

*Christopher Columbus  
Timeline*



## HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS

# Timeline: Spain, Columbus and Native Americans

**Approximately 13,000 B.C.:** First known human beings live in the Caribbean.

**Approximately 8 B.C.:** The people who call themselves Taíno, or "men of good," arrive in the region. With great care for the earth, the Taínos are able to feed millions of people. No one in a community goes hungry. They play sports and recite poetry. They are great inventors and travel from island to island. One Spanish priest reported that he never saw two Taínos fighting.

There are frequent skirmishes between Taínos and Caribs on nearby islands, but these threaten neither civilization.

**1451:** Columbus is born probably in the Italian port city, Genoa. At the time of his birth, there may be as many as 70 to 100 million people living in what will one day be called the Americas. They are of many nationalities, with perhaps 2,000 different languages.

**1453:** Turks conquer Constantinople and the eastern Mediterranean, restricting land routes from Asia to Europe.

**1455:** Christian Castile [Spain] launches the re-conquest of territories governed by the Moors, who practice the Islamic religion, for eight centuries. There will be six invasions of Moorish Granada, in southern Spain, between 1455 and 1457.

**1471:** About this time, Columbus first goes to sea on a Genoese ship.

**1483:** King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella launch the Spanish Inquisition to root out Jews who had converted to Christianity but still practice Judaism. Many hundreds will be tortured and burned to death.

**1484:** Columbus first presents his idea to the king of Portugal for reaching the Indies by sailing west. The plan is rejected, not because the king's advisors don't believe the world is round, but because they think Columbus's estimate of the distance is way too small.

**1486:** Columbus first proposes a western voyage to Queen Isabella, whose advisors postpone any recommendation.

**1488:** Columbus appeals again to the Por-



tuguese king. At the same time, Bartolomé Dias claims Africa can be rounded by sea to get to the Indies. This eliminates Portugal's interest in looking for a westward route.

**1490:** Queen Isabella's advisors urge the queen to reject Columbus's proposal. But Isabella keeps Columbus on the royal payroll, offering him hope his proposal will eventually be granted.

**Jan. 2, 1492:** The Moors surrender Granada. Under the agreement, all Moors can stay in Spain, keep their property and practice Islam. (Ten years later Spain will demand that all Moslems convert to Christianity or be expelled.)

**March 30, 1492:** Ferdinand and Isabella order all Jews to leave Spain.

**April, 1492:** Ferdinand and Isabella agree to Columbus's westward voyage to the Indies. They also agree to his demands: 10% of all the wealth returned to Spain, the title of Admiral of the Ocean Sea, governor and viceroy of all the territory he discovers. All these titles are to be inherited by his heirs.

**Aug. 2, 1492:** Deadline for Jews to leave Spain. Between 120,000 and 150,000 are forced out, able to take only what they can carry. They must leave all their gold, silver, jewels and money for the King and Queen.

**Aug. 3, 1492:** Columbus departs from Palos instead of the port of Cadiz, which is filled with ships taking some 8,000 Jews into exile.

**Oct. 12, 1492:** Juan Rodriguez Bermejo, a sailor on the *Pinta*, shouts, "Land, Land!" Columbus later claims he first spotted land and thus will collect the lifetime pension promised. The ships arrive at the island, Guanahaní, where Columbus takes possession of the island for Ferdinand and Isabella. Columbus receives presents from the people he encounters and gives them some red caps, glass beads, and "many other things of little value."

The first thing he tries to ask the people is "if they had gold."

**October 14:** Columbus's thoughts turn to slavery: "... When Your Highnesses so command, they [the Indians] can be carried off to Castile or held captive in the island itself, since with 50 men they would be all kept in subjection and forced to do whatever may be wished."

**November 12:** Columbus kidnaps 10 Taínos: My men "brought seven head of women, small and large, and three children."

**November 17:** Two of his captives escape.



**December 9:** Columbus sails into the harbor of the island the Taíno people call Bohio. Its plains are "the loveliest in the world" and remind Columbus of Spain. He calls the island Española.

**October/November/December:** Columbus's every move is determined by where he believes he can find gold. On December 23 he writes in his journal: "Our Lord in His Goodness guide me that I may find this gold, I mean their mine, for I have many here who say they know it." Still, by mid-December Columbus has found very little gold.

**December 25:** Columbus's ship, the Santa María, hits rocks off Española. He is forced to abandon it. The Taíno cacique (leader), Guacanagarí, weeps when he hears of the shipwreck. Taínos help unload the ship "without the loss of a shoe string." "They are," Columbus writes, "a people so full of love and without greed... I believe there is no better race or better land in the world."

**December 26:** Realizing he will have to leave men behind, Columbus orders a fort and tower built. He writes that it is necessary to make the Indians realize that they must serve Spain's king and queen "with love and fear."

**January 2, 1493:** Columbus prepares to leave Bohio. He leaves behind 39 men and orders them "to discover the mine of gold."

**January 13:** First reported skirmish between Spaniards and Indians: After landing on an island to trade for bows, Columbus writes that many Indians prepared "to assault the Christians and capture them." The Spaniards "fell upon" them, "they gave an Indian a great slash on the buttocks and they wounded another in the breast with an arrow." Columbus believes that these people were "Carib and that they eat men [though he offers no evidence]." He regrets he didn't capture some to take back to Spain.

**February 15:** Columbus returns with relatively little of value. In a letter written aboard ship, Columbus lies, saying that on Española, "there are many spices and great mines of gold and of other metals."

**Mid-April:** Columbus welcomed by Ferdinand and Isabella. They begin planning his second voyage. Of the six Indians brought to Spain, one would stay and die in two years. The others would leave with Columbus for Española and three would die enroute.

**May 28, 1493:** The king and queen confirm that Columbus, his sons and his heirs will be Admiral and Viceroy and Governor of the islands and mainland discovered "now and forever."

Approximately September/October

**1493:** The men left behind at La Navidad brutally mistreat the Taínos. They steal, take slaves and rape women. In response, the Taíno cacique, Caonabó, kills all the Spaniards on the island.

**Sept. 25, 1493:** Columbus's second voyage begins. His fleet includes 17 ships and between 1200 and 1500 men (no women). Pressure is high for Columbus to make good on his promises. At least some of the money to finance the voyage comes from wealth taken away from Spanish Jews.

**November 3, 1493:** Columbus lands on Dominica. On Guadeloupe, his men go ashore "looting and destroying all they found," according to Columbus's son, Fernando. They capture 12 "very beautiful and plump" teenage Taíno girls.

**Mid-November:** Columbus's crew trap a small group of Caribs in a harbor at what is now St. Croix. In defense, the Indians shoot arrows at the Spaniards, killing one and wounding one. The Indians are caught, and one is horribly mutilated, then killed, by the Spaniards.

**November 28:** Columbus finds the fort at La Navidad burned.

**Early February, 1494:** Columbus sends 12 of the 17 ships back to Spain for supplies. Several dozen Indian slaves are taken aboard — "men and women and boys and girls," he writes. He justifies this by writing that they are cannibals and thus slavery will more

readily "secure the welfare of their souls."

Columbus recommends to the king and queen that supplies needed in the Indies could be paid for in slaves, "well made and of very good intelligence," and that slave shipments could be taxed to raise money for Spain. Spanish priest Bartolomé de Las Casas later writes that claims of cannibalism are used to "excuse the violence, cruelty, plunder and slaughter committed against the Indians every day."

**Feb/March:** In Isabella, Spaniards are dying of disease, and there is less food every day. Columbus uses violence against Spaniards who disobey his orders to work. Any Spaniard found hiding gold is "well whipped." Colonist Michele de Cuneo writes that "Some had their ears slit and some the nose, very pitiful to see." Many blame Columbus, governor of the island, for their problems. Demoralized, many want to leave.

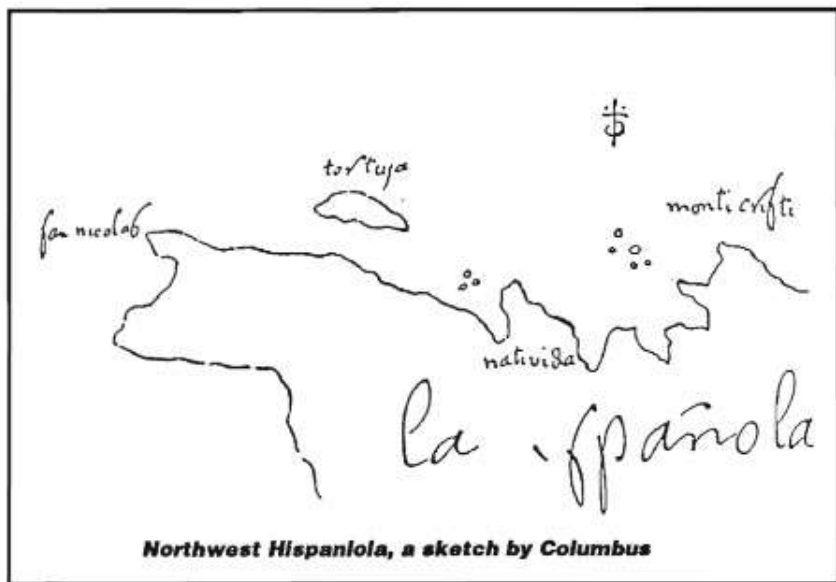
**Late March/early April:** Columbus is told that Indians are leaving their villages and that the cacique, Caonabó, is preparing to attack the fort at Isabella. Las Casas writes that Columbus "ordered Alonso de Hojeda to lead a squadron by land to the fort of Santo Tomas and spread terror among the Indians in order to show them how strong and powerful the Christians were."

**April 9, 1494:** Hojeda takes 400 men inland, captures a cacique and some relatives, accuses one of theft and has his ears publicly



Credit: Ulm, De France





cut off. When Hojeda returns to Isabella with these and other prisoners, Columbus orders a crier to announce their public decapitation. Las Casas comments, "What a pretty way to promote justice, friendship, and make the Faith appealing — to capture a King in his own territory and sentence him, his brother and his nephew to death, for no fault of their own!"

**April 24, 1494:** Columbus leaves Isabella to seek the mainland of the Indies.

**Spring 1494:** Columbus explores the coast of Jamaica. Andres Bernaldez, accompanying Columbus, writes of the island's "extreme beauty." Columbus sets loose a vicious dog against the Indians. Bernaldez writes that it "did them great damage, for a dog is the equal of 10 men against the Indians."

**June 12, 1494:** Columbus, off the coast of Cuba, believes he has reached the mainland. The next day he begins his return to Española.

**September 14:** Columbus reaches the southern coast of Española. Instead of returning to Isabella, Columbus heads to Puerto Rico to raid for Carib slaves. However, he becomes ill and his officers return the ships to Isabella.

**November 1494:** Returning to Spain, mutineers against Columbus complain to the king and queen. They say there is no gold and that the enterprise is a joke.

**February 1495:** Columbus must be desperate to prove that his "enterprise" can be profitable. He rounds up 1600 Taínos — the same people he had earlier described as "so full of love and without greed." Some 550 of them — "among the best males and females," writes colonist Michele de Cuneo

— are chained and taken to ships to be sent to Spain as slaves. "Of the rest who were left," writes Cuneo, "the announcement went around that whoever wanted them could take as many as he pleased; and this was done."

**1495:** Columbus establishes the tribute system. Every Taíno, 14 or older, is required to fill a hawk's bell full of gold every 3 months. Those who comply are given copper tokens to wear around their necks. Where Columbus decides there is little gold, 25 pounds of spun cotton is required. The Spaniards cut the hands off those who do not comply; they are left to bleed to death. As Las Casas writes, the tribute is "impossible and intolerable."

Columbus will soon replace the tribute system with outright slavery, though the Queen will rule that Indians forced to work must be paid "wages." It is called the *encomienda* system, in which colonists are simply granted land and numbers of Taínos.

**March 24, 1495:** Columbus, and his brothers Diego and Bartolome, who had arrived earlier, send an armed force to the mountains to put down Taíno resistance to Spanish brutality. The force includes 200 soldiers in full armor, 20 vicious dogs and 20 mounted cavalry. The Spaniards confront a large number of Taínos in a valley 10 miles south of Isabella, attack them and, according to Columbus's son, "with God's aid soon gained a complete victory, killing many Indians and capturing others who were also killed."

**October 1495:** Responding to reports of Columbus's misrule, the king and queen send an investigator to Española.

**March 1496:** Columbus departs for Spain. Two ships make the journey. Onto them, Columbus forces 30 Taíno prisoners, including the cacique, Caonabó, who led the first resistance to Spanish rule in Española. It takes 3 months to make the voyage. Caonabó dies enroute; no one knows how many others also die. Columbus arrives and awaits an answer from the king and queen to his request for a third voyage.

**July 1496:** Ferdinand and Isabella agree to see Columbus. He sets out for Burgos with his Taíno slaves. Columbus promises to locate the mainland so that it will come under Spanish rather than Portuguese control. The king and queen will not agree to Columbus's plans for almost two years.

**May 30, 1498:** Columbus's third voyage begins. Three ships head directly for Española, another three, with Columbus, travel farther south.

**July 31, 1498:** Columbus sails past and names Trinidad. He saw what is today Venezuela, but didn't realize that it was the mainland.

**Mid-August 1498:** Columbus lands in Española. The admiral finds a rebellion against his brothers' rule. He backs down and offers amnesty to anyone who will return to Spain or will accept free land.

**1500:** By now the Spaniards have established at least seven forts in Española and at least 340 galleons.

**August 1500:** The king and queen, upset over the negative reports of Columbus's bad government, though not his mistreatment of Taínos, sends a commissioner to take charge in Española. The commissioner arrives amid another uprising against the Columbus brothers. He arrests them and in October sends them to Spain for trial.

**Late October:** Columbus arrives in Cadiz in chains. A few months later, he presents his case to the king and queen. He demands he be reinstated governor. He will make one more voyage but will never regain his power.

**May 20, 1506:** Columbus dies in Valladolid, Spain.

**1542:** Bartolomé de las Casas writes that a mere 200 Taínos still live in Espanola. One scholar recently estimated that perhaps more than 3 million Taínos lived there when Columbus first arrived. □

*Compiled by Bill Bigelow*

Sources: Cecil June, *The Journal of Christopher Columbus*; Benjamin Keen, ed., *The Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus by His Son Ferdinand*; Hans Koning, *Columbus: His Enterprise*; Bartolomé de las Casas, *History of the Indies*; Milton Meltzer, *Columbus and the World Around Him*; Samuel Eliot Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*; Kirkpatrick Sale, *Conquest of Paradise*.



# For the Love of Gold



**Spaniards chopping off the hands of Indians who failed to meet the gold dust quota. Drawing by Bartolomé de Las Casas, 1619.**

*One thought preoccupied Columbus after he landed on the islands of the Caribbean. Gold. Following are entries from his journal for his first voyage which underscore this preoccupation and expose the profit-motives which guided his journeys. The excerpts are from The Journal of Christopher Columbus, translated by Cecil Jane.*

**October 13, 1492:** And I was attentive and labored to know if they [the Indians] had gold, and I saw that some of them wore a small piece hanging from a hole which they have in the nose, and from signs I was able to understand that, going to the south or going round the island to the south, there was a king who had large vessels of it and possessed much gold.

**October 16:** This island is very large, and I am resolved to round it, because as far as I can understand, there is in it or near it a gold mine.

**October 17:** I desired to take the route to the south-south-east, because in that direction, as all the Indians whom I have with me say and as another indicated, towards the

south, lies the island which they call Samoet, where there is gold.

**October 19:** Tomorrow I wish to go so far inland to find the village and to see or have speech with this king, who, according to the signs which these men make, rules all these neighboring islands and is clothed and wears on his person much gold.

**October 21:** According to whether I shall find a quantity of gold or spices, I shall decide what is to be done.

**October 23:** I see that here there is no gold mine... I say that it is not right to delay, but to go on our way and to discover much land, until a very profitable land is reached.

**November 12:** So Your Highnesses should resolve to make them Christians, for I believe that, if you begin, in a little while you will achieve the conversion of a great number of peoples to our holy faith, with the acquisition of great lordships and riches and all their inhabitants for Spain. For without doubt there is a very great amount of gold in these lands, so that it is not without reason that these Indians, whom I carry with me, say that there are places in these islands where they dig gold and wear it around their necks, in the ears, and on the arms and legs, and that there are very large bracelets, pearls of great

value and an infinite amount of spices.

**December 3:** Whatever they [the Indians] have they give at once for anything that may be given to them, without saying that it is little, and I believe that they would do so with spices and gold, if they had any.

**December 12:** I had given orders that they [my men] should take some [Indians on Española], treat them well and make them lose their fear, that some gain might be made, since, considering the beauty of the land, it could not be but that there was gain to be got.

**December 23:** Our Lord in His Goodness guide me that I may find this gold, I mean their mine, for I have many here who say they know it.

**December 29:** There is so much [gold] and in so many places, and in this island of Española itself that it is a wonder.

**January 6, 1493:** Sovereign Princes, I realize that Our Lord miraculously ordained that the ship should remain there [at La Navidad], because it is the best place in all the island [of Española] for forming a settlement and nearest to the mines of gold."

**January 10:** More honor and favor ought to be done to the people [on Española], since in this island there is so much gold and good land and spices. □