
COLONIAL AMERICA

THIRD EDITION



Jerome R. Reich

3RD EDITION



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Jerome R. Reich

Chicago State University



PRENTICE HALL, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 07632

REICH, JEROME R.

Colonial America / Jerome R. Reich. — 3rd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-13-088808-7

1. United States—Civilization—To 1783. I. Title.

E162.R44 1994

973.2—dc20

92-46073

CIP

Acquisitions editor: Steve Dalphin
Production editor: Cecile Joyner
Interior design: Joan Stone
Copy editor: Rene Lynch
Cover design: Anne Ricigliano
Prepress buyer: Kelly Behr
Manufacturing buyer: Mary Ann Gloriande
Editorial assistant: Caffie Risher



© 1994, 1989, 1984 by Prentice-Hall, Inc.
A Simon & Schuster Company
Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 07632

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Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

ISBN 0-13-088808-7

PRENTICE-HALL INTERNATIONAL (UK) LIMITED, *London*
PRENTICE-HALL OF AUSTRALIA PTY. LIMITED, *Sydney*
PRENTICE-HALL CANADA INC., *Toronto*
PRENTICE-HALL HISPANOAMERICANA, S.A., *Mexico*
PRENTICE-HALL OF INDIA PRIVATE LIMITED, *New Delhi*
PRENTICE-HALL OF JAPAN, INC., *Tokyo*
SIMON & SCHUSTER ASIA PTE. LTD., *Singapore*
EDITORA PRENTICE-HALL DO BRASIL, LTDA., *Rio de Janeiro*



Preface

A preface to a third edition of any history text must give rise to the pertinent—or impertinent—question: Why must history once written be constantly rewritten? Several answers come readily to mind. New evidence becomes available and/or old evidence is, or should be, reevaluated. Certain aspects of the past (or certain groups) long neglected by historians are “discovered” to be of importance and interest. Biases (yes, even historians have them) gradually decompose under the accumulated pressure of knowledge and, hopefully, wisdom.

That all three of these phenomena have occurred in the field of colonial history is obvious. We continue to learn more and more about every aspect (social, cultural, economic, as well as political) of colonial life; we have begun to give their just due to Native Americans, Afro-Americans, women, and the “common people”; and we have dumped such stereotypes as “Puritan versus Cavalier,” “Anglo-Saxon liberty versus Popish slavery,” and “noble versus ignoble” savage. It is hoped that this volume reflects these advances.

I would like to thank the reviewers of this edition: J. Michael Hill of the University of Alabama, David C. Twining of Westminster College, and Arthur J. Worrall of Colorado State University. In addition, credit must be shared with Stephen Dalphin and his colleagues at Prentice Hall and with my wife for her tolerance of, with each new edition, a more irascible author.



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1



European Backgrounds

Was the discovery of America a blessing or a curse to humankind? This was a popular topic of debate during the eighteenth century and still remains a lively question today. Your answer depends a great deal on whether you are of Native-American, African, Asian, or European descent, for the peoples of all of these continents shared the “blessings” and/or “curses” resulting from the discovery of America. In this chapter we will not attempt to evaluate the results of the discovery but to examine the events, inventions, and explorers that made it possible.

NORSE DISCOVERIES

By the end of the tenth century, over 20,000 Norsemen were living in Iceland. A few thousand more lived in Greenland, which had been discovered only a few years earlier by Eric the Red. In the opening decade of the eleventh century, Leif, one of the sons of Eric the Red, sailed west and discovered three “lands.” He named them Helluland (Flatland), Markland (Timberland), and Vinland (which may be translated either as Wine Land—from the grapes which grew there—or Meadow Land—from the archaic Norse word *vin*).

Authorities differ widely on the location of these three lands, but the most widely accepted theory is that they are Baffin Island, Labrador, and Newfoundland—all of which are only a few hundred miles from Greenland. Archaeological studies made by Helge and Anne Stine Ingstadt at L'Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland, during the 1960s appear to buttress the belief that a Viking settlement existed there. The Ingstadts found the remains of houses, boat sheds, a cooking pit, a smithy, a bronze pin, and other artifacts of the type used by the Norsemen. Radiocarbon analysis dates these remains at about the year 1000.

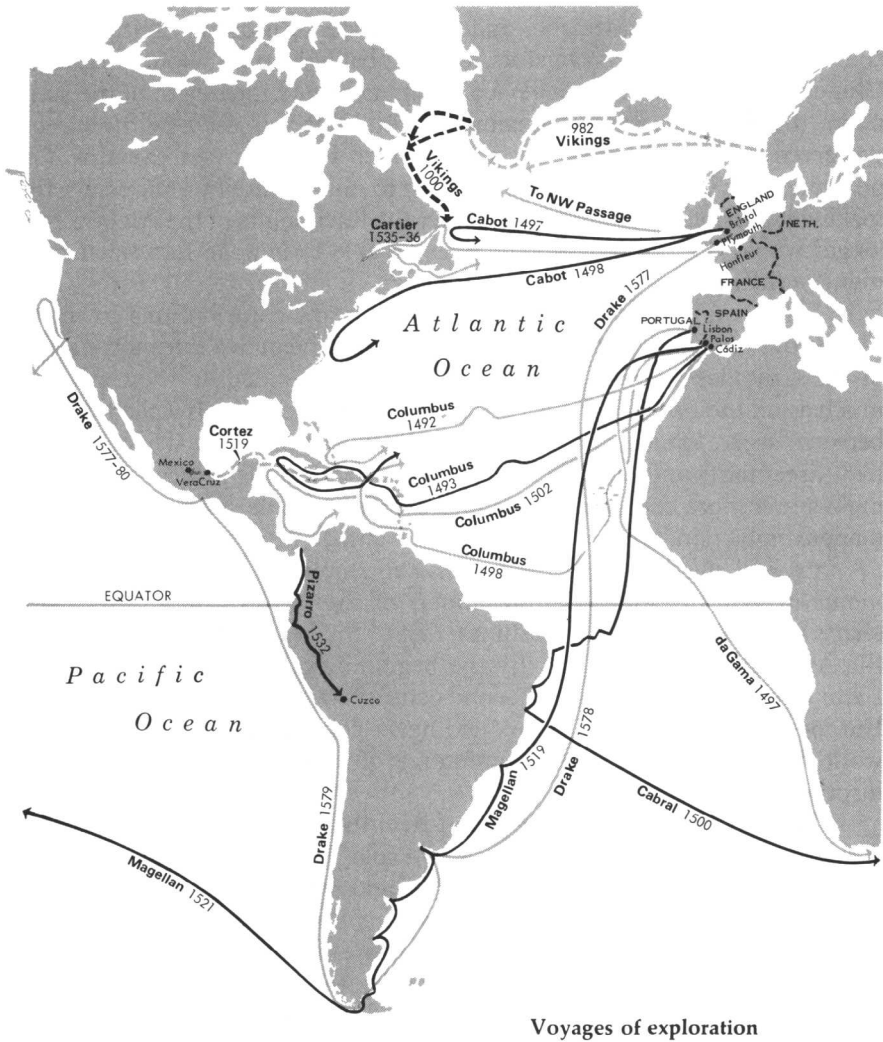
The Greenlanders' saga and the saga of Eric the Red tell about several attempts to colonize Vinland, but none of these attempts seems to have enjoyed long-term success. Leif's brother Thorvald was killed by the Indians, who were called *skraelings*, or screechers, by the Norsemen. These *skraelings* were described as "swarthy . . . with ugly hair on their heads . . . they had great eyes, and were broad of cheek." Other expeditions were also attacked and were forced to return to Greenland. Thus, the Norse discovery of America proved to be a false start: even its memory faded away. In the eleventh century Europeans were not prepared economically, politically, or technologically to settle new, far-off continents. It was another 500 years before that state of readiness was achieved.

THE CRUSADES

Before the end of the eleventh century, however, the first link was forged in the long and intricate chain leading from Leif Ericsson to Christopher Columbus. That link was the calling of the First Crusade by Pope Urban II at the Council of Clermont in 1095. The primary goal of the First Crusade and of later Crusades—the capture of the Holy Land from the Moslems—was only temporarily attained. However, as so often happens with great historical movements, the unforeseen results of the Crusades proved to be more significant and far-reaching than its sponsors ever imagined.

The feudal system—the political, social, and economic regime which dominated western Europe at that time, never fully recovered from the Crusades. The lands of knights who perished in these expeditions without leaving heirs reverted to the king. Those who did survive were often forced to sell or mortgage their lands, or to grant privileges to the towns on their estates in order to raise the money needed to finance their participation in a Crusade. By 1300 most towns had bought or won charters, which made townspeople free and virtually self-governing. Countless serfs won their freedom either by joining a Crusade or by running away to one of these towns, where residence for a year and a day gave serfs their liberty.

The Crusades also had important effects on European culture. European contacts with the Byzantine and Moslem empires—which had pre-



Voyages of exploration

Voyages of Exploration. (From Hofstadter, et al. *United States: Brief Edition*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., © 1979, p. 4. By permission of the publisher.)

served classical philosophy, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, and geography—facilitated the reintroduction of this body of thought and knowledge into European life. Contrary to accepted belief, Europeans did not merely accept classical Moslem and Oriental knowledge but, particularly in the sciences, built upon it as well. The result was a series of technological improvements which were to prove crucial in the rediscovery and settlement of America.

Chief among these technological accomplishments were improvements

in the compass, the astrolabe, and gun powder. Europeans borrowed the compass from Moslem navigators, who probably learned about it from the Chinese. The astrolabe was a device which measured the height of the sun at noon, thereby indicating approximate latitude. It was used by the Greeks, preserved by the Moslems, and passed on to European sea captains. Gun powder, also a Chinese invention, was put to military use by Europeans, thus making it possible for them to overpower the inhabitants of the Americas. No longer would the *skraelings* (or Indians) be able to impede European settlement permanently.

European shipbuilders also made important contributions to marine technology. The galleys that sailed the Mediterranean Sea during the period of the Crusades were low, bulky ships which depended on their rowers as much as on their sails for power. Gradually, however, vessels (called caravels) became larger, longer, narrower, and higher, with multiple decks. Caravels had three masts and depended entirely upon their sails, which had become bulkier and more complex. These improvements made ships speedier, more maneuverable, and better able to take advantage of wind direction.

Closely allied to the improvements in shipbuilding were the improvements in map making. The forerunners of the modern map were marine charts which described the coastlines, first of the Mediterranean, and later of the Atlantic coast of Europe. By the beginning of the fifteenth century, a Latin translation of Ptolemy's (second-century) work on geography reminded Europeans of what their scholars had never completely forgotten—that the world was round. The exact circumference of the globe, however, was still in dispute.

Ptolemy, who was followed by fifteenth-century geographers such as Pierre d'Ailly and map makers such as Paolo Toscanelli, greatly underestimated the size of the world. Both d'Ailly and Toscanelli, who greatly influenced Columbus, theorized that the distance from Europe to Asia was only about 6,000 to 6,500 miles, with Japan and several other islands conveniently located in between to break the voyage. By the first half of the fifteenth century, the Canary Islands, Madeira, and the Azores had already been rediscovered, and most experts expected other islands to be found as navigators sailed farther and farther west into the Atlantic Ocean.

THE RENAISSANCE

Another step on the road to the rediscovery of America was the Renaissance. The Renaissance, or rebirth of classical learning, began in thirteenth-century Italy. There the study of Latin and Greek literature became known as the humanities, the study of human beings and their literature. The Renaissance also stimulated European art, architecture, science, and technology. Perhaps most importantly, it led to a new outlook on life that was very unlike that of

the Middle Ages. During the Middle Ages people had concentrated on the next world; during the Renaissance they concentrated on this world. People of the Renaissance tended to be more skeptical, individualistic, and optimistic than their forebears of the Middle Ages. The psychology of the Middle Ages tended to hinder the search for, and exploration of, new parts of the world; the psychology of the Renaissance positively encouraged such ventures.

This adventurous spirit is perhaps best illustrated by the missionaries and traders who, long before Europeans began to think of sailing westward to reach the Orient, attempted to reach India and China by following the caravan routes across Asia. The first recorded visit of a European to the Far East was made in 1241 by a Franciscan monk named John of Plano Carpini, an envoy of Pope Innocent IV to Genghis Khan. Twelve years later another Franciscan, William de Rubruquis, was sent on a similar mission by King Louis IX of France. Both men left detailed accounts of their visits; but the most famous—and influential—account of the Orient was written by Marco Polo, a young Venetian trader who traveled throughout the Orient between 1274 and 1295.

Marco Polo might never have written his famous account of the wonders of the East if he had not been captured and imprisoned by the Genoese during the course of a war with Venice. Fortunately for us, if not for him, he spent his time in prison writing about his adventures. His narrative excited generations of Europeans with accounts about the wealth and grandeur of China, India, Persia (which he saw with his own eyes), and islands such as Japan, Zanzibar, and Madagascar (about which he had learned second hand). When the first printed edition of his adventures appeared in 1477, it became a best seller. Columbus felt the book was important enough to take with him on his first voyage to America. The wide circulation of Marco Polo's book is only one example of the effect of the invention—in the mid-fifteenth century—of movable metal type for the printing press, which made it possible to mass produce books and maps.

TRADE AND THE NATION-STATE

While the Crusades increased knowledge, they increased trade between Europe and the Far East even more. During the course of the Crusades, the merchants of the Italian cities (which were the jumping-off places for the Crusades) had accumulated the ships, the know-how, and the large amounts of capital needed for trade with the Orient. Soon textiles such as silk, satin, velvet, taffeta, and damask; spices (necessities, not luxuries, in the days before refrigeration) such as pepper, cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, and cloves; as well as rugs, tapestries, gems, china, glassware, perfumes, dyes, and steel weapons began arriving in European markets. Further, hitherto exotic fruits

such as cherries, melons, apricots, peaches, and dates became commonplace on the tables of Europeans wealthy enough to afford them.

These goods were transported thousands of miles by land and sea before arriving at the port cities at the eastern end of the Mediterranean or at Constantinople. Because of agreements negotiated during the period of the Crusades, merchants from one or another of the Italian cities (most often from Venice, Genoa, or Pisa) held a virtual monopoly of all trade at these ports. They alone were eligible to purchase the oriental products, and the rest of Europe was forced to go to Italy to obtain these products—at exorbitant prices.

Italy was not the only area of Europe to benefit from the increase in trade. Important mercantile towns and seaports developed in the Low Countries (present-day Holland and Belgium), Portugal, Spain, France, England, and the Hanseatic League towns along the Baltic and North seas. Merchants from all these parts of Europe purchased oriental goods and, in return, sold the hides, timber, furs, tin, lead, woolen goods, and leather products which were produced in their own areas. These towns also became centers of industry and banking. The wealthy bourgeoisie (town dwellers) who controlled them gradually attained a position of power and influence in the medieval world.

The bourgeoisie resented the limitations placed upon them by the feudal nobility. Whenever a noble's land was crossed, merchants faced, at best, the payment of a fee. At worst, merchants faced confiscation of their goods or loss of their lives. The lack of any ruler strong enough to protect merchants against these depredations or against robbers and pirates was a severe handicap to trade. The fact that each petty principality had its own system of coinage and code of laws further worked against mercantile prosperity.

It was not long before merchants began to discern the solution to their problem—supporting the monarchs in their struggle to assert authority over nobles. The details of this strategy need not concern us here. Suffice it to say that with the financial support of the merchant class, kings were able to hire mercenaries and to equip them with the guns and cannon necessary to subdue the recalcitrant nobles and destroy their castles. During the fifteenth century Portugal, Spain, France, and England became true nation-states. Their rulers showed their appreciation of bourgeois support (and recognized their own self-interest) by giving full support to commercial development.

However, all these new nations found themselves with a common problem: an unfavorable balance of trade, or, more precisely, an unfavorable balance of payments. In other words, they were spending more on the goods they imported than they received for the goods they exported. As a result, bullion (gold and silver) was being drained out of all these new nations. According to the economic doctrine which developed concurrently with the rise of the nation-state, nothing could be more disastrous. Without an ample