

20 What's in a Name?



Vespucci said he saw people in the New World who did strange things—like eat other people.

Your teachers probably tell you that writing is important. Well, if ever there was a story to prove that, it's the story of Amerigo Vespucci (vess-POO-chee).

Columbus did all that discovering, and yet it was Amerigo whose name got put on the land. History isn't always fair.

Not that Amerigo wasn't a good guy. He was. And quite an adventurer, too. He made several trips across the ocean and went way down the coast of South America.

But what made him famous was that he wrote about his trips. His letters were so fascinating that everyone wanted to read them. And, thanks to Gutenberg's printing press, many people did. Amerigo Vespucci did something else that was important. He understood that there was a huge continent over here, a continent new to Europeans, and he said so in his writings. He called it a "New World." Actually, he called it a *novus mundus* because, like educated people of his time, he wrote in Latin. (His name in Latin was Americus Vespucius.)

Columbus and Vespucci were friends, but their personalities were different. Columbus was a dreamer; Vespucci was a hardheaded businessman whose hobbies were mathematics, sailing, and reading. Columbus couldn't give up his dream of finding Cathay; Vespucci looked at the land of South America with an open mind. "In those southern parts," he wrote, "I have found a continent more densely peopled and abounding in animals than our Europe or Asia or Africa." He could see that it was a vast continent and that it wasn't China.

A man named Martin Waldseemüller (valt-ZAY-mew-ler) actually named America. He was a printer and mapmaker who was fascinated

One famous

historian (his name is Samuel Eliot Morison) had this to say about how America got named:

"America was discovered accidentally...and most of the exploration for the next fifty years was done in the hope of getting through or around it. America was named after a man who discovered no part of the New World. History is like that, very chancy."

On one of his trips to South America, Vespucci and his companions became the first Europeans to lay eyes on the Amazon River. On his second trip he and two other explorers reached a huge bay and another river. They named it Rio de Janeiro, which means "January River," because they found it in the month of January.

The First Map to Include "America"

Martin Waldseemüller's famous 1507 world map was the first map to use the name *America*. He drew North and South America very narrow because he thought the globe was much smaller than it is, and because no one knew how big the newly discovered continents really were. At the top of the map are the figures of Ptolemy and Amerigo Vespucci (turn to page 96 for a close-up).



When you use the term "Americans" keep in mind that Canadians and Latin Americans live in America too.

At the top of his new world map, Waldseemüller included a portrait of the man whose first name he'd attached to the great continent across the sea—*America*.

by Vespucci's letters. He said, "Americus Vespucci has first related without exaggeration of a people living toward the south, almost under the antarctic pole. [They] go around entirely naked, and not only offer to their king the heads of their enemies whom they have killed, but also feed eagerly on the flesh of their conquered foes."

You can see why this made interesting reading. In 1507 Waldseemüller printed a huge world map, and on it he put a new continent. He used information from the voyages of Columbus, Cabot, and Vespucci to make the map. He decided to put the name AMERICA on the southern continent, since Amerigo had written about it.

His map was the most up-to-date and reliable one around. Many people bought it. Six years later Waldseemüller made a new map. This time he didn't think it was such a good idea to call the new land America. He left that name off, but it was too late. People were already using it, and it stuck. Amazing, isn't it, how fickle history can be?

