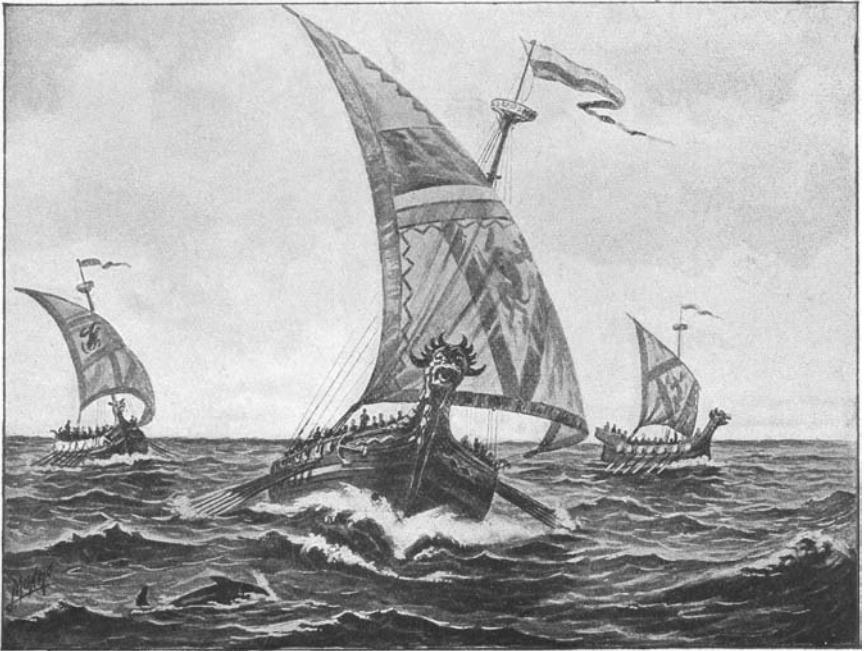


AMERICAN HISTORY STORIES
VOLUME I



SHIPS OF THE NORSEMEN

**AMERICAN HISTORY
STORIES
VOLUME I**

**BY
MARA L. PRATT**

with illustrations

**YESTERDAY'S CLASSICS
CHAPEL HILL, NORTH CAROLINA**

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This edition, first published in 2007 by Yesterday's Classics, is an unabridged republication of the work originally published by Educational Publishing Co. in 1908. For a complete listing of the books published by Yesterday's Classics, please visit www.yesterdaysclassics.com. Yesterday's Classics is the publishing arm of the Baldwin Project which presents the complete text of dozens of classic books for children at www.mainlesson.com under the editorship of Lisa M. Ripperton and T. A. Roth.

ISBN-10: 1-59915-202-9

ISBN-13: 978-1-59915-202-8

Yesterday's Classics
PO Box 3418
Chapel Hill, NC 27515

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LONG AGO

Many, many years ago, O, so many that I fear you could not count them even, this country in which we live was one vast expanse of woodland and fields, mountains and swamps.

There were no cities, no villages, not even a single house to break the view across the wild fields.

The whole country looked as it does now in those places which have not yet been built up.

Did you ever stand on a high hill and look off across the country where not one house was to be seen? How broad the fields looked and how strange it was to see the sky dipping down and seeming to rest upon the hills and trees away off at the horizon line! Well, that is the way it looked to the little boys and girls here so many years before the white people came to this country.

We do not know very much about these little boys and girls, and their fathers and mothers; for they knew nothing about writing, and so left no books to tell us about themselves.

We know that they used to live in tents, which they called wigwams; that they called the women

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squaws, and the baby boys and girls papooses; and that they were all called Indians by the white men.

These Indian people, according to our ideas, were very rude and wild. The fathers spent their time in hunting and fishing. The mothers stayed about the tents, kept the fires going, tilled the ground, raised the corn, cooked the food, such as it was, and loved their children just as mothers do the world over.

The little boys and girls had no schools, no books, no toys to keep them busy; so they spent their time playing about the tent or learning to fish and hunt and build canoes.

Perhaps you think they had lovely times with nothing to do; but I am afraid they sometimes had very hard times too.

If I were to tell you the way the tribes of Indians used to pounce down upon their homes, and slay the fathers, burn the mothers, and steal the children; and the way the children used to huddle into their tents during the cold, cold winters, I think you would not envy them at all.



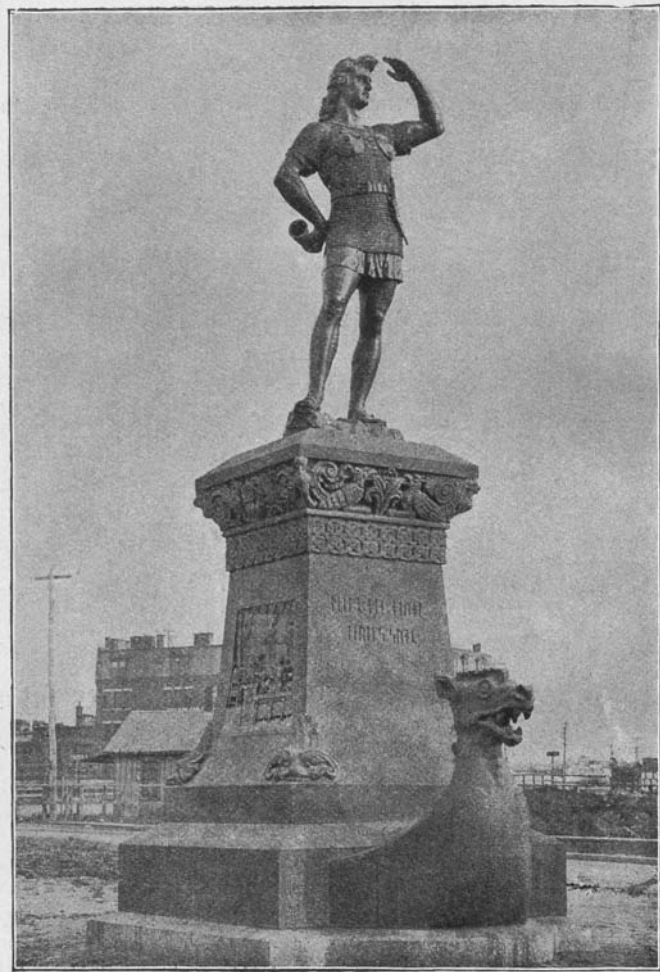
EARLY DISCOVERIES

Little indeed did the people of Europe know of this country across the water or of the strange copper-colored people living here.

Lately there has been raised in Boston a monument in memory of Lief, the brave Northman or Norseman, who in the year 1000 sailed from his home in Iceland and came to the coast of America.

The vessel in which this Norseman came was odd-looking enough. Sometimes it moved along by the aid of its sails, sometimes each man would take an oar and so help it to move over the water.

The first land these hardy Norsemen found was flat and stony near the sea; but inland high mountains could be seen from the shore. This was Newfoundland. Then on the Norsemen sailed farther south,



STATUE OF LIEF ERICSON, BOSTON

EARLY DISCOVERIES

pleased with the warmth of the sun and the green trees, the song birds and the rich fruits. At one place, supposed to be on the shores of Massachusetts or Rhode Island, one of their company found such delicious wild grapes and in such abundance that Lief gave to the country the name of Vinland.

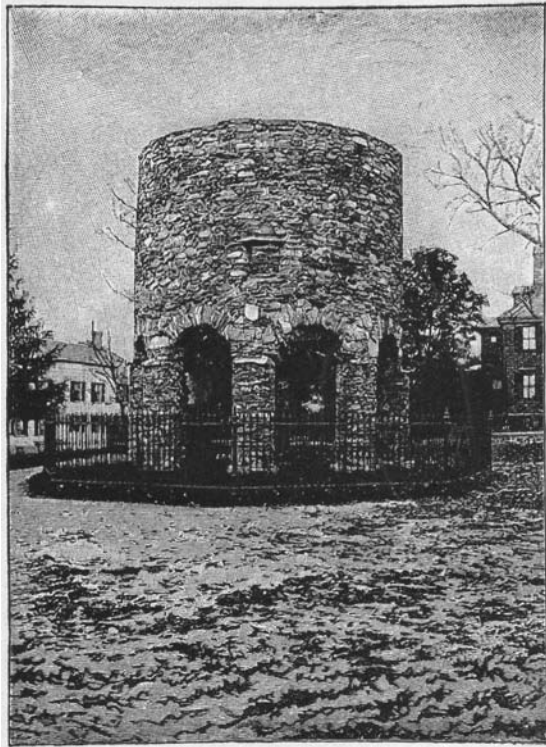
So delightful was the climate and so rich the fruits that the little band built huts and planned to spend the winter in the beautiful Vinland. It was all very strange to them, the swiftly changing day and night; for in their own land they had only one long day and one long night in a year.

Spring came, and Lief hastened back to Iceland to tell of the wonderful new land. Other Norsemen came, and, later still, a Norwegian nobleman with his beautiful young wife, Gudfrida. A colony was formed and the people lived very happily here for three years or more.

Then for some reason the colony died out, and little is known of them except what has been found in old chronicles in Iceland.

In Newport, Rhode Island, is a strange old tower which was once believed to have been built by these Norsemen. Certainly it is old enough and strange enough; but as to the true story of the Norsemen in America, I suppose we shall never know it.

They were a brave, sturdy people and very fond of adventures. No people were ever so brave upon the sea as these Norsemen, and it is a great pity we do not know all about them.



ROUND TOWER, NEWPORT

EARLY DISCOVERIES

These Northmen were the only Europeans who ever ventured far away from home. The people of the southern counties of Europe would look out across the sea and wonder; but they dared not venture out a great ways upon the ocean.

In fact, the ships in those days were small and frail, hardly more sea-worthy than a simple pleasure yacht to-day; and therefore very little had been learned of the oceans.

“There is,” sailors of southern Europe would sometimes say, “an island far out at sea,—a beautiful sunny island with rich fruits and beautiful flowers and great purple mountains. Rich gems and gold and silver sparkle about its shores, and in the centre on a gentle slope of ground stands the palace of the sea-god.”

But although the southern sailors talked of it and the poets sang of it, no one had ever seen this land. Sometimes on a clear day, standing upon the shores and looking away out to where the sky seemed to dip down and meet the earth, some imaginative person would think he saw the island, and would call to his companions; but before they could come, behold, it always disappeared.

There was living at this time a good man whom the people called Saint Brandon. He was always trying to help others to do what to him seemed right and good; and when he heard of this island, he with another good priest sailed away towards it, hoping to find an opportunity to help the people who might be living there.

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He never found the island, however—the Atlantis, as it was called, but he did find, so he said, another island, afterwards called the island of St. Brandon. But the wonderful part of the story is that even this island could never again be found. Whether St. Brandon was fond, like the other adventurers of his day, of telling a big story, or whether he did honestly find an island which, by and by, sank below the level of the water, as sea-islands sometimes do sink, no one could ever tell.

Once in the history of Spain there was a terrible war between the Moors and the Spaniards. Seven Spanish bishops, pursued by these Moors, took to their ships and sailed out upon the sea. “Better by far drown than be overtaken by our cruel foe,” said they; and they sailed out into the great sea, beyond all sight of land, into the very sunset, so they said.

These bishops came at last upon an island,—a beautiful sunny island, rich in fruit and flowers and the most wonderful trees.

Here they built seven cities, each bishop placing himself at the head of his own city and governing such natives as lived in his part of the island.

By and by, when the cities were prosperous, the seven bishops returned to Spain and told of their wonderful discovery. Strange to say, however, no one was ever able again to find this island; and no one has ever found it yet.

Of one other island we must speak—and that is the island of Bimini. This island was not only rich and beautiful, but there was upon it a fountain of sparkling

EARLY DISCOVERIES

water whose waters could restore youth and strength to the weakest and oldest of men.

Such an island as that was certainly well worth searching for; and, in 1512, long after Columbus had sailed to the new world, an old man, Ponce de Leon, sailed away in search of this wonderful "Fountain of Youth."

Remember this was the childhood of the modern world, a time when wise old men and women would listen to stories that to-day only a baby could be made to believe. It does not seem possible that they believed these tales; yet they must really have thought them true, for the books they made in those days tell us so. And who knows, after all, that the things we believe to-day may not, hundreds of years later, seem just as strange to the people who will be living then.



Christophe Colomb

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS



But all these stories, foolish as they may seem, proved in the end a good thing. They kept the people wide awake, and on the look out for any new discovery far away upon the mysterious ocean.

By and by, there was born in the little village of Genoa, Italy, a baby boy who was destined to do more than guess and dream about the land beyond the sea. He was really to go and explore it and bring back proofs of its existence.

This baby boy, as every American school-child knows, was Christopher Columbus, the man whom now we are proud to honor as the discoverer of America.

Living as he did in this little sea-port town, he was generally, when not at school, to be found standing about the wharves watching the great ships come in, and listening to the marvellous stories that the sailors told.

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Genoa at this time was a very rich town, and it sent ships to all parts of the known world. The little boy, eagerly drinking in all the wonderful stories the sailors were so fond of telling, thus learned much of the far away countries—much that was true and much also that was purely imaginary.

“I shall be a sailor!” he would say to himself as he listened; and then, like all other small lads, he longed to grow big and strong and old. “When I’m a man, I shall be a sailor! When I’m a man I shall go to all these wonderful countries and gather these beautiful things and bring home ships loaded with silver and gold.”

The parents of Columbus were poor people. His father was a wool comber; but they were wise, and they tried to give their boy a good education. He was taught to read and write; and when, by and by, he was old enough to know what he should most enjoy, his father sent him away to a school where he could study arithmetic and drawing and geography.

To Columbus there was no study so fascinating as geography. He had listened eagerly to the sailors’ stories in his very early boyhood; and so now he eagerly devoured every book and drank in every story he could find about the wonderful countries so far away.

And he would say to himself, “I must be a sailor! I must be a sailor!”

One day his good father said to him, “My boy, I have watched you for a long time; and since you have made up your mind to be a sailor, and since you like best those studies that have to do with navigation, I

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

am willing to send you to the University of Pavia where, I am told, geography, astronomy, map-drawing and navigation are wisely taught.”

Columbus was a happy boy, you may be sure. “Now indeed I may be a sailor!” cried he—“A wise one! An explorer and a discoverer perhaps!” And seizing a book, he ran down to the wharf to watch the ships and dream of the happy time when he should have learned all the wonders of navigation and be able to guide for himself one of these great ships.

Columbus improved every hour of his term at the University, learning so fast and showing so much eager interest and real thoughtfulness, that the teachers were very proud of him and predicted a great future for their pupil. But even they had little idea of how great that future was to be.

Columbus was only fourteen years old when he made his first voyage out upon the great blue sea with some traders bound for the East Indies. From that time on his life was like that of all sailors, I suppose, full of adventures, narrow escapes, and marvellous experiences.

When he was thirty-five years old he went to Lisbon, the capital of Portugal. He was a quiet, dignified, thoughtful man now—his hair already white,—and here and there on his face were lines of care and trouble. For Columbus’ life had not been an easy one; neither had he been satisfied to drift along contented with whatever he had been taught, whatever he had heard and read.

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The stories of the great flat earth borne upon the back of an elephant or upon the shoulders of a great giant, the tales of the sea-gods and wind-gods,—all of which were believed in those early days,—had long since ceased to amuse or satisfy him. “They are not reasonable,” he would say to himself. “They are like the stories one tells little children. There must be something different from all this.”

And so, year after year, Columbus pondered and pondered upon these questions. He read every account of travels, every story of adventure, every theory of the earth’s size and shape that he could find. But none satisfied him. “It’s easy enough to guess and to guess about these things,” he would say; “but there must be some natural law, some real fact, that, if discovered, would give us the truth.”

On account of the smallness of the ships, together with the superstitious fears the sailors had of the unknown sea with its angry and revengeful gods, no one had ever sailed very far out upon the ocean, and so had little thought of what might be found far out beyond the horizon.

“There may be land away out there,” Columbus would say; “at any rate, I am convinced that this earth is round, and that by sailing straight out to the westward, we should come to the East Indies, a much easier and more speedy route than we now have.”

“Hear him! hear him!” the people would say. “He is crazy! he dares say the earth is round, when we and all our ancestors before us have *known* that the earth is flat.” “Ha, ha,” laughed others; “let him sail

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

westward as far as he pleases. When he has reached the end of the great sea and the sea-gods have cast him over, then he will learn how foolish he is, and Portugal will be well rid of him!”

But John II., then King of Portugal, was convinced that these notions of Columbus, as the people were pleased to call them, were not so absurd as they seemed. “The man knows what he is talking about, I believe,” said he; “I will get his plans from him, pretend to favor them, pretend to be willing to aid him—then—then—well, we’ll see who will have the honor of the first expedition, Columbus, the Genoese wool-comber’s son, or John II., King of Portugal!”

And so this mean king led Columbus on to tell his plans and his reasons for believing the earth to be round. The king was wise enough to see that there was sound common sense and reason in these plans. Then when he had learned all, and had obtained the maps and charts which Columbus had made, he secretly sent out a vessel and ordered the captain to follow closely the route Columbus had marked out.

This was a mean trick, and I am glad, and you will be, that it did not succeed. No sooner was the vessel out of sight of land than the ignorant captain and the superstitious sailors began to be frightened.

“We are surely sailing off the edge of the earth!” cried they. “What shall we do when the sea-gods learn that we have dared come out of our home into their sacred waters!”

Then a great storm arose; the waves rolled and tumbled and broke above them mountains high. The

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thunder rumbled and the lightning flashed. Terror-stricken, the sailors turned the vessel homeward. "The gods are angry with us! They are punishing us for our boldness!" cried the ignorant sailors.

A more frightened and miserable crew never sailed back into Lisbon harbor than this one sent out by King John II.

And when Columbus heard of it, angry and disgusted with the meanness of the king, he would have no further talk with him; but, taking his little son Diego with him, he left the country and went to Spain.

Friendless and without money, Columbus with the little Diego travelled from place to place, always seeking some one who would understand and help him to an audience with the king or queen of Spain. If only somewhere a person of wealth could be found who would fit out for him a fleet, Columbus had not a doubt or a fear but that he could return with news of new lands or, at least, of a short route to India.

Years and years rolled by; and Columbus had gained nothing but a world-wide name of being a fool or an insane man. Men sneered at him, boys hooted at him in the street. Surely it was a brave man who could endure all this for the sake of right. But it is always so; as you grow older and read larger histories than these, you will find that seldom has a great man or woman brought to the world any great new truth, that ignorant and superstitious people did not scoff at it and make the life of the brave discoverer one of wretchedness and persecution.

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

“I will go to France,” said Columbus at last, “and see if I can get the help of the French king.” And he started with his little son, Diego, to walk the long distance.

One day, while on the road, Columbus stopped at the gate of a great gray convent in the town of Palos and asked for food.

As the gate-man brought them bread, one of the monks passed by. Struck with the dignity and the courteous, refined appearance of Columbus, he said to himself, “Whom have we here? This is no ordinary beggar. I will speak with him.”



COLUMBUS AND DIEGO

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So, going up to Columbus, he saluted him kindly and asked him to stop and rest. Glad enough were both Columbus and Diego to accept this hospitality, and together they entered the great halls of the convent.

Now the monk was a man of great learning for those days. More than that, he was a man who thought and who was always ready to accept any new theories, providing they seemed reasonable and honest proofs of their truth could be presented with them.

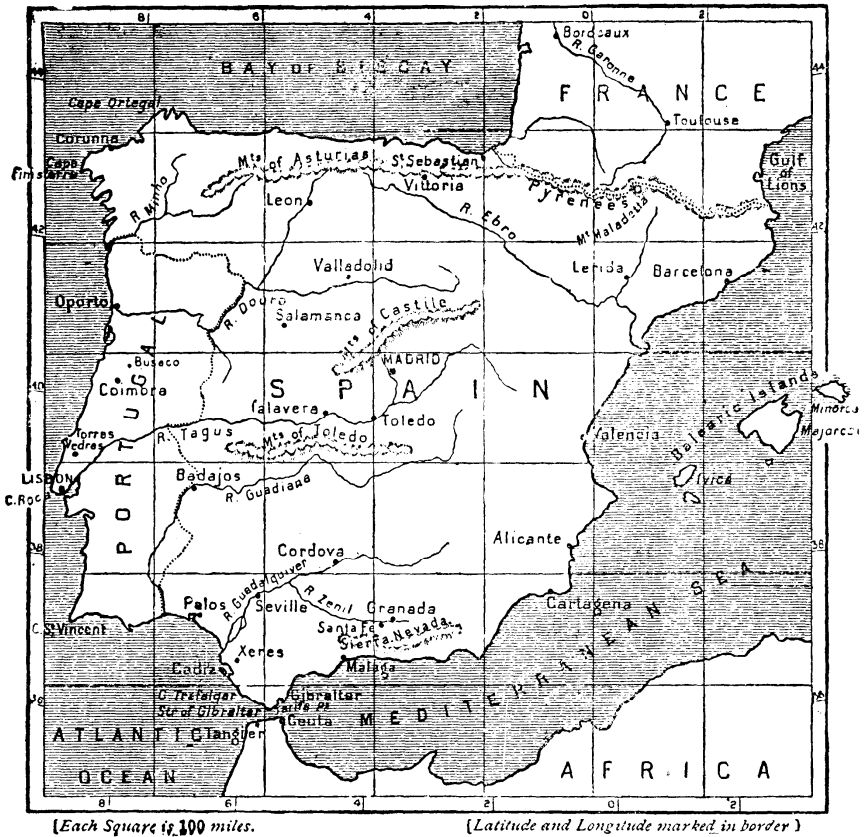
The intelligence and conversation of Columbus attracted the monk at once. "This man knows what he is talking about," thought he. "Surely I must bring him to Queen Isabella. She, if any one, will give him patient and intelligent hearing."

At that time the Spanish king and queen were busy with a great war against the Moors, so that it was a long time before either could listen to Columbus; but after long weeks of delay, he was summoned before them. There, before the king and queen and a large body of "wise men," as they called themselves, Columbus told his story.

All listened attentively. It was like a wonderful dream or a grand fairy story; and people were very fond of wonder stories of any kind in those days. But when the "wise men" were asked their opinion of the story as one at all likely to be true, they roared with laughter.

"The earth round!" cried they. "It is absurd! If a fleet were sent out upon the ocean it would certainly

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS



SPAIN — TIME OF FERDINAND AND ISABELLA

sail over the edge and fall down—down into unknown space.”

“And if the earth *were* round,” said others, “and if this crazy man *could* sail down and stand upon his head on the other side of the sphere, how, pray, could he ever get back again? Has he learned to sail up hill?”



COLUMBUS BEFORE THE WISE MEN

This was indeed unanswerable, so they all thought. Of course he could not, and of course he was a fool to think of such a thing. And so Columbus was sent away in disgrace, while the “wise men” entertained their friends for days after with the absurd story the crazy Genoese had told them.

“I will go to France,” said Columbus to the good monk, when, discouraged and weary at heart he returned to the convent with the story of his defeat. “There is no hope for me in Spain.”

“Wait, wait,” said the monk. “I myself will go to the queen. I cannot bear that this honor should pass

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

into the hands of the French. I will go to Isabella and beg her again to give you a hearing.”

And so it was that once more Columbus waited and was led at last into the presence of the only one in all Spain who seemed to be kind enough at heart and to be far sighted enough to know that Columbus was neither foolish nor crazy.

After long hesitation—for it was not an easy matter in those days to fit out a fleet, nor was it a politic thing for Isabella to move in opposition to all the advice of her countrymen, she sent this word to Columbus: “I will undertake this enterprise for my own kingdom of Castile; and I will pledge my jewels, if need be, to raise the funds.”