

Famous Explorers:

Amerigo Vespucci



Amerigo Vespucci was born in 1454 in Florence, Italy. While his older brothers went to the University of Pisa to become scholars, Amerigo studied to become a merchant. He worked for Gianotto

Berardi, who was ordered by the king of Spain, King Ferdinand, to build 12 ships to explore America (which was then called the West Indies, because Europeans thought it was a part of India). King Ferdinand had promised Christopher Columbus that he would be the only merchant allowed to travel back to the West Indies, but he soon broke this promise and Queen Isabella removed Columbus as **governor**, or ruler, of the West Indies in 1499. Explorers and merchants were now allowed to make private journeys to the west.

In 1499, King Manuel I of Portugal invited Amerigo Vespucci to participate in several voyages that explored the east coast of South America between 1499 and 1502. While on these voyages, Amerigo wrote letters describing how the Native Americans lived, which were printed and sold in Europe and became very popular. These voyages also demonstrated that South America was much larger than Europeans had previously thought. Perhaps most important

is the fact that Amerigo was the first European to find out that North and South America were both **distinct**, or separate, from Asia. Columbus thought that these continents were a part of Asia until the day he died!

In 1507, Martin Waldseemüller, a German cartographer, produced a world map that named the New World “America,” after Amerigo. This led some people to believe that Martin was trying to overshadow Christopher Columbus’ glory. After a few years, Waldseemüller changed his mind about what he wanted to name the New World, but it was too late—people in Europe were already referring to these continents using the name America.

So how did America get its name from a man called Amerigo? Amerigo’s Latin name was Americus, and Martin chose to use the female version of Americus: America. Martin chose this because Asia and Europe (or Europa) were both referred to using women’s names.

In 1508, Amerigo became the chief navigator of Spain and was ordered by King Ferdinand to create a school for navigators. Vespucci worked to make sure that all the navigation techniques that Spanish seafarers used were made up-to-date, and he even developed a new method to determine **longitude**, or how far east or west you are on the earth. He died in Spain in 1512, at the age of 58.

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Define these Terms:

Governor

Distinct

Longitude

Reading Comprehension:

What two things did Amerigo Vespucci discover that Christopher Columbus didn't?

Briefly explain how America got its name from the name Amerigo.

Writing Prompt:

In Amerigo Vespucci's day, many people strongly believed in Columbus' right to claim that he discovered America. Do you agree with them? Why or why not? What does the word "discover" mean to you?

Write your response on a separate sheet of paper.

Activity:

Go online with a parent and find Martin Waldseemuller's map, *Universalis Cosmographia*. This was the first map that showed America as a distinct landmass that wasn't part of Asia. What do you notice about the shape of North and South America compared to how it looks on a modern map? Why do you think Martin drew it this way?
