

Amerigo Vespucci



THE CITY OF ISABELA that Columbus built on Hispaniola became a center for traders, explorers, and for Spaniards who hoped to get rich quickly. The city looked respectable with its square plaza and church and a stone palace for the governor. (The governor was of course Columbus.) But right from the start, the colony had trouble. The colonists didn't like to work; they kept getting sick; they ran out of food; they couldn't get along with each other or with Columbus. When Columbus went exploring and left the colony in charge of his brother Diego, the colonists didn't get along with him either. Neither man was good at maintaining order, but worse than that, they were from Genoa. Spaniards saw no reason to obey foreigners, especially ones who promised so much and produced so little. Perhaps the settlers were by nature

difficult men. A historian writing in 1525 thought so. No early governor of Hispaniola, he said, could have succeeded unless he were superhuman.

Still, this was the place where explorers stopped, met, exchanged news, loaded up with supplies, and repaired their ships. When the capital was moved from Isabela to Santo Domingo, this became the explorers' headquarters. One of the most interesting visitors and certainly the most controversial was Amerigo Vespucci. Historians still argue about him. Some give him credit for recognizing a continent when he saw one. Others call Amerigo Vespucci an out-and-out faker.

But there are some facts that no one disputes. Born in 1454, Amerigo Vespucci came from a prominent family in Florence, Italy, and was a friend of Lorenzo Piero de Medici, ruler of Florence. Always interested in maps and astronomy, Vespucci followed news of explorations avidly, and when Columbus was preparing for his third voyage, Amerigo Vespucci helped to outfit his ships. The next year, 1499, he himself went exploring. According to some historians, Vespucci went as a gentleman tourist on an expedition commanded by Alonso de Ojeda. According to others, he was expected to make astronomical observations and was given directional charge of at least some of the ships. He was particularly interested in locating a star that he imagined must remain fixed at the South Pole as the North Star was fixed at the North Pole. In any case, when Alonso de Ojeda and Amerigo Vespucci reached the area that Columbus had called the Garden of Eden (somewhere on the coast of Suriname or French Guiana), Vespucci went south down the coast and Ojeda went north in search of pearls. They did eventually meet up in Hispaniola, and Vespucci sailed back to Spain several months after Ojeda.

On his return, Amerigo Vespucci wrote a long letter to his friend Lorenzo, describing his experiences on the mainland, which he called

“at the extreme limits of Asia.” Unfortunately, he had been forced by strong currents to turn back before he could locate the star or group of southern stars that he was seeking. If he could only find that star, he thought, he could solve the problem of longitude and so immortalize his name. If his letter seemed long-winded, he suggested that his friend read it at the end of dinner when he was in a mood for “belching.”

Meanwhile, Amerigo Vespucci was going over his figures to establish exactly where he'd been. To his surprise, he discovered that without knowing it, he had crossed the Line of Demarcation into Portugal's territory. Indeed, he had seen the north end of Brazil before any other European had seen it, ten months before Cabral. By this time King Manuel of Portugal had received word of Cabral's landing in Brazil and was eager to find out just how much property he owned across the sea. Vespucci wanted to return and was willing to sail under the Portuguese flag, so King Manuel gave him ships and asked him to check the Brazil stories. It was to be a trip “solely to make discoveries and not to seek any profit.” This pleased Vespucci. Unlike other explorers, he was no gold seeker. He was curious, as well as being eager for fame. Perhaps he would achieve fame if he had another chance to study those southern stars. Or if he was able to find the strait that Columbus had failed to find.

Amerigo Vespucci had what sounds like one of the happiest explorations of his time. Right from the start he was lucky. When he reached the Cape Verde Islands, there was Pedro Cabral returning from India. Of course Vespucci was full of questions about Brazil. And of course Cabral was eager to hear the latest news from Portugal. Then off Vespucci sailed for Brazil, the land that had captured his imagination. Although he mapped the Portuguese territory, naming the harbors and rivers as he proceeded down the coast, he took time to marvel at the sights. Indeed, he spent twenty-seven days living among the native

peoples, observing how they lived, ate, loved, played, made war with other tribes. He noted that they had no king, no laws, no religion, no private property, yet seemed to live at peace among themselves. As for other forms of natural life, he was lost in wonder. The multitude of brilliantly colored birds! The variety of animals! There were so many

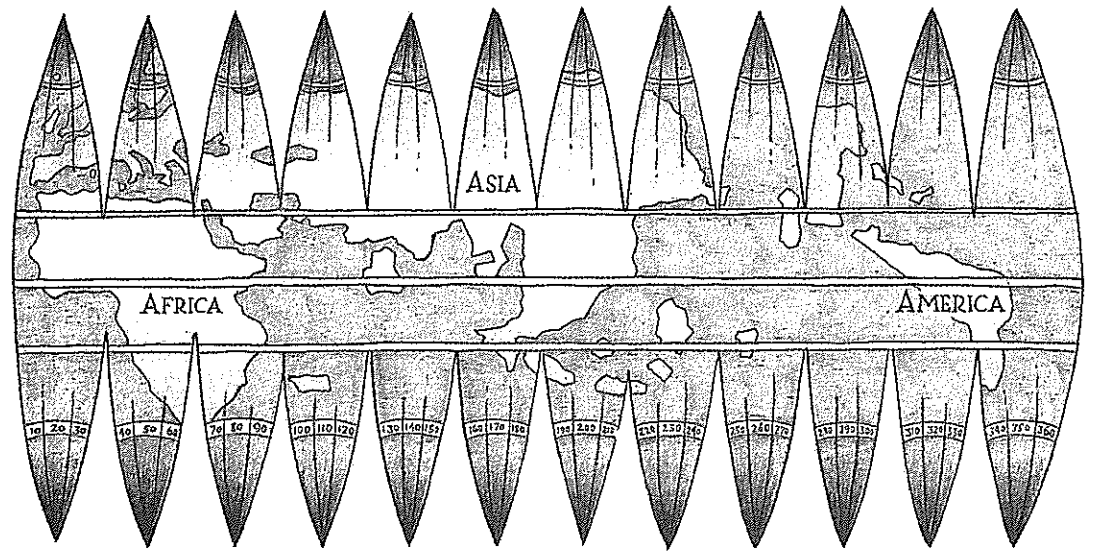


species, he said, they could never have fitted on Noah's ark. In addition, he contended that there were far more languages in the world than anyone had imagined. Scholars generally agreed that there were seventy-seven languages, but Vespucci thought that there were at least one thousand.

Amerigo Vespucci traveled south for nine months and twenty-seven days, giving mapmakers about 3,300 new miles to add to their maps, but he did not find his fixed star. He thought he'd made some advance in determining longitude by recording the time it took the moon to pass certain planets, but no accurate measurement of longitude was established until 1735, when one John Harrison invented a chronometer, the first instrument that could measure time correctly on a rolling ship.

Nor did Vespucci find a strait. He went far below the Portuguese territory, sailing quickly, because this land belonged to Spain. Still there was no strait. But since the coast continued unbroken for so long, he came to the conclusion that this was a new continent, previously unknown. At least so he wrote to Lorenzo in 1502.

And now the controversy really begins. Lorenzo died in 1503. According to one theory, someone who was familiar with Vespucci's letters decided that they should be printed. Readers in Europe were hungry for news of the strange world across the sea. The stranger, the better. So the editors added juicy bits, exaggerated Vespucci's descriptions, and changed the geographical data so that it was not only false but contradictory. In some cases they even used careless language such as Vespucci never would have used. Was Amerigo Vespucci really a boaster? No one knows, but the editors had him boasting that he was "more skilled than all the shipmates of the whole world." The most dramatic thing they did, however (if they did it), was to change the date of his voyage to the new continent to 1497, one year before Columbus had actually been there. This of course made Amerigo Vespucci the



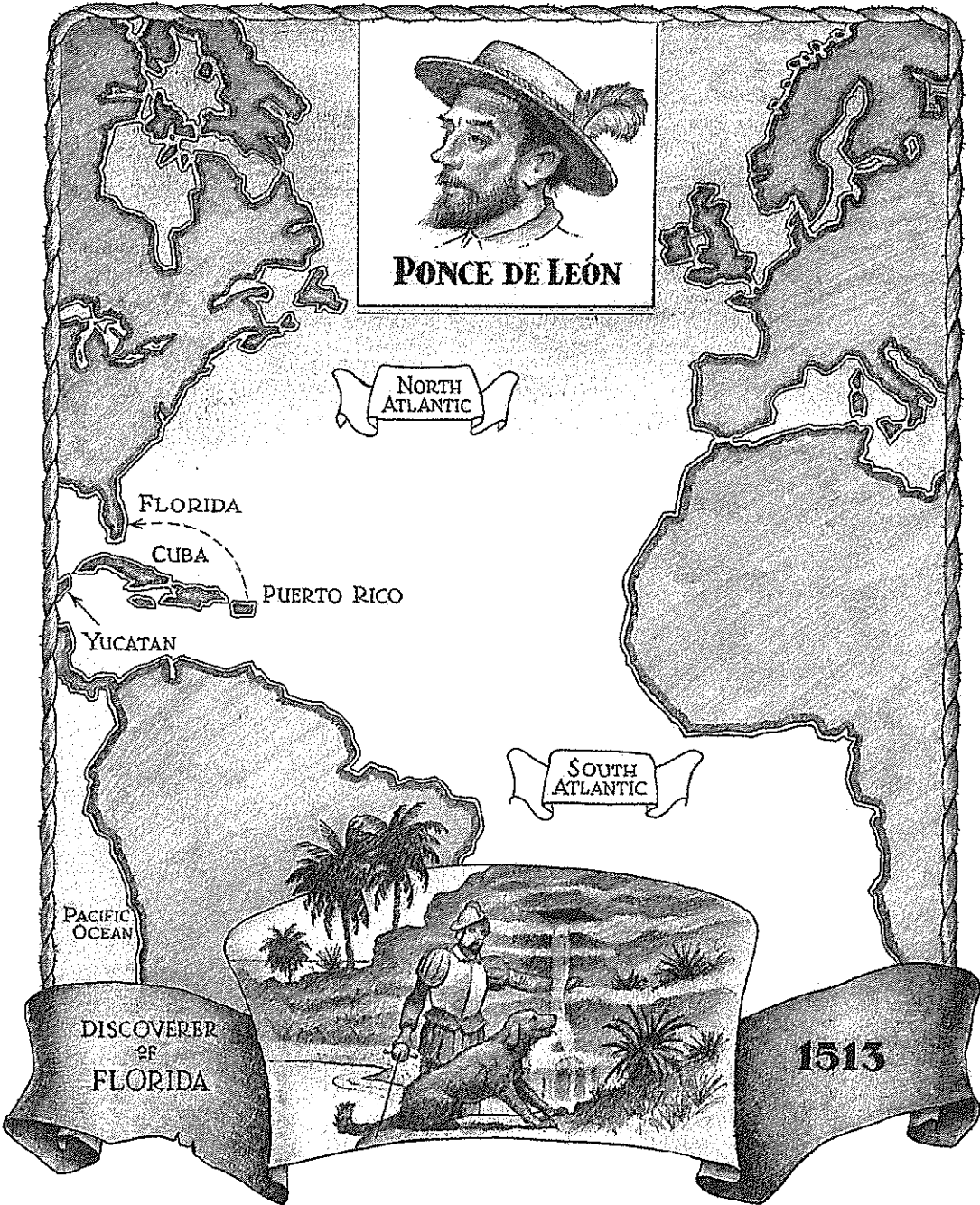
MARTIN WALDSEEMÜLLER'S MAP

“discoverer,” and many people reading the two printed letters believed this.

Some historians insist that these published accounts, which came out in 1504, were actually written by Vespucci. Some claim they were forgeries. Martin Waldseemüller, a German mapmaker, believed in them. In 1507 he was making a world map in which he showed a continent between Europe and Asia. It was a very narrow continent blocking the way to Asia, and just beyond its borders in a hitherto unknown sea was an oblong island marked Cipangu, or Japan. Martin Waldseemüller loved making up names, so when he read these accounts written or supposedly written by Amerigo Vespucci, he was delighted. Now he could give that southern continent a name. Right across Brazil he splashed the word *America*. It was a good name for a continent, he thought, ending with an *a* just like Africa and Asia. And unlike Europe and Asia, it was named for a man. About time! he said.

On their maps Spaniards went on calling the continent either the New World or the Indies. And on a later version of his map, Waldseemüller, perhaps thinking he had not been fair to Columbus, removed the name *America*. But it was too late. The name had caught on, and before long it was applied to all the land in the Western Hemisphere.

As for Columbus, he died the year before Martin Waldseemüller's map came out, so there was no chance of it upsetting the friendship between him and Amerigo Vespucci, which continued through the last days of Columbus's life.



PONCE DE LEÓN

NORTH ATLANTIC

FLORIDA

CUBA

PUERTO RICO

YUCATAN

SOUTH ATLANTIC

PACIFIC OCEAN

DISCOVERER
of
FLORIDA

1513

