

The Origin of America

By Sando Bologna

In these days few words are as revered as “America.” The name is nobly honored as in “America the Beautiful,” and “God Bless America.”

Yet, despite the high regard for “America,” relatively little is known about how or why the name became associated with the identity of the United States. Or why its called “The United States of America” as printed on our currency.

Historians have attributed the defining of America to the name Amerigo Vespucci, the Florentine navigator, explorer and writer, who made two or four voyages to the New World and who identified the region of what is known as South America as a vast continent instead of part of the Indies as had his contemporary Christopher Columbus.

It is known that Amerigo Vespucci was born in May of 1454 into an upper-class family in the city-state of Florence. Not much is known of his early life. He was primarily educated by his learned uncle Giorgio Vespucci, a priest. Amerigo was named after his father’s father.

He had been employed for ten years by the Medici family, Florence’s most important bankers, when he was assigned by his employer to Seville, Spain, as the bank’s representative. He involved himself in navigation matters and he assisted Columbus in the preparations for his second voyage in 1493 and his third trip in 1498.

In 1499, at age 45, Amerigo Vespucci sailed from Spain, under Spanish auspices, on his first voyage. He was the navigator and merchants’ representative. He wrote of exploring the coast of Brazil, then headed to an area which he called Venezuela (Spanish for “Little Venice.”) Some scholars claim that he fabricated much of what he wrote.

In other accounts, he wrote of the voyage which began in May, 1501, at Lisbon, Portugal. He wrote of his explorations of the entire coast of Brazil (the first European to have done that feat) then on to Uruguay and Argentina. His report to the Medici family stated that he had explored a new land which he explained was not Asia. The letter was widely distributed throughout Europe.

In 1507, several scholars in Saint-Die in northeastern France wrote a book on geography and mathematics in which they suggested that the New World be called “America” in honor of Amerigo Vespucci. The name came from “Americus,” the Latin for “Amerigo.” Many countries names end in “a,” the feminine reference in Italian.

Martin Waldseemuller, a German mapmaker, wrote “Amerige” or “Americus” on the map in the French book which was widely read in Europe. The name was

subsequently repeated on maps drawn by cartographers. Eventually the name was extended to identify North America.

When the United States was emerging as a new nation, many leaders advocated the name “Columbia.” But, Christopher Columbus was not a popular American here in the post Revolutionary era. Later, his popularity increased with naming of King’s College Columbia, calling the Capital district Columbia, writing a biography of Columbus by Washington Irving, and crafting scores of poems for the Great Navigator, by including epic poems by Timothy Dwight and Joel Barlow, both of Connecticut.

Thus, the new nation became known as “The United States of America.” United States citizens apparently like calling their country America – a sweet-sounding name worth repeating. Historian Dennis Brindell, in his small book, “Amerigo Vespucci,” asserts: “Putting aside the two disputed voyages, the fact remains that Amerigo Vespucci was the first person to identify the lands across the Atlantic Ocean as an unknown continent. For that reason alone, isn’t it fitting that North and South America were named for him?”

As Historian John Noble Wilford concludes in his book, “The Mysterious History of Columbus,” “Even if the meaning of America was an accident of history, Amerigo Vespucci can be said to deserve the honor.”