

## Columbus's Landing in the New World

Columbus, and his voyage to the New World, is one of those historical stories that makes it into every single U.S. history textbook. Up until the 1990s, Columbus was depicted as a great and brave man, and his story was used to teach young Americans that if they hold on to their convictions and ignore the naysayers, great things will come their way. Since Columbus shows up so often and usually has large sections of text dedicated to him, this section looks specifically at how textbooks dealt with the first contact made between Europeans and Native Americans.

1794

*Originally published in the 1780s, Noah Webster's An American Selection of Lessons in Reading and Speaking was used to improve students' grammatical and oral speaking skills, and therefore it would not be considered a "historical textbook" today. But by its third edition in 1787, approximately half of the entire book was dedicated to historical content, arguably making this textbook one of the first to record the historical events that led to the founding of the new nation.\**

\* In most printed material done before 1820, book publishers and newspaper editors did not use the letter "f" instead of the letter "s" within their text. Rather, they were using something called the "long S," which was actually a separate printed letter.

He [Columbus] therefore propofed that they fhould\* obey his orders for three days longer and, fhould they not difcover land in that time, he would then direct his courfe for Spain.

They complied with his propofal; and, happily for mankind, in three days they difcovered land. This was a fmall ifland, to which Columbus gave the name of San Salvador. Their firft interview with the natives was a fcene of amufement and compaffion on the one part, and of aftonifhment and adoration on the other.

The natives were entirely naked, fimple and timorous; and they viewed the Spaniards as a fuperior order of beings, defcended from the Sun, which, in their ifland, and in moft parts of America, was worfhipped as a Deity. By this it was eafy for Columbus to perceive the line of conduct proper to be obferved toward that fimple and inoffenfive people.<sup>17</sup>

1830

*The author of this textbook gives students an idealized view of Columbus and the Native Americans he seemed to have enchanted with his dress and behavior. Although highly overstated and lacking any real historical research, passages such as this must have given students in the 1830s a definite sense of being superior to these "simple" people.*

At founfe, Columbus, in a rich and fplendid drefs, landed, and, with a drawn fword in his hand, and difplaying the royal ftandard, took poffeffion of the ifland for the crown of Spain, all his followers kneeling on the fhore and kifing the ground with tears of joy. The natives who had afsembled in great numbers on the firft appearance of the fhips, ftood around the Spaniards, gazing in fpeechlefs aftonifhment.

The Europeans were hardly lefs amazed at the fcene before them. Every herb, and fhrub, and tree was different from thofe which flourifhed in Europe. The inhabitants appeared in the fimple innocence of nature, entirely naked. Their black hair, long and uncurl'd, floated upon their fhoulders or was bound in trefses around their heads. Though not tall, they were well fhaped and active. They were fhly at firft, through fear, but foon became familiar with the Spaniards; from whom, with tranfports of joy, they received

\* An approximation of the "long S" (see the footnote on the previous page).

various trinkets, for which in return they gave such provisions as they had, and some cotton yarn, the only commodity of value they could produce.<sup>18</sup>

## 1880

Starting in the late 1800s, an interesting twist took place in the historiography of the Columbus story—Native Americans disappear completely. Now, Columbus and his men take over a new, completely uninhabited land.

On landing, he threw himself on his knees, kissed the earth, and returned thanks to God with tears of joy. His example was followed by the rest, whose hearts, indeed, overflowed with the same feelings of gratitude. Columbus then rising, drew his sword, displayed the royal standard, and assembling round him all who had landed, took solemn possession in the name of the Castilian sovereigns, giving the island the name of San Salvador. Having complied with the requisite forms and ceremonies, he called upon all present to take the oath of obedience to him as admiral and viceroy, representing the persons of the sovereigns.

The feelings of the crew now burst forth in the most extravagant transports. They had recently considered themselves devoted men hurrying forward to destruction; they now looked upon themselves as favorites of fortune, and gave themselves up to the most unbounded joy. They thronged around the admiral with overflowing zeal, some embracing him, others kissing his hands. Those who had been most mutinous and turbulent during the voyage were now most devoted and enthusiastic. Some begged favors of him as if he had already wealth and honors in his gift. Many abject spirits, who had outraged him by their insolence, now crouched at his feet, begging pardon for all the trouble they had caused him, and promising the blindest obedience for the future.<sup>19</sup>

## 1946

Columbus's taking the land and its people are justified in this 1946 except due to the fact that he did it for "their Highnesses." It is interesting to note that U.S. history textbooks written after 1945 would unanimously condemn Germany, Japan, and Italy for their aggressive acts of basically doing the exact same thing.

Setting out under the Spanish flag from the little harbor of Palos, in August, 1492, Columbus and his badly frightened crew reached one of the Bahama Islands the following October. "After a passage of seventy-three days," he wrote, "... I discovered very many islands inhabited by people without number: and of them all I took possession for their Highnesses with proclamation and the royal banner unfurled, no one offering any contradiction."<sup>20</sup>

## 1995

By the 1990s—and widespread historical controversies surrounding the Columbus quincentennial—U.S. history textbooks began to question whether Columbus should be a celebrated hero or, as the following text suggests, regarded as a villain.

## Columbus: Hero or Villain?

For years, Columbus has been remembered as the bold sea captain who "discovered America." In one sense, he deserves that honor. Europeans knew nothing of the Americas before Columbus brought them news of this "new world." Today, we recognize that other people "discovered" America long before Columbus. Still, his daring journey brought the peoples of Europe, Africa, and the Americas into lasting contact for the first time in history.

Native Americans, however, paid heavily for Columbus's voyage. Columbus and the Europeans who came after him forced native peoples to work in mines or on farms raising sugar cane and cotton. Over the next 50 years, hundreds of thousands of Caribbean Indians died from harsh working conditions and European diseases.

"Discovery" also cost Native Americans their lands. Starting with Columbus, Europeans justified seizing Indian lands. Some believed they had the right to take the lands because Indians were not Christians.

For better or worse, the rise of powerful nations in Europe signaled a new era for the Americas. Curious Europeans wanted to know more about the lands across the Atlantic. They saw the Americas as a place where they could trade and grow rich. Once Columbus reached the Americas, nothing could stop the flood of explorers and settlers who followed him.<sup>21</sup>