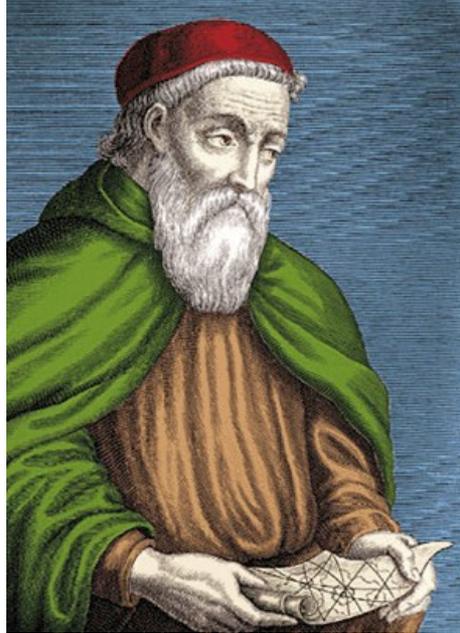




From the Annals of the World History

Amerigo Vespucci

March 9, 1454 - February 22, 1512



Amerigo Vespucci was an Italian explorer, financier, navigator and cartographer. The Americas are generally believed to have derived their name from the feminized Latin version of his first name.

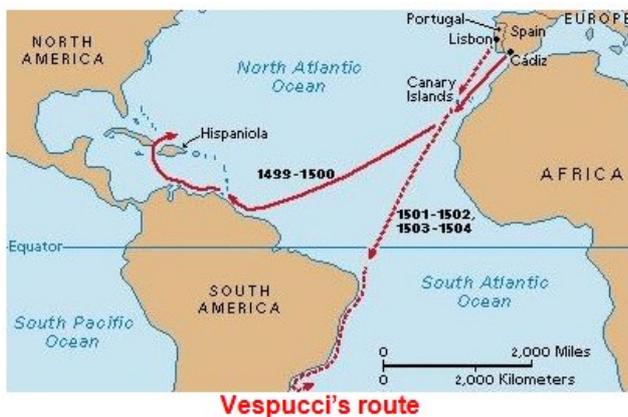
Life

Amerigo Vespucci was born and raised in Florence, Italy. He was the third son of Ser Nastagio (Anastasio), a Florentine notary, and Lisabetta Mini. Amerigo Vespucci was educated by his uncle, Fra Giorgio Antonio Vespucci, a Dominican friar of San Marco in Florence. While his elder brothers were sent to the University of Pisa to pursue scholarly careers, Amerigo Vespucci embraced a mercantile life, and was hired as a clerk by the Florentine commercial house of Medici, headed by Lorenzo de Medici. Vespucci acquired the favor and protection of Lorenzo Pierfrancesco de Medici who became the head of the business after the elder Lorenzo's death in 1492. In March 1492, the Medici dispatched the thirty-eight year old Vespucci and Donato Niccolini as confidential agents to look into the Medici branch office in Cadiz (Spain), whose managers and dealings were under suspicion.

In April, 1495, by the intrigues of Bishop Juan Rodríguez de Fonseca, the Crown of Castile broke their monopoly deal with Christopher Columbus and began handing out licenses to other navigators for the West Indies. Just around this time (1495-96), Vespucci was engaged as the executor of Giannotto Berardi, an Italian merchant who had recently died in Seville. Vespucci organized the fulfillment of Berardi's outstanding contract with the Castilian crown to provide twelve vessels for the Indies. After these were delivered, Vespucci continued as a provision contractor for Indies expeditions, and is known to have secured beef supplies for at least one (if not two) of Columbus's voyages.

Expeditions

At the invitation of King Manuel I of Portugal, Vespucci participated as observer in several voyages that explored the east coast of South America between 1499 and 1502. On the first of these voyages he was aboard the ship that discovered that South America extended much further south than previously thought.



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- [Aims](#)
- [Concept](#)
- [Parenting](#)
- [Events](#)
- [Training Programmes](#)
 - October 11
 - December 09
- [Expansion](#)
- [Development](#)
- [Syllabus](#)
- [Bal Vikas Administration](#)
- [Past Students](#)
 - [June 2010](#)
 - [September](#)
- [Home](#)

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The expeditions became widely known in Europe after two accounts attributed to Vespucci were published between 1502 and 1504. In 1507, Martin Waldseemüller produced a world map on which he named the new continent America after Vespucci's first name, Amerigo. He died on February 22, 1512 in Seville, Spain, of an unknown cause.

Historical role

In 1508, after only two voyages to the Americas, the position of chief of navigation of Spain (piloto mayor de Indias) was created for Vespucci, with the responsibility of planning navigation for voyages to the Indies. Two letters attributed to Vespucci were published during his lifetime. *Mundus Novus* (New World) was a Latin translation of a lost Italian letter sent from Lisbon to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici. It describes a voyage to South America in 1501-1502. *Mundus Novus* was published in late 1502 or early 1503 and soon reprinted and distributed in numerous European countries.

Lettera di Amerigo Vespucci delle isole nuovamente trovate in quattro suoi viaggi (Letter of Amerigo Vespucci concerning the isles newly discovered on his four voyages), known as Lettera al Soderini or just Lettera, was a letter in Italian addressed to Piero Soderini. Printed in 1504 or 1505, it claimed to be an account of four voyages to the Americas made by Vespucci between 1497 and 1504. A Latin translation was published by the German Martin Waldseemüller in 1507 in *Cosmographiae Introductio*, a book on cosmography and geography, as *Quattuor Americi Vespuccij navigationes* (Four Voyages of Amerigo Vespucci).

In 1508, King Ferdinand made Vespucci chief navigator of Spain at a huge salary and commissioned him to found a school of navigation, in order to standardize and modernize navigation techniques used by Iberian sea captains then exploring the world. Vespucci even developed a rudimentary, but fairly accurate method of determining longitude (which only more accurate chronometers would later improve upon). In the 18th century three unpublished familiar letters from Vespucci to Lorenzo de' Medici were rediscovered. One describes a voyage made in 1499-1500 which corresponds with the second of the "four voyages". Another was written from Cape Verde in 1501 in the early part of the third of the four voyages, before crossing the Atlantic. The third letter was sent from Lisbon after the completion of that voyage.

It was the publication and widespread circulation of the letters that might have led Martin Waldseemüller to name the new continent America on his world map of 1507 in Lorraine. Vespucci used a Latinised form of his name, **Americus Vesputius**, in his Latin writings, which Waldseemüller used as a base for the new name, taking the feminine form America, according to the prevalent view. The book accompanying the map stated: "I do not see what right any one would have to object to calling this part, after Americus who discovered it and who is a man of intelligence, Amerige, that is, the Land of Americus, or America: since both Europa and Asia got their names from women". Amerigo itself is an Italian form of the medieval Latin *Emericus* (see also Saint Emeric of Hungary), which through the German form Heinrich (in English, Henry) derived from the Germanic name Haimirich.

The two disputed letters claim that Vespucci made four voyages to America, while at most two can be verified from other sources. At the moment there is a dispute between historians on when Vespucci visited mainland the first time. Some historians like German Arciniegas and Gabriel Camargo Perez think that his first voyage was done in June 1497 with the Spanish Pilot Juan de la Cosa. Vespucci's real historical importance may well rest more in his letters, whether he wrote them all or not, than in his discoveries. From these letters, the European public learned about the newly discovered continents of the Americas for the first time; its existence became generally known throughout Europe within a few years of the letters' publication.

First voyage

A letter published in 1504 purports to be an account by Vespucci, written to Soderini, of a lengthy visit to the New World, leaving Spain in May 1497 and returning in October 1498. However, modern scholars have doubted that this voyage took place, and consider this letter a forgery. Whoever did write the letter makes several observations of native customs, including use of hammocks and sweat lodges.

Second voyage

About 1499-1500, Vespucci joined an expedition in the service of Spain, with Alonso de Ojeda (or Hojeda) as the fleet commander. The intention was to sail around the southern end of the African mainland into the Indian Ocean. After hitting land at the coast of what is now Guyana, the two seem to have separated. Vespucci sailed southward, discovering the mouth of the Amazon River and reaching 6°S, before turning around and seeing Trinidad and the Orinoco River and returning to Spain by way of Hispaniola. The letter, to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, claims that Vespucci determined his longitude celestially on August 23, 1499, while on this voyage. However, that claim may be fraudulent, which could cast doubt on the letter's credibility.

Third voyage

The last certain voyage of Vespucci was led by Gonçalo Coelho in 1501-1502 in the service of Portugal. Departing from Lisbon, the fleet sailed first to Cape Verde where they met two of Pedro Álvares Cabral's ships returning from India. In a letter from Cape Verde, Vespucci says that he hopes to visit the same lands that Álvares Cabral had explored, suggesting that the intention is to sail west to Asia, as on the 1499-1500 voyages. On reaching the coast of Brazil, they sailed south along the coast of South America to Rio de Janeiro's bay. If his own account is to be believed, he reached the latitude of Patagonia before turning back, although this also seems doubtful, since his account does not mention the broad estuary of the Río de la Plata, which he must have seen if he had gotten that far south. Portuguese maps of South America, created after the voyage of Coelho and Vespucci, do not show any land south of present-day Cananéia at 25° S, so this may represent the southernmost extent of their voyages.

After the first half of the expedition, Vespucci mapped Alpha and Beta Centauri, as well as the constellation Crux, the Southern Cross. Although these stars had been known to the ancient Greeks, gradual precession had lowered them below the European horizon so that they had been forgotten. On his return to Lisbon, Vespucci wrote in a letter to d' Medici that the land masses they explored were much larger than anticipated and different from the Asia described by Ptolemy or Marco Polo and therefore, must be a New World, that is,

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a previously unknown fourth continent, after Europe, Asia, and Africa.

Little is known of his last voyage in 1503-1504 or even whether it actually took place.