

# The Naming of America

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*By Peter MacDonald Last updated 2011-03-29*

Was John Cabot the first European to discover America? How did the continent get its name? Peter Macdonald unravels a 15th-century story and challenges conventional thought.

## Knowledge in the 15th century

There are two key characters in this story, John Cabot, a sailor, and Richard Amerike, a Bristol business man. Unfortunately, neither left much of themselves for us to see or read: no portrait, nothing in their own writing, no detailed contemporary record of themselves or their work. There is, however, enough recorded to know that they both achieved things of lasting importance; one very directly, the other less obviously but in its way even more portentous: Cabot awakened the world to the existence of the North American continent, and Amerike gave his name and badge to what, in time, was to become one of the great nations of the world.

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At the end of the 15th century knowledge was a scarce commodity, and it is difficult for us to comprehend just how ignorant people were. They knew nothing about almost everything. They had no idea how their bodies worked -

why they breathed, urinated, defecated or felt hungry, felt sick or had a temperature - and many made no connection at all between the sexual act and childbirth. They knew nothing about geography - most people didn't know or, unable to travel, care what went on on the other side of the horizon - and they thought the world was flat. Nearly everyone was illiterate, even kings; only a few of the clergy knew how to read and write. Symbols were used to identify status and trades: eminent people had coats of arms to identify themselves, especially in battle, when it was important that they didn't get spiked in mistake for someone else; the barber/surgeon's red-and-white striped pole, for example, identified his calling.

People lived a cold, hungry and uncomfortable existence. Filth lay all around, and disease lurked in the hovels in which most people lived. Ever since the Romans had departed from Britain centuries before, people had hardly washed themselves; as spices were used to kill the smell and flavour of decaying meat, which was eaten as a matter of course, so wafted perfumes drowned the stench of a courtier's lady. The rest of the population just stank to high heaven.

On a voyage of discovery at the end of the 15th century Christopher Columbus, thinking he had missed China and reached the Indian Ocean, found and named the West Indies. On his third voyage, in 1498, he landed on the mainland of South America. But neither he nor John Cabot were the first people, or Europeans, to arrive in North America: native Americans had crossed the Bering

Strait from Asia in prehistory, migrating south and becoming, in time, American Indians, Aztecs and Incas; St Brendan was there in the 6th century; Eric the Red, a Viking, was there in the 10th; Basque whalers saw Maine and Rhode Island on the horizon in the 14th and 15th centuries. But, generally, the world was unaware of the fact that North America existed.

That was the sort of world in which Cabot and Amerike lived.

## **John Cabot**

Giovanni Cabotto (the name Cabotto means 'coastal seaman' - or, according to some, 'Big Head') was born in Genoa in 1450, the son of a spice merchant. By 1461 the Cabot family had moved to Venice, where John Cabot worked in his father's shop. In 1476 he married a young woman called Mattea (the female version of the name Matthew) who bore him three sons - and maybe daughters, too: they were not considered important enough to be listed in legal documents.

Between 1485 and 1490 Cabot travelled widely, becoming, according to his contemporaries, a 'skilful mariner'. Knowing that spices came from the East, and that it was possible, though not proven, that the world was round, he was convinced that by sailing westwards he could explore, and tap, the riches of the Orient.

Hoping to find someone to sponsor a voyage of discovery, in 1495 Cabot came to Bristol, and was introduced to a group of businessmen, led by an Anglicised

Welshman by the name of Amerike, who were just as keen as he was to expand trade. Impressed by Cabot, the Bristolians arranged an audience with King Henry VII in London, and on 5 March 1496, Cabot secured letters patent (a letter of authority to make a voyage and claim lands on behalf of the monarch) from the King.

Thirty-four days after leaving England the sailors sighted a 'New Found Land'.

A ship, only 70 feet long, was designed and built in Bristol, and on 20 May 1497, with a well-chosen crew of 18, the *Matthew* sailed from the mouth of the Avon, travelled to the fishing grounds south of Iceland and then due West. Eventually, 34 days after leaving England, the sailors sighted a 'New Found Land'. They went ashore in three places and brought back several pieces of evidence of their voyage, including a needle for making nets, a snare for catching animals and the jawbone of a whale. They made the return journey in just over two weeks, and only three days after returning to Bristol Cabot presented these things to the King. Much impressed, Henry VII granted another patent, and in 1498 Cabot, with a fleet of five ships, again set sail from Bristol. One, storm-damaged, returned to Ireland: the others were never heard of again.

One of Cabot's sons, Sebastian, was to become almost as famous as his father. He sailed to St Petersburg, was the first Governor of the Muscovy Company of Merchant Venturers, and he led an expedition that explored the coast of Brazil. But he did not achieve what his father had achieved: the discovery of a

continent most of the world did not know existed.

## **Richard Amerike**

Descending from the Earls of Gwent, Richard Ap Meryk - in Welsh, Richard, son of Meryk - was born in 1445 at the family home, Meryk Court, Weston-under-Penyard, near Ross-on-Wye. (Elizabeth, granddaughter of one of his ancestors, Hywel Ap Meurig, married Sir John Poyntz in 1343. Queen Elizabeth II is descended from their Tudor lineage, as was Diana, Princess of Wales, via the Spencer family connections.)

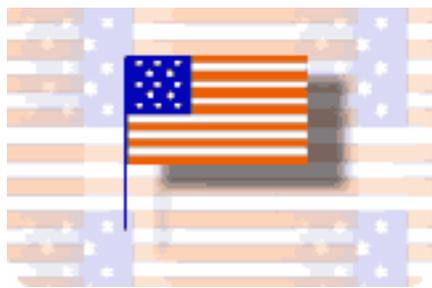
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Richard Amerike married a woman by the name of Lucy Wells, living for a time at West Camel, near Ilchester, where the local assize courts were held. When Bristol grew in importance and the assizes moved there, so did Amerike, joining relatives already established in the city. When he arrived it was the second biggest port in England after London. Trade was controlled by a few energetic men and to succeed he had to make the right contacts: he did, and in time became an important and wealthy man. By 1497 he was Sheriff of Bristol and also, for the third time, King's Customs Officer for the port - an office usually held for only one year though Amerike had already been the Customs Officer twice before, in 1486 and 1490.

When Cabot's voyage of discovery was proposed, Amerike donated more money than anyone else to funding the construction of the ship. Also, as no wood was readily available nearby, oaks from Amerike's family estate were cut down and floated down the Wye from Ross to Chepstow, over the Severn and then up the Avon to the Bristol dockyard.

It was probably in honour of Cabot's wife Mattea that the ship was named *Matthew*, but it could also have been named after Amerike himself, Matthew, one of the apostles, having been a custom's officer. But it is also probable that, as the chief sponsor of the *Matthew's* voyage, and with Cabot's wife and children then living, at his instigation, in a house belonging to a close friend, Amerike sought reward for his patronage by asking that any new-found lands should be named after him.

## The Stars and Stripes



The Stars and Stripes of the American flag [©](#) Since the flag of the United States of America is based on the design of Amerike's coat of arms, it is more than probable that its origins lie with Amerike and not with George Washington, whose family also bore arms of the Stars and Stripes. According to the American Flag Research Centre in Massachusetts the heraldic origin of the American flag is not positively known; archives in the British

Library confirm that the Stars and Stripes was the coat of arms of the Ap Merike family - and that they pre-date Washington's connection with the continent by 300 years.

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Amerike's coat of arms can be seen in the Lord Mayor's Chapel on College Green in Bristol as part of the Poyntz crest, a relative having married into that wealthy, land-owning family.

Cabot must have been a very remarkable person. How else could someone of no great wealth or personal influence pursue a goal so single-mindedly and achieve it so triumphantly? How else could a foreigner convince the English king that he should give him formal backing, and hard-headed Bristol merchants that the money they were hazarding would be spent with hope of a good return? Who else, knowing just how dangerous the oceans could be, would set off again and again to risk his life and that of his crews on the quest for new places beyond the horizon?

As to Richard Amerike, the picture that emerges is of a man who was an outstanding medieval entrepreneur - defined in the dictionary as 'one who undertakes a business enterprise with chance of profit or loss'. He was very successful, but little did he know that the Stars and Stripes on his personal

banner would eventually become an emblem known the world over.

## **Find out more**

### **Read on**

*Naming of America: Continents, Countries, States, Counties and Cities* by Alan Wolk (EP Dutton, 1978)

*The Flag, the Poet and the Song: The Story of the Star-Spangled Banner* by Irvin Molotsky (Plume Books, 2001)

## **About the author**

Peter MacDonald has written six novels and eight works of non-fiction, including a biography of the Vietnamese General Giap, a book about bomb disposal, a short history of the world, two illustrated books about the history of Bristol and a book about John Cabot and the naming of America.

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