

America's Founding Papers ,John Phillips

In Granada on the 30th April 1492 Christopher Columbus received a 'Letter of Privilege' written by Juan de Coloma, Secretary to Ferdinand and Isabella, King and Queen of; Castile, Leon, Sicily, Granada, Toledo, Valencia, Majorca, Minorca, Sevil, Sardinia, Jaen, Algarve, Algezira, Gibraltar, The Canary Islands, etc. The letter did not name America, but it did entreat its recipient to discover and subdue a '*terra incognita*' laying to the west of Europe.

'For as much as you Cristóbal Colón (Christopher Columbus) are going by our command, with some of our vessels and men, to discover and subdue some Islands and Continent in the ocean.'

And it extended to Columbus and his family a right, in perpetuity, to govern this undiscovered place.

'That you, Cristóbal Colón, after discovering and conquering the said Islands and Continent in the said ocean, or any of them, shall be our Admiral of the said Islands and Continent you shall so discover and conquer: and that you be our Admiral and Vice-Roy, and Governor in them, and that ... your sons and successors in the said employment, may call themselves Dons, Admirals, Vice Roys and Governors of them.'

Conquest and the creation of a New World of Christian purity were intertwined with this first American project. In January 1492 Muslim forces withdrew from their last stronghold north of the Mediterranean. Ferdinand and Isabella took possession of these territories, and opened a new campaign to 'unify' their nation. On 31 March Juan de Coloma wrote and signed *The Edict of the Expulsion of Jews*, which was copied and publicly displayed throughout all territories controlled by Ferdinand and Isabella. The Edict ordered all:

*'Jews and Jewesses of our kingdoms to depart and never to come back...under pain that if they do not comply with this command and shall be found in our said kingdom and should in any manner live in them, they incur the penalty of death and confiscation of all their possessions by our Chamber of Finance, incurring these penalties by the act itself, without further trial, sentence or declaration.'*¹

Jewish cultural and religious practices were banned. Jews were instructed to emigrate or convert to Christianity before 2 August 1492. The majority converted. Between forty and one hundred thousand became refugees.

When Columbus received his letter, at a ceremony in the newly occupied palace of Alhambra, he expressed the hope of contributing to Ferdinand's and Isabella's apocalyptic mission.

*'I plead with Your Majesties', he declared, 'to spend all the treasure from this enterprise on the conquest of Jerusasem'*²

Ferdinand and Isabella provisioned Columbus's expedition with finance expropriated from the Jewish community ³. They also gave him another letter addressed to the people of the southern port of Pallos.

'You will know that,' It stated, *'because of certain acts performed and committed by you to Our detriment, you were condemned by Our council and obliged to provide Us for twelve months with two caravels equipped at your own expense, whenever and wherever by Us, under fixed penalties, as is provided in detail in the aforementioned decree which was pronounced against you.'* ⁴

Columbus raised additional finance, to rent and provision a third ship, by arranging loans from Italian slave traders.

The 2nd of August 1492 marked the deadline for Jewish conversion or banishment. Columbus's ships: Santa Maria, Pinta and Niña, left Pallos on the following day. On 6th September they embarked from the Canary Island of Gomera and sailed westward for thirty-six days. Throughout the voyage Columbus kept a journal, in which he recorded the distance travelled day by day, and alongside these estimates he noted the false and shorter distances that were reported to his crew.

As a child I was taught that Columbus's sailors believed that the world was as flat as their Admiral's paper charts, and that they threatened mutiny to prevent their ships from falling off the edge, or sailing into the gates of Hell. But Washington Irving, who had a taste for the gothic and the macabre, invented this story in the nineteenth century. Irving was Mary Shelly's lover, and Edgar Allen Poe's mentor. He was a politician and a prolific author, who had little time for meticulous research. Irving wrote *Rip Van Winkle* and the *Legend of Sleepy Hollow* under the pseudonym *Dietrich Knickerbocker*. He inserted the Flat Earth story into his popular four-volume biography; *The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* ⁵, and this fictitious tale gradually became accepted as fact. The concept of a spherical earth was widely accepted in fifteenth century Europe. The principle debate was over the diameter of its circumference. If this was too great, Columbus's opponents argued, the ships would run out of supplies before reaching land. Columbus overcame these arguments by deliberately falsifying his evidence.

At 2 a.m. on Friday the 12th October, ⁶ Juan Rodriguez Bermeo, a member of the Pinta's crew spotted land. Sometime before noon Columbus, accompanied by captains Martin Alonso Pinzon and Vicente Yanez Pinzon, disembarked on the shore of this 'unknown' island, which the inhabitants called 'Guanahani' ⁷. The Europeans fell to their knees and prayed. They rose, planted the banners of Ferdinand and Isabella in the sand, and wrote and signed a piece of paper, proclaiming their ownership of the land. They named the island San Salvador. In his journal Columbus noted how the small band of naked villagers that gathered to observe the transfer ceremony raised no objection, so he interpreted this silence as their acquiescence to the change in title deeds. The new landlords were eager to test their tenants' familiarity with weapons, so the Europeans pointed their swords towards the naked

youths, and calmly observed as they slashed their hands by grasping at the razored blades. In the Journal entry for the 13th October Columbus described the second encounter between Europeans and the Arawaks, He recorded both his wonder and his greed.

'At daybreak great multitudes of men came to the shore, all young and of fine shapes, very handsome; their hair not curled but straight and coarse like horse-hair, and all with foreheads and heads much broader than any people I had hitherto seen; their eyes were large and very beautiful; they were not black, but the colour of the inhabitants of the Canaries, which is a very natural circumstance, they being in the same latitude with the island of Ferro in the Canaries. They were straight-limbed without exception, and not with prominent bellies but handsomely shaped.... They came loaded with balls of cotton, parrots, javelins, and other things too numerous to mention; these they exchanged for whatever we chose to give them. I was very attentive to them, and strove to learn if they had any gold. Seeing some of them with little bits of this metal hanging at their noses, I gathered from them by signs that by going southward or steering round the island in that direction, there would be found a king who possessed large vessels of gold, and in great quantities. I endeavoured to procure them to lead the way thither, but found they were unacquainted with the route. I determined to stay here till the evening of the next day, and then sail for the southwest.'

Before returning home, the expedition claimed numerous other islands⁸ including Cuba, where Columbus instructed Luis de Torres, an Arabic interpreter, to journey overland bearing a letter of introduction to *The Great Khan, Ruler of India*. He also forced the crew to sign a statement witnessing their arrival in Asia. Dissenters were warned.

*'anyone who subsequently says the contrary of what he now said, and on each occasion at whatever time this occurred; a punishment also of having the tongue off.'*⁹

Columbus reached Lisbon in March 1493 and wrote immediately to his sponsor Luis de Santangel¹⁰. This letter praised the people of the New World.

'they are artless and generous with what they have, to such a degree as no one would believe but him who had seen it. Of anything they have, if it be asked for, they never say no, but do rather invite the person to accept it, and show as much lovingness as though they would give their hearts.'

And outlined their future prospects.¹¹

*'their Highnesses may see that I shall give them as much gold as they need and slaves as many as they shall order to be shipped.'*¹²

The letter was immediately printed, and by the time Columbus reached the Spanish court in early April, it had been distributed throughout Europe. Columbus lied to Ferdinand and Isabella about the abundant riches in the islands that he had found, and the King and Queen immediately petitioned the Pope to authorise their chartered claims. On the 4th May 1494 Pope Alexander VI replied:

'To our most dearly beloved son in Christ, King Ferdinand, and to our dearly beloved daughter in Christ, Isabella...as it hath pleased Almighty God, ... you have, ...appointed our well-beloved son Cristóbal Colón ..., to seek (by the sea where hitherto no man hath sailed), such firm lands and islands far remote and hitherto unknown....We also understand, that in these lands and islands lately found, is great plenty of gold and spices, with divers and many other precious things of sundry kinds and qualities...We, by the authority of almighty God granted unto us in Saint Peter, and by the office which we bear on the earth in the stead of Jesus Christ, do forever, by the tenure of these presents, give, grant, assign, unto you, your heirs, and successors (the kings of Castile and Leon), all those lands and islands, with their dominions, territories, cities, castles, towers, places, and villages, with all the right and jurisdictions thereunto pertaining: constituting, assigning, and deputing, you, your heirs, and successors the lords thereof.'

In granting these rights to conquest Pope Alexander VI cited his own deed of authority; the *Donation of Constantine*. This eighth-century parchment delegates to the Bishop of Rome the right to arbitrate territorial disputes between monarchs, and distribute God's world to earthly kings and queens. But by the fifteenth century the *Donation of Constantine* was openly acknowledged to be a forgery.

Following Columbus's discovery, and Ferdinand and Isabella's example, European monarchs felt entitled to issue their own 'Letters of Privilege'. On 5 March 1496 Henry VII of England granted a Charter to the Venetian Master Zuanne Caboto (John Cabot) and his three sons: Lewis, Sebastian and Sancius, permitting them:

'to find, discover and investigate whatsoever islands, countries, regions or provinces of heathens and infidels, in whatsoever part of the world placed, which before this time were unknown to all Christians...'. And gave "licence to set up our aforesaid banners and ensigns in any town, city, castle, island or mainland whatsoever, newly found by them...to conquer, occupy and possess, as our vassals and governors lieutenants and deputies therein, acquiring for us the dominion, title and jurisdiction of the same towns, castles, cities, islands and mainlands so discovered.'

Little is known about Cabot's journeys. He sailed west from Ireland in search of Asia, but a slender entry in a Bristol record informs us that "*In the year 1497, June 24, on St John's Day, was Newfoundland found by Bristol men in a ship called the Matthew*". A testimony that Cabot raised the English banner on that

shore, would, over a century later, form the basis of England's claim upon North America. But Cabot was not the first European to 'discover' the continent. This achievement is generally credited to Amerigo Vespucci, who was the head of a leading Florentine family, and a friend of Lorenzo de Medici. Vespucci's discovery of the 'New World' is described in two letters that were published, and widely circulated in Europe in the early sixteenth century. These texts: *Mundus Novus* and *The Four Voyages*, describe Vespucci's journeys, and exploration of 6,000 miles of the South American coastline. The first expedition, described in *The Four Voyages*, occurred in May 1497, placing Vespucci in America at least three weeks ahead of Cabot. The letters led Martin Waldseemüller to incorporate the Vespucci claim into an extraordinary map. Measuring 2.5 meters wide, and made from 12 separate woodblocks, Waldseemüller's print is the first European chart to offer a 360° projection of the world, and the first map to name the new continent, America, in honour of Americus Vesputius¹³. In a small vignette within the map's margin Vespucci is portrayed beside an accurate projection of the South American continent. But this image holds a riddle. The map was published in 1507, six years before Europeans sighted the Pacific, and fifteen years before Magellan's circumnavigation of the world. It therefore predates European exploration of this region. Inevitably it raises many questions about these 'discoveries'. *The Four Voyages* is now regarded as a forgery, and *Mundus Novus* as a partial forgery. Vespucci's first journey to America actually took place in 1499. He was the first of the European renaissance explorers to propose that the newly discovered lands were not attached to Asia, but were another separate continent that lay between Europe and East.

There is an alternative origin for America's name. John Cabot was not alone in his discovery. In 1475 Bristol merchants were excluded from the Icelandic cod trade. In response they explored the Great Banks off the Newfoundland coast and established shore-bases to salt and dry their catch, prior to transporting it back to England. This was a lucrative business, so the fishermen kept their bases and the source of their wealth a secret. Cabot sailed in their wake and mapped the continental coast. On his charts he named this place Amerike, in honour of the Bristol merchant Richard Amerike, who had sponsored his exploratory voyage. Copies of the Amerike map reached Columbus, Vespucci and Waldseemüller, who incorporated it into the 1507 print.

In the aftermath of its 'discovery' America was drawn and quartered on paper. The Portuguese questioned Pope Alexander IV's territorial gift to Ferdinand and Isabella on the grounds that it ignored prior Papal gifts of Western lands to their kingdom. On June 7 1494 the Spain and Portugal agreed an exclusive duopoly, which divided America vertically at longitude 46° 37' west, and granted control of all territories east of this line to Portugal and all lands to its west to Spain. This agreement, the Treaty of Tordesillas (Spanish) or Tordesilhas (Portuguese), is the foundation of the linguistic and political divisions that shape Latin America today. The continent was subsequently divided horizontally along the Tropic of Cancer. Spain asserted her dominance of all latitudes south and recognised French claims north of this line. The division is set out in a map created by Diego Gutiérrez in 1562¹⁴. This chart additionally reveals the accumulation of fantasy, fact and fear that had accrued

around America by the middle of the sixteenth century. Many settlements are named, and the vast drainage systems of the southern continent are plotted. America is also populated, albeit by giants in Patagonia and cannibals elsewhere. The voyage to this demonic continent is portrayed as particularly un-enticing. Tiny caravels are tossed by gigantic waves, or battle with each other in mid-crossing. Sailors fall from broken ships, or toss barrels into stormy seas to distract the monsters in their wake. Off the continental shore mermaids lure sailors to their ocean beds, while fierce warriors shoot stout arrows at their ships. In the midst of all this mayhem, north of the Tropic of Cancer, a regal figure, presumably Charles IX of France is propelled towards the Florida coast, marked *Tierra Fancisca*. His chariot, drawn by powerful and unruly steeds, is surrounded by monsters. This tiny detail is remarkably similar to another image, which was created by Bruegel around 1565. Bruegel depicts a magnificent warship, which rests at anchor. Above its rigging the drama of Apollo and his son Phaethon unfolds. Eager to prove his divine origins Phaethon takes the reins of Apollo's sun chariot, but loses control. The sun veers too close to earth, North Africa turns to desert, and the Ethiopians are scorched black before Apollo knocks Phaethon off his perch, and restores order. There is a common link between the official Spanish map and Bruegel's print. The Antwerp publisher Hieronymus Cock, who also published Bruegel, engraved the Gutiérrez chart. The two chariot scenes are so alike that one must be a copy of the other, but we can only speculate as to whether this apocalyptic reference was intended as a warning, or a joke.

A Charter is a sheet of paper (*carta*) through which a monarch, or legislature, grants permissions and rights. European colonisation of North America was authorised by these documents, which took no account of the prior claims of indigenous people. In 1584 Queen Elizabeth of England granted a Charter to Sir Walter Raleigh, whose settlement failed. In 1606 James I issued a Charter to a London Company, which, one year later, established the first permanent colony. Charters were issued by Henry IV of France, and the States General of the United Netherlands. Each country established settlements along the eastern seaboard, and these became bases for adventures and explorers, who obtained new Charters, granting new rights, for new colonies, in Newfoundland, New Holland and New England. In the period 1610 to 1780 the colonial population grew from 350 to 3 million.
