

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS: Courageous Champion? or Conniving Conquistador?

Assessment of the Actual Historic Account (both good and bad) of the 1492 “Discoverer” of the Americas

by Roger Peterson from RogerPaulPetersonMusic.com

WHAT ABOUT the outcomes of Admiral Christopher Columbus’ four earth-shattering voyages of discovery from Spain to the Americas ... were they good? Or were they bad? Should we continue toppling all statues and cancel Columbus Day? Or should we reboot Columbus Day, this time humbly acknowledging the atrocities while also celebrating the good? It’s the latter of these two where I cast my vote, for reasons I explain below.

First, these are Columbus’ historic voyages under consideration:

- 1492-1493 (3 ships; 90 men)
- 1493-1496 (17 ships; 1,500 persons, plus horses, beasts of burden and other animals)
- 1498-1500 (2 voyages of 3 ships each; provisions for the settlers on Española)
- 1502-1504 (4 ships; the crew included Columbus’ brothers Diego and Bartholomew and his son Hernando)

Second, let’s be very clear: we should never condone slavery, taking possession of someone else’s land, or the unbridled pursuit of gold. Failing in his attempt to find a new trade route to Asia, this daring, path-breaking explorer did locate the Americas about 2:00 a.m. on October 12, 1492, soon anchoring his three ships in *Guanahani* — Watling Island in the Bahamas — which Columbus re-named San Salvador (*Holy Savior* in honor of the Lord God Who provided safe trans-Atlantic passage for Columbus and his crew). Did bad things happen to the local Indian people as a result? — no, not during that first voyage. However, *after* that first voyage, yes, bad things happened to both the Indian people and the Spanish explorers. But good things happened as well.

■ My Interest in Columbus

During the past 50 years, I’ve been working periodically on a Columbus Day song, musically inspired in part by the African American ragtime composer Scott Joplin. I’m finally releasing “**Chris ‘n Iz — A Columbus Day National Ragtime**” this October 1st — in time for Columbus Day, October 12, 2020. Wanting the story-telling lyrics of my song to reflect actual recorded history, I’ve done my own research into this controversial sailor’s life. Much of what I discovered comes directly from Columbus’ own personal diaries, drafted into public book formats by his son Hernando Columbus (Don Fernando Colón, 1488-1539) — a highly trained, impeccable scholar in his day; and by family friend Bartolomé de la Casa. Both men had access to Columbus’ papers. I recognize both to be prejudiced in their generally supportive view of Columbus, so I’ve scoured more than a dozen other conservative and liberal sources as well.

■ Columbus’ Background (b. Fall 1451 in Genoa, Italy; d. May 20, 1506 in Valladolid, Spain)

Christopher Columbus (*Portuguese*: Christovão Colom; *Spanish*: Cristóbal Colón; *Italian*: Cristoforo Colombo) was born the son of an Italian wool merchant, Domenico Colombo (1418-1496). Columbus began sailing in his teens and remained at sea until age 25 when pirates attacked and sunk his ship. Columbus survived (floating on a scrap of wood) and made his way to Lisbon, Portugal, eventually studying mathematics, astronomy, cartography, geography and navigation. Prior to his groundbreaking 1492 voyage, Columbus had sailed as far north as Iceland and perhaps as far south as the equator. He was an excellent natural pilot who knew how to take advantage of the wind and currents and who developed remarkable navigation skills by accurately measuring altitudes of the sun and North Star — the very first sailor to do so; Columbus was the first to teach the Spaniards this vastly superior, scientific

method of navigation. Columbus' navigational and sailing skills as a Captain and Pilot far surpassed many of his contemporaries. His societal contribution of scientific navigation has saved countless lives at sea.

Columbus (and others) already believed the earth to be a sphere. Spending many years reading, studying and engaging in oral and written conversations with multiple sailors and other knowledgeable people, he became convinced it was possible to sail west from Europe to reach the eastern lands of the Orient (Asia — specifically Japan, China and India). Organizing, financing and carrying out such an unprecedented expedition became the driving, consuming passion of his life for more than three decades. King Henry VII of England refused to finance him; King John II of Portugal refused to finance him; then in Spain, Columbus spent nearly seven years repeatedly holding out possibilities of riches and wealth for the Catholic Monarchal Sovereigns, King Ferdinand II of Aragon (1452-1516) and Queen Isabella I of Castile (1451-1504) before Isabella and Ferdinand gave their nod of approval.

■ Caribbean Indians' Background

Columbus encountered two primary "Indian" people groups during his four voyages: the *Arawak* people and the *Carib* people. Most of the Indian people Columbus met in the various Caribbean islands were never dressed; they went around completely naked — adult men and adult women. Columbus writes on more than one occasion, "They all go naked as their mothers bore them, including the women."

Arawak People

The Arawak-speaking people were the most numerous indigenous people of the Caribbean and inhabited what are now Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola (Haiti and the Dominican Republic, which Columbus named *Española*), Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. Hispaniola was home to the Arawak-speaking *Taino* people; the Bahamas (where Columbus first landed) were home to the Arawak-speaking *Lucayan* people. The Arawak people were renowned for how nice and hospitable they were, and how they readily shared whatever they had — not just among themselves, but also to and with Columbus and his men. In Jamaica (his second voyage), Columbus and his men observed that the Arawak people had already subjugated their island ancestors, the *Ciboney* people (stone people, who were cave-dwelling stone carvers). Their society was sub-divided into two groups: the nobles (*nitainos*) and their enslaved commoners (*naborias*). The Arawak Indian people in Jamaica were already dealing in slaves well *before* Columbus or any Spanish and European slave traders ever set foot on the shores of the Americas. Former Stanford anthropologist Carol Delaney agrees: "Slavery was common, even among [native] people in the Caribbean."

Carib People

The Arawak's enemies were the Carib people of the Lesser Antilles and neighboring South American coast. The Caribs were cannibals; they cannibalized entire islands before Columbus' arrival and were known for killing and eating the Arawak people (one time the Spaniards saw a human arm roasting on a spit). Caribs would hunt the Arawak people, rape their women, castrate the boys, and kill the men. The Carib people had set aside two islands where they kept only women, which the Carib men would visit on occasion to rape and to impregnate. The women kept and raised the female offspring (presumably for future sexual encounters with the Carib men), but the men took the male babies to either raise into future warriors — or to eat. The Arawak people wanted Columbus and his men to protect them from the Carib people, so Columbus made a treaty with *Guacanagari*, one of the Arawak chiefs of Hispaniola. Columbus promised the chief he would protect him from the Caribs when he returned for a second voyage. When Columbus returned, he fulfilled his promise. He either destroyed the Caribs' canoes (so they could not sail again to terrorize the Arawak people), or would capture the Caribs and send them to Spain as prisoners of war.

■ Columbus' Personal Character

His son Hernando describes his father as moderate and modest in eating and drinking, affable in conversation with strangers, very pleasant to members of his household, strict in matters of religion to the point of being an enemy of swearing and blasphemy. He was a devoted Catholic whose Christian faith was alive and genuine, unswerving in his dependence on Almighty God. Columbus felt supernaturally called and directed by God to make the discoveries he did, and to add substantially to the dominions of his financiers, the Catholic Sovereigns Ferdinand and Isabella.

■ Columbus' Personal Motives

Perhaps no gamble in history has been more momentous than the landfall of Columbus's ships the *Niña*, *Pinta* and *Santa Maria* in the Bahamas in 1492. Why was Columbus so eager to take this risk? My limited but conscientious study of Columbus leads me to believe, in the order I present, the "why" — that is, the driving motives behind everything Columbus did:

1. **Personal Recognition and Honor**

Columbus appears to have struggled with low self-esteem most of his life, feeling belittled for not having noble ancestry or birth. In his negotiations with the Catholic Sovereigns (Ferdinand and Isabella), he argued for and eventually received the noble titles of *Don* (Don Christopher Columbus), *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, *Viceroy* and *Governor* — including the honor and authority associated with those titles — and including the inheritance of those titles and authority to Columbus' son and future generations. Columbus hungered for recognition as a person of nobility, honor and importance.

2. **Discovery and Possession of New Lands for the Catholic Sovereigns**

In all four voyages, every new Caribbean island where Columbus landed he immediately planted the Spanish flag and claimed possession of his newly “discovered” terra firma solely for the Catholic Sovereigns (Columbus was contracted in writing by the King and Queen to do so). Taking possession of new lands (i.e., fulfilling the terms of his contract) gave Columbus the honor and recognition he sought; it also helped assure additional financing for future voyages.

3. **Pursuit of Gold for the Catholic Sovereigns**

Important to note: Columbus did not directly pursue gold for his own personal gain, which he could have done easily (he was already being paid 10% of whatever was to be discovered). He was, however, continually on the prowl for sources of gold wherever they went, to provide for the Catholic Sovereigns' wealth and his 10% cut. (Here again, if he could find enough gold, it would ascribe him the honor and recognition he sought, and help assure additional financing for future voyages). Sadly, many of his crewmen from all four voyages aggressively pursued gold for their own personal gain, bent on making swift profits at the expense of the local Indian people.

4. **Conversion to Christianity**

The endeavors of Christian conversion (to the Catholic faith) was not Columbus #1 motive — but it was indeed a strong, driving, and always-present motive. The Catholic Sovereigns were also substantially supportive of converting Jewish and Islamic people to Christianity, so much so that on the first voyage (assuming they would find Asia and the East by sailing west), they provided Columbus with a converted Jew who had a knowledge of Arabic, believing he might be better able to explain the Christian faith to the Chinese, Japanese and Indian people who were presumed to speak Arabic. Columbus' own log book from his first voyage notes: “...your Highnesses decided to send me, Christopher Columbus, to see these parts of India and peoples of those lands and consider the best means for their conversion. For, by neglect of the Popes to send [missionary] instructors, many nations had fallen to idolatry of perdition ...”. He also writes “... I knew they were a people to be converted and won to our holy faith by love and friendship rather than by force ...”. Columbus eventually asked the Catholic Sovereigns and the Pope to send priests who would learn the local Indian language and instruct the people in the Christian faith prior to baptism.

5. **Establishing New and Prosperous Trading Ventures**

The prospect of opening new trading opportunities for Europe with the East (by sailing west) for gold, spices and whatever else could be found, provided the overall economic motive for the voyages. Marco Polo's descriptions of the rich lands in the East inspired Columbus, and the Catholic Sovereigns were most certainly interested in the prospect of bringing gold, jewels and spices of the Orient into Spain.

■ **Were Genocide and Slavery Motives?**

Resolutely no — genocide, murder, and killing the local Indian people were not motives in the original voyage. Columbus' son Hernando states emphatically on Columbus' first voyage that he “warred against no Indian, but kept peace and friendship with them to the day of his departure from Española” (Hispaniola, present-day Haiti/Dominican Republic). My personal read of Columbus' diary fully agrees with that statement. However ...

Death by Murder/Killing/Disease

Death by murder/killing/disease did occur (by both sides) *after* the first voyage. While this horrid reality did in fact exist, murder/killing/disease were never trip-launching motives for any of Columbus' four voyages — yet we must admit they were appalling results. One of the ironies of the (false) genocide charge against Columbus is this: the local Indian people (not Columbus nor his men) were the first to kill; all 34 men who stayed behind after the first voyage were killed by the local Arawak Indian people. Later, when Columbus and his men did resort to killing the local people, it was often in self-defense, and then later to punish certain Indian people they now judged to be criminals. I think it's safe to assume the local Indian people were either fearful or highly provoked when launching their attacks on these new European settlers who were taking their lands, gold and people (the local Indian people would have felt the need to defend their lands, homes and families).

It's important to re-state that genocide (the intentional, planned, deliberate killing of the entire Caribbean Indian population) was never a motive for any of the four voyages. Carlos Martínez Shaw (professor of modern history, Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia; and member, Spanish Royal Academy of History) reiterates there was never an actual plan to wipe out indigenous populations — because that would then wipe out the potential labor force. History professor Steve Hackel, University of California: “He did not intend genocide nor did he practice it. But he can be condemned for enslaving hundreds of Indians. He can't, however, be held responsible for the actions of those who came after him.” Colombian publisher/writer Mario Jursich notes it is well documented that Columbus was not at the helm of any genocidal project: “The people who committed atrocities against the indigenous Americans came after him — the colonizers,” he says.

Rendered in today's context with our 2020 judicial lens, some of the killings done by each side against the other side would be considered justifiable homicide. Yet Columbus and his men also could have been charged with both first and second degree murder of many of the local Indian people. And the local Indian people, too, could have been charged with both first and second degree murder against some of the new settlers.

Slavery

Columbus has a mixed score when it comes to slavery; yes, he did see profit in slavery and economic advantages Europeans could gain with slaves. Columbus lived in a time when those with power, authority and privilege exercised that advantage to slave-trade — an abhorrent norm of that society. But as noted above, slavery was already being used by the Arawak Indian people in Jamaica *before* Columbus landed — an abhorrent norm of that society as well. While his own handwriting makes it clear that he periodically captured local Indian people, more times than not, Columbus treated his “captures” with great respect, learning what knowledge he could from them, and even allowing them back on shore for help in releasing other local Indians. On at least one occasion he specifically ordered his men not to molest a young girl on board. His “captures” were hardly ever imprisoned or in chains (unless being punished for crimes — “crimes” wholly defined by Columbus or other Spaniards he put in charge). When landing on Española the first time, his men “caught” a young girl in pursuit of several Indian people who were running away; they brought the young girl onto the ship where Columbus gave her gifts of trinkets and little bells. Then Columbus ordered her put back on shore unharmed, even sending three Indian people he had brought from other islands, along with three of his crewmen, to accompany her to her village. At the end of his first voyage, the initial 12 local Indian people (men, women, children) whom he “seized” to bring to Spain to provide information to the Catholic Sovereigns came on board willingly and peacefully; Columbus ordered they should all be treated well.

In spite of this, yes, the ugly wickedness of slavery did arise as a morally repugnant motive *after* the first voyage by most (but not all) of the trans-Atlantic explorers, including Columbus, who could envision massive profits from enslaving local Indian people. Countless other Europeans (and Jamaican Arawak Indians) had been, and were still, involved in slave trading during this period of world history. At that time Europeans had both legal justification and papal justification for slavery. Even so, Columbus and his men still remain guilty at some level of making slaves of the local Indian people in order to procure gold. Subsequent to Columbus' first voyage, many Spaniards also raped and/or took one or more local Indian women as their wives (if “married” against these women's will, this is yet another form of slavery). But imperative to bifurcate: the callous, mass-transport of millions of captured and enslaved people from Africa to the Americas began taking place about six decades *after* Columbus' death. Columbus was never involved in the African slave trade to the Americas; nor did he ever advocate for it.

What many fail to recognize was the emergence of the flip side of the coin at this very moment in history. It was specifically Columbus' involvement in slavery that was directly responsible for triggering one of the first high-level, anti-slavery proclamations; the Catholic Sovereigns' position was that the natives must be converted and that *these new Christians should not be enslaved*. In year 1500, the Sovereigns declared Native Americans to be “free vassals.” When sending Columbus on his fourth voyage, the Sovereigns wrote in their letter (March 14, 1502) that *on no account whatsoever should Columbus bring back slaves*. Even Columbus' friend and historian Bartolomé de la Casa offended the new Spanish settlers when he advocated for the rights of the local Indian people (only criminals and prisoners of war might be enslaved). While it never justifies his human trafficking activities, without realizing it, Columbus triggered some of the earliest beginnings of the anti-slavery abolitionist movement.

■ Columbus' Treatment of the Local Indian People

Again, Columbus often treated the local Indian people unusually well — contrary to what many present-day people assume. Only a week into their first arrival, when local inhabitants fled their village at the sight of Columbus and his

men, Columbus would not permit his men to take any of the possessions the Indian people left behind. The same thing happened during the third week when “discovering” Cuba, where Columbus ordered his men not to touch anything when the local people fled; he sent a small embassy after the local Indian people (two Spaniards, an Indian they brought from his first stop in San Salvador, and a local Indian who agreed to accompany the others). He ordered his little embassy to “treat the Indians they should meet in a friendly manner.”

However, the motive behind his good deeds among the local Indian people was this: “I gave them a thousand pretty things that I had brought, in order to gain their love and incline them to become Christians. I hoped to win them to the love and service of their Highnesses and of the whole Spanish nation and to persuade them to collect and give us of the things which they possessed in abundance and which we need ... they are firmly convinced that I have come from the sky with these ships and people. In this belief they gave me a good reception everywhere, once they had overcome their fear ... not because they are stupid — far from it, they are [Indian] men of great intelligence ...”.

While Columbus and his men contributed to this, it was primarily *other* Spaniards who followed after Columbus’ death who wound up destroying the majority of local Indian people and their culture because of their greed for gold, land and dominion. Thirty-six years after Columbus’ death, de las Casas wrote from his firsthand, on-site account what had taken place *after* Columbus’ four voyages: “They [the other Spanish explorers] forced their way into native settlements, slaughtering everyone they found there, including small children, old men, pregnant women, and even women who had just given birth. They hacked them to pieces, slicing open their bellies with their swords as though they were so many sheep herded into a pen. They even laid wagers on whether they could slice a man in two at a stroke, or cut an individual’s head from his body, or disembowel him with a single blow of their axes.”

Within just one or two generations of Columbus’ first arrival, a heinous nexus of slavery, excruciating work and famine had killed most of the Indians in the Caribbean, exacerbated by the European-imported deadly viruses and bacteria of smallpox, measles, typhus, influenza, malaria, cholera and other diseases.

As the third verse to my new Columbus Day song declares,

*No, their motives weren’t all pure; here we voice dissent.
Too many lives were torn apart, a living hell event.
For all the lies and sullied deeds, we cry “Forgive us, please!”
Let’s honor ev’ry skin and tongue! Damned be our hate disease!*

■ Other Notable Outcomes (both Good and Bad)

For better or worse, Columbus set into motion the beginning of globalization. The earliest form of globalization — the “Columbian Exchange” — launched the widespread transfer of plants, animals, culture, human populations, technology, diseases and ideas between the New World of the Americas and the Old World of Europe/Asia/Africa during the next two centuries following Columbus. Perhaps the most significant impacts were the cultural exchanges and the transfer of people (both free and enslaved) between both Worlds. Good and bad.

The New World introduced both good and bad to the Old World: turkeys, llamas, potatoes, tomatoes, maize, cacao, tobacco, tuberculosis and syphilis. The Old World introduced both good and bad to the New World: horses, cows, chickens, donkeys, pigs, rice, wheat, apples, bananas, slavery and the deadly diseases mentioned above.

Swine bred quickly in the Americas, expanding a needed food supply in the New World. In the Old World, lives of millions of people in Africa, Europe and Asia improved due to the introduction of New World crops like potatoes and maize which could grow in soils useless for Old World crops. If not for Columbus, it’s arguable whether these positive changes in world food supply would have taken place when they did. Earlier “discoverers” like pillaging Leif Eriksson (Vikings) can’t be credited for this.

By the late 1700s, the Columbian Exchange ushered in perhaps its greatest contribution. The newly established United States of America imported from the Old World the philosophies of the French Enlightenment: liberty, constitutional government, equality and justice. Our Bill of Rights is a direct result. We can worship as we choose; we can speak as we choose; we can peaceably assemble as we choose. Our press is free. We have the right to bear arms. We are protected from unreasonable searches and when accused cannot be deprived from due process of law nor the right to a speedy public trial by an impartial jury.

Without Christopher Columbus “discovering” the Americas when he did, would the United States even exist? Would the freedoms in our blessed land have ever been planned?

■ Columbus Day and Columbus Statues

A 2017 Rasmussen Reports poll found 58% of adults in the general population supported keeping Columbus Day. Renaming or eliminating Columbus Day denigrates the role of Italian Americans and all other immigrants who created our American society. The Sons of Italy’s Commission for Social Justice notes, “Columbus is an Italian icon. We’ve adopted him as our hero.” Any non-Italian ethnicity attempting to topple the memory of the Italian sailor Columbus may be crossing over a repulsive threshold into racial ethnic cleansing. Columbus was not perfect. Nor were any men/women we honor with statuary legacy (except Jesus). If we cancel Columbus statues, then equal-justice integrity demands we topple them all.

Perhaps there’s a better way: let’s keep them all standing and spiff ’em all up. But as we go forward, it’s time to carve into stone descriptions of why we put the memory of this person on a pedestal (the good they did), and with that same indelible chisel what they did wrong. Both the good AND the bad.

Those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it — or as Harvard philosopher George Santayana advised, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Every piece of rationale used for removing Columbus statues is in fact a rationale for keeping the statue — but only if we plaque the statue with both the good and bad. If some of our fellow human beings succeed in canceling all memory of Columbus, they “condemn us to repeat” the same horrid aspects of the past. Instead, as Americans of every ethnicity, I suggest we choose to celebrate Columbus Day as Columbus Day. I implore us to humbly acknowledge both the good and bad, ever thankful to God for our resulting freedoms. Celebrating Indigenous Peoples’ Day is also imperative — but let’s give it its own separate day to honor the indispensable indigenous peoples of the Americas.

We still have more work to do, to fully achieve impartial, equal justice under the law for all men and women of all ethnicities in these United States. We desperately need each other’s hand in this worthy quest.

Thank you, Christopher Columbus, for bravely sailing into what became a new worldview of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for millions of people — those God-given, unalienable rights for *all* people from *all* ethnic cultures in our beloved United States of America. May God bless the U.S.A. on this Columbus Day, October 12, 2020!

My new single, “Chris ’n Iz — a Columbus Day National Ragtime” will be released October 1st on all major streaming platforms and more than 350 U.S. radio stations, twelve days prior to Columbus Day 2020. Resting on top of a driving mixture of American country pop rock and African American-influenced honky-tonk ragtime piano, “Chris ’n Iz” shares both sides of his world-changing story.

Sources Used: *learnodo-newtonic.co; thoughtco.com; English.elpais.com; Britannica.com; WashingtonPost.com; SmithsonianMag.com; loc.gov; History.com; BigThink.com; Time.com; campcabarita.com; Amazon.com description of “The Four Voyages”; The Pew Charitable Trusts; TruthAboutColumbus.com; TheRidgewoodBlog.net; Wikipedia; various Google search summary results; “Christopher Columbus — The Four Voyages” edited and translated by J.M. Cohen, Penguin Books, 1969; “The Diario of Christopher Columbus’s First Voyage to America 1492-1493” abstracted by Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, transcribed/translated by Oliver Dunn and James E. Kelley, Jr., University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 1991; “The Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus” by His Son Ferdinand [Hernando Columbus], translated and annotated by Benjamin Keen, Rutgers State University, 1992.*

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