucci

1451 - 1512

Italian Explorer

Explored Coast of South America

**First to Claim that North and South America
Were Continents**

The “Americas” Are Named for Him

AMERIGO VESPUCCI WAS BORN in Florence, Italy, in 1451. His name is pronounced “ah-MER-ah-go ves-POO-chee.” He was from a wealthy merchant family. He liked books and maps when he was young. He also liked astronomy.

As a young man, Vespucci worked for the Medici (meh-DEE-chee) family. That was one of the wealthiest, most powerful families in Florence. He worked in their businesses and as a banker for them.

In 1492, he went to Seville, Spain. There, he helped outfit Spanish ships for trips of exploration. Historians think that Vespucci helped supply the voyages of **Christopher Columbus**.

VOYAGES OF EXPLORATION: The record of Vespucci's explorations is a bit unclear. There is a letter, supposedly by Vespucci, that claims he went on his first voyage in 1497. It also states he went on four voyages altogether. But most historians think the letter is a forgery. They believe that Vespucci went on two voyages of discovery.

FIRST VOYAGE: Most historians think Vespucci went on his first voyage in 1499. He sailed with Alonso de Ojeda (oh-HEY-dah) for Spain. Ojeda had been on Columbus's second voyage. At that time, no one knew that Columbus had actually reached a new continent. Columbus himself was convinced he'd reached Asia.

Vespucci sailed from Spain with four ships in May, 1499. He captained one of the ships. After 24 days at sea, they landed in what is now Brazil. Vespucci sailed north along the coast of Brazil. He saw the mouth of the Amazon River and the Orinoco River. Some historians claim that Vespucci was the first European to cross the Equator in the west.

Vespucci then turned north and sailed to the Spanish settlement of Hispaniola (modern-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic). He rejoined Ojeda's other ships, and they sailed back to Spain. Vespucci stopped in the Bahamas and captured 200 natives. He took them back to Spain as slaves. He reached home in June 1500.



Possible route of Vespucci's voyages of 1499-1500 and 1501-1502.

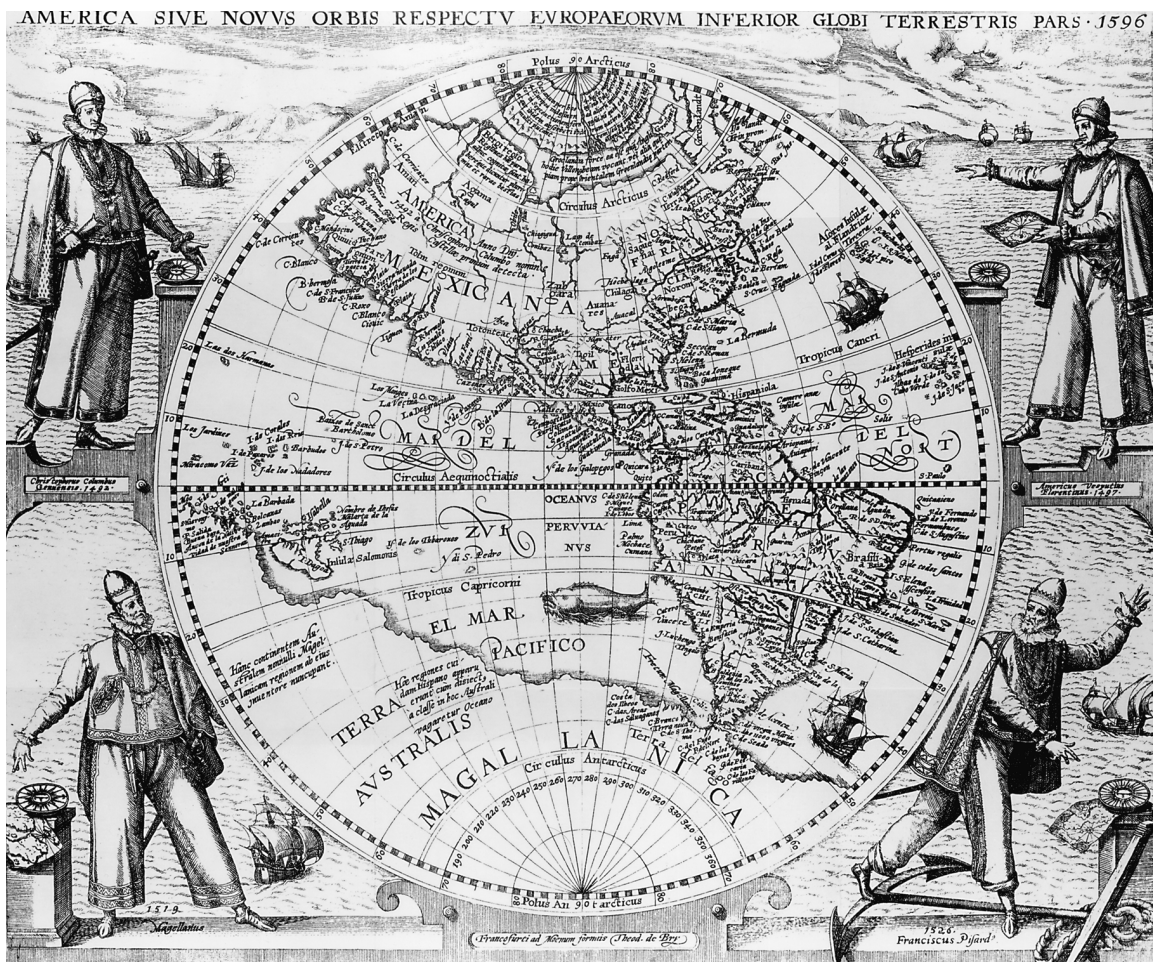
SECOND VOYAGE: Vespucci's next expedition was funded by Portugal. He left Portugal in May 1501. On his way, he stopped at the Cape Verde Islands. There, he met **Pedro Alvares Cabral**, who was returning from India. Cabral described the land he had recently discovered, while on his journey from Portugal to India. Vespucci thought they'd seen the same land — what we now call Brazil. And he began to think that the land was *not* Asia. Perhaps it was a **New World** completely.

Vespucci and his crew sailed on to Brazil. He headed south along the coast of what is now South America. No one is sure how far south Vespucci traveled. Most historians think it was about 2,400 miles. He sailed past the area that is now the city of Rio de Janeiro. He may have reached southern Argentina.

DISCOVERING THE “NEW WORLD”: When Vespucci returned to Portugal in June 1502, he made a bold statement. He said that he had not reached Asia, but had instead discovered a new continent, not known to Europeans. He called the continent the “New World.”

NAMING THE NEW WORLD FOR AMERIGO: Vespucci wrote a book about his travels that was read all over Europe. In 1507, a German mapmaker named Martin Waldseemueller made a famous map that included the new continent. He named it “America.” He said it was for “Amerigo, its discoverer, a man of great ability.”

Later, in 1538, the famous mapmaker Gerhardus Mercator named North America and South America for Amerigo Vespucci. So although Columbus is generally considered the “discoverer of America,” the continents of the New World bear the name of Amerigo.



Map of the Americas from 1596 with portraits of Columbus (upper left), Vespucci (upper right), Magellan (lower left), and Pizarro (lower right).

Columbus wasn't angry that the **New World** was named for Vespucci. In fact, they were friends. Columbus called Vespucci "a man of good will."

Vespucci didn't go on any more voyages. He worked for the Spanish government as Pilot Major. In that job, he kept records of all the sea voyages made by the Spanish explorers.

AMERIGO VESPUCCI'S HOME AND FAMILY: Vespucci lived his last years in Seville, Spain. He married a woman named Maria de

AMERIGO VESPUCCI

Cerezo. They had no children. Amerigo Vespucci died in Seville on February 22, 1512.

HIS DISCOVERY: Vespucci's most important discovery was that the land mass between Europe and Asia was indeed a continent. He was the first to call it the "**New World.**" While his individual explorations were not as important as others, the way he thought about the lands he saw *was* new, and very important.

WORLD WIDE WEB SITE:

<http://www.mariner.org/age/biohist.html>