

*America: Our Stories*

Volume 1  
*First Peoples to 1812*

By Lorene M. Lambert

America: Our Stories, Volume 1: First Peoples to 1812  
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## Chapter 1

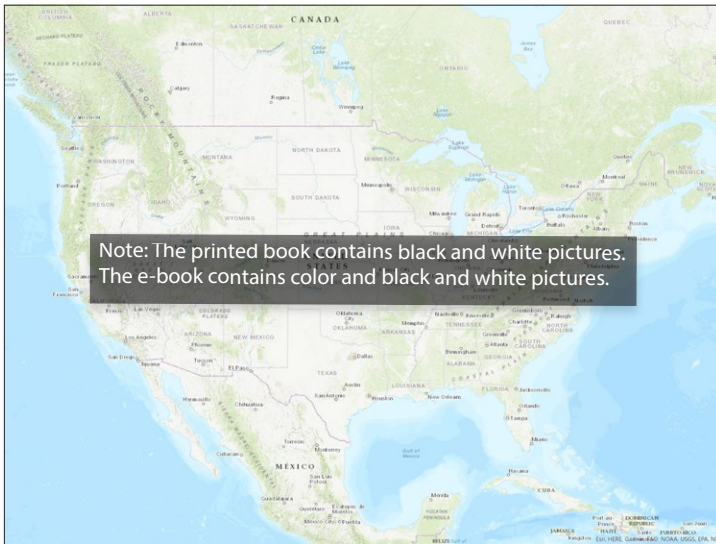
# An American Day

### *The Geography of the United States*

**I**t's 6 A.M. on a fresh fall day in October in the United States of America.

Darkness rests like a soft quilt over the crumples and folds of the countryside. The ocean waves are crashing against the cliffs in Washington State, while early morning starlight frosts the soaring peaks of the Rocky Mountains. In the center of the country, the Mississippi River rolls ever onward, and the wind rustles the grasses of the Dakotas and ripples the leaves of mangrove trees in the Florida Everglades. On the eastern edge of the continent, along the wide Atlantic beaches, the land sleeps—and waits for day.

From the surface of the sun, 93 million miles away, the waves of light that will make a new American day speed forward, 186,000 miles every second. The light skims over the Atlantic Ocean, polishing it to a brilliant silver sheen. The earth rotates gently, a thousand miles every hour, and the light races toward the dark coastline, where the state of Maine reaches out into the cold, North Atlantic water. And there, up ahead, silhouetted against the pearly gray sky, a rounded, smooth-topped mountain surveys the rocky shore. With a satisfied glimmer, the daylight skips forward and kisses the mountain's bald head.



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*The geography of the contiguous United States*

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It is 6:38 A.M.; a new American day has begun.

This is Cadillac Mountain, named for a French explorer. During the autumn and winter months, the sunrise touches the United States first in Maine, on Cadillac Mountain's summit. But, of course, the light doesn't stop there to rest. The day hastens on its way, shouldering the darkness aside, as America comes to life and her people begin to go about their day.

From that easternmost part of Maine, the morning light floods across the rest of the USA's east coast. It reveals a flat plain, bordered by the Atlantic Ocean, with many bays and islands, inlets and sandspits, and beautiful buff-colored beaches fringed with dunes and seagrass. This hospitable coast plays host to some of America's mightiest cities: Boston, New York City, Philadelphia. The plain stretches the whole length of the eastern shores, from Maine down to Florida. There, just a little less than an hour after it touched Cadillac Mountain, the sunrise smiles on Key West.

Key West is the last in a long chain of islands that dangle in a graceful curve from the bottom tip of Florida; it's the farthest south you can go in the *contiguous United States*—the whole country minus Alaska and Hawaii. Instead of Cadillac Mountain's lonely gray rocks and sweet-scented pine trees, Key West boasts slim coconut palms and coral reefs darting with tropical fish. Its citizens greet the dawn with a cup of dark tropical coffee, leaning on the rails of their white-painted balconies, even while Cadillac Mountain is empty save for a few hardy hikers. But both places are waking up to the same American day.

The morning flows toward the west, and the land begins to climb up from the flat coastal plain, rumpling in rolling hills that give place in turn to a long line of mountains. Extending from the island of Newfoundland in Canada all the way south to Alabama, these are the Appalachians. Here the light glows on the mountaintops while the valleys remain in deep blue shadow. In the crisp October air, the trees lift up branches clothed in glorious oranges, reds, and golds. As they march southward, the mountains boast many different, storied names: White Mountains, Berkshires, Alleghenies, Blue Ridge Mountains, Catskills. But they are all part of the Appalachians, and they're all sharing the same American day.

Beyond the mountains, the land flattens again. To the north, the sunlight dances on the deep blue waters of the five Great Lakes: Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, and Superior. They form the largest group of lakes on Earth; in fact, they contain one-fifth of all the world's fresh water. If the Great Lakes could escape their bounds, and their water were spread across the whole continent, it would cover the entire United States to a depth of five feet. Far to the south, the beautiful blue of the Great Lakes is echoed by another enormous body of water: the Gulf of Mexico. Spread between them and to the west, illuminated by the racing light, lie the Great Plains: a thousand miles of grasslands and flatlands and farms. With the morning sun climbing over the

horizon, farmers rise, too, eager to bring in the October harvest. Each farm is one square in a vast checkerboard. Throughout the spring and summer, the deep, rich soil of the plains has nurtured the seeds that become corn, soybeans, and wheat. American farmers grow more corn and soybeans than anyone else in the world, here in the heart of the United States.

All this land, and all these farms, and all of the people who depend upon them: all enjoying the same American day.

Two hours after it skips past Cadillac Mountain, one hour after it greets Key West, the sunrise reaches the contiguous United States's northernmost point, an odd corner of far northern Minnesota called the Northwest Angle. It's cut off from the rest of the state, and indeed from the rest of the country, by another enormous lake—the Lake of the Woods—and it seems as though perhaps it should belong to Canada. Mostly forest, spotted with ponds and wandering deer: very few people live there. Isolated and still, it welcomes the sunrise with birdsong and the quiet murmur of tree limbs in the breeze.

Just south of the Lake of the Woods, another smaller lake lies cupped among the trees: Lake Itasca. It is an ordinary lake like thousands of others splashed across the continent, yet its quiet waters are hiding a magnificent secret, for, at one point, the lakewater tumbles over some smooth rocks and becomes a bubbling stream. This stream, tiny as it is, will grow into America's greatest river, the Mississippi, the fourth longest river in the world. From here, it unspools like a giant ribbon down the entire breadth of the United States, joined along the way by countless streams and other rivers, until, finally, in Louisiana, it spreads out into an enormous *delta* and joins the lovely turquoise waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

By now, the morning has worn itself out, and the sun rests directly overhead. It's noon, and we're in Lebanon, Kansas, a tiny town of just 60 families or so. Nothing remarkable, really—wood-sided houses, tall cottonwood trees, a main street edged



with brick-fronted shops, a town like hundreds of other tiny farm towns sprinkled across the Great Plains. But our day pauses here, because Lebanon sits in the exact center of the United States. From this spot, equally in all directions, America stretches out her arms.

Beyond Lebanon, to the west, the land rises gradually, higher and drier. The checkerboard of farmland becomes less regular, and the farms themselves expand into huge ranches and gigantic wheat fields, where cattle wander and hulking tractors rumble, cutting and gathering the grain. This is the West, where the buffalo roam.

These creatures are actually American *bison*. Once, they ranged in vast herds across the whole of the Great Plains. America's largest and heaviest land animal, they wander freely through the West's wild places. Though winter is coming, and October snow is already falling in the high mountains, the bison are not concerned. They've grown thick, wooly coats that will see them through the fiercest winter blizzard.

The afternoon light finds a herd of bison in the northwestern corner of Wyoming, grazing peacefully beside a glimmering pool. But what a strange and wondrous pool: bubbling hot and wreathed in steam and ringed along its edges with rainbow-bright bands of brilliantly-colored bacteria. In the distance, a jet of boiling water erupts in a graceful arc from a mound of smooth white rock: a *geyser*. This is Yellowstone, miles and miles of wilderness set aside by American president Ulysses S. Grant in 1872 to be the world's first National Park. It is home to the nation's largest herds of bison, home as well to more than half of the world's geysers and hot springs.

A simple road winds past the bison and makes its way into the surrounding mountains, climbing upward through a shadowed forest until it levels out and crosses a bridge over a narrow lake covered with water lilies, rafts of deep green leaves, and silky yellow flowers. A wooden sign announces its name:

Isa Lake. Like Lake Itasca back in Minnesota, its quiet waters hide a secret: Isa Lake is one of the very few lakes in the entire world whose waters drain into two different oceans. It straddles the *Continental Divide*, an imaginary line that runs north and south down the great ridge of western mountains and separates the flow of water on the continent. On the eastern side of the Divide, all streams run down toward the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean, but on the western side all water flows toward the Pacific Ocean. The Divide runs along the Rockies, the towering mountains that rise up from the Great Plains like a mighty wall. Tracing the spine of the Rockies, the Divide makes its way south through the states of Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico before continuing southward into Mexico and South America. Its central point is in the state of Colorado, where the Divide soars along the crest of many peaks taller than 13,000 feet.

But as the afternoon light plunges onward, it ricochets off the summit of a mountain that's even taller. West of the Rockies, after the land swoops down into a vast valley called the Great Basin, it climbs again in a series of jagged ridgelines: another great mountain range, the Sierra Nevadas. There, glistening with fresh October snow, stands Mt. Whitney, 14,494 feet, the contiguous United States's tallest mountain. Meanwhile, just 90 miles to the east, the evening shadows are starting to gather in Death Valley, which is America's lowest point, 282 feet below sea level.

The shadows start to spread, and streetlights come to life. The great cities of the West Coast—San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle—glow like jewels. The waves of the Pacific send a greeting to California's warm, golden beaches. And far to the north, amidst the towering cedars and glassy rivers of Washington State, the sunlight bids America goodbye. It bestows a final caress on the cliff tops at Cape Flattery, the contiguous USA's northwesternmost point, and sails away over the deep

blue ocean. There, as the rest of the country nestles down under the blanket of night, the sunlight will give its greetings to Alaska and Hawaii, the farthest flung of America's states.

From city to farm, from Cadillac Mountain to Mt. Whitney, from Key West to Cape Flattery, from sea to shining sea: this is a beautiful, broad country, a nation full of wonders, and it rejoices in another American day.



## Chapter 2

# Until 1491

### *The Native Americans*

*In fourteen hundred and ninety-two,  
Columbus sailed the ocean blue.*

School children across America learn this little verse: the date of the discovery of the New World and the beginning of the history of the United States.

But, of course, the land itself did not shimmer into existence in 1492. It was here long before—the big, broad, beautiful land that we saw in the last chapter—and it was filled with people.

Who were they, and how did they live here in the land before it became America?

That's not an easy question to answer, because the people who lived here before 1492 were spread widely. The countryside is huge and varied; so too were the groups of people who lived upon it deep in the past, and they did not write books telling their stories. To find them, we have to look for them in different ways: we have to seek out the footprints they left behind.

One of those faint traces can be found in what is today the state of Utah.

Far from roads or towns, a narrow canyon winds its way through the golden-red sandstone that makes up so much of the southwestern United States. The sun's heat presses heavily down on the sandy clifftops, but below, in the shadow of the canyon wall, we can find a hollow, like a cavern in the rock, with its front open to the air. There, on the rock-strewn floor, something has been constructed: a low circular wall of stones, just a foot or so high, with an opening facing toward the east, like the ghost of a door. This is the ruins of a *kiva*. When it was newly built, hundreds and hundreds of years ago, it would have been a covered room, used by its builders for ceremonies and traditions. Now it's just a shadow, a footprint left behind by those ancient Americans.

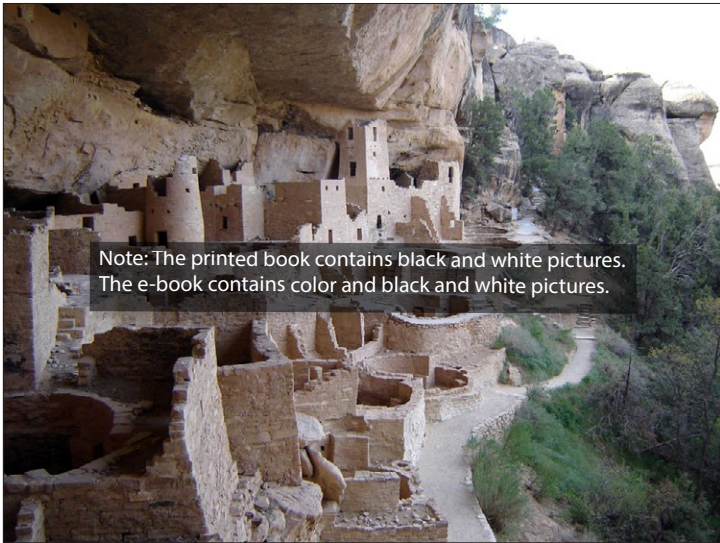


*A kiva in present-day Utah*

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The kiva's builders were called Puebloans. They lived in the "Four Corners": that unique point in the Southwest where the states of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah meet. Their descendants, who still live in that region, call them the Ancient Ones. There in the desert, they built large villages—*pueblos*—using a special mixture of stone and clay called *adobe*. The

structures were often several stories tall, like modern apartments, with thick, cool walls and deep-set, T-shaped doorways; for protection from enemies, they were often perched high on the sides of cliffs or atop the flat-topped mountains that are called *mesas*. One of these pueblos, at a place called Chaco Canyon in New Mexico, contained enormous houses with more than 200 rooms each, the largest buildings to be found in North America until late in the 1800s.



*Pueblo cliff homes at Chaco Canyon, New Mexico*

The Puebloans were expert weavers and potters and industrious farmers. The Four Corners, along with the rest of the Southwest, is a hot, dry place, and so the people of the pueblos were careful to harvest rainwater alongside their other crops. They collected the water in dammed ditches and reservoirs and clay-lined cisterns and then directed it into their fields, where they grew a plant they called *maize*, which you would recognize as corn.

For a thousand years or more, before Columbus sailed, the Puebloans lived and worked, tucked safely into their cliffside

houses. In New Mexico and Arizona, people still live in the pueblos that were built by their ancestors centuries ago. For them, the footprints of the Ancient Ones are easily seen.

And there are others.

Far to the east, just across the Mississippi River from the present day city of St. Louis, Missouri, there stands a mound of earth, a flat-topped pyramid cloaked with smooth, green grass, 100 feet tall and 1,000 feet long. Around it stretches a broad park with 80 other mounds scattered here and there, the remains of a city that once covered more than six square miles. This is Cahokia, home to a people called the Mississippians. At its most prosperous, sometime in the 1200s, Cahokia might have been larger than 13th-century London.

Like the Puebloans to the southwest, the Mississippians built sprawling settlements, supporting themselves by growing crops in the fields that surrounded their cities. Instead of adobe, though, they used earth—hard-packed soil—to build their monumental structures. The mound in the center of Cahokia had been constructed by bringing dirt, one basketful at a time, and piling it up, higher and higher, over the course of many years. On the mound's flat top, the people then raised up a temple to use for the ceremonies that their religion required.

In front of the mound was a *plaza*—a large, flat, open square. Here the men played a game called *chunkey*, where two players would compete. One would roll a disc-shaped hoop of stone along the ground, and both would hurl a leather-trimmed stick, each trying to land his throw closest to the hoop as it wavered and toppled over. Enormous wagers would often be placed on these games. The winner would be celebrated; the loser forfeited all he had, including, sometimes, his life.

You can see the remains of Cahokia today should you ever visit St. Louis. Perhaps you can hear the echoes of the shouting spectators, cheering their favorite at a chunkey match. The mound at Cahokia, huge as it is, is a footprint left by the past.



And, still, there are others.

Further to the east, in the very southernmost part of Ohio, you can find another immense mound, this one 1,400 feet long, formed in the shape of a long, coiling serpent, and so called The Serpent Mound.



*The Serpent Mound in present-day Ohio*

In the Colorado Desert in California, ancient Americans carved giant pictures—men, animals, spiral shapes—directly into the dry ground by removing the dark layer of soil on the surface to reveal the pale rock underneath. High in the mountains of Wyoming, a great wheel of rocks now called the Bighorn Medicine Wheel has been carefully laid out so that its spokes align with the winter and summer solstices. And if we go back to that quiet canyon in Utah, we'll find the walls decorated with little pictures—pictographs—perhaps left there by the same Ancient Ones who built the kiva.



*The Bighorn Medicine Wheel in present-day Wyoming*

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Of course, as time passed, the lives and ways of all of these people gradually changed. The city of Cahokia was abandoned, sometime in the mid-14th century, after being deluged by Mississippi River floods. The people who lived in the pueblos of Chaco Canyon faced the opposite problem: a 50-year-long drought that made it impossible for them to continue to survive in their dry canyon-lands. They moved away, joining other peoples to the north or west, adapting to the change in their circumstances as best they could.

And so, in every corner of this land, from the coasts of the Atlantic to the far Pacific shore, from the forests of the north to the grasslands of the Plains, people lived and worked and farmed and played. They made war on one another; they traded food and crafts with one another; they married and reared children; they mourned their dead. Across the years and miles, they shared many of the same beliefs: respect the elderly, live together in communities,

stay true to tradition, tend the land and defend it from enemies. They were the first Americans, the *Native Americans*.

These people were grouped into *tribes*: groups that live in the same region or share the same language. A tribe, in turn, might be part of a larger *nation* or be divided up into smaller *clans*, which are family groups. Each tribe had its own name for itself and its own way of living.

In the northeast, in the boundless woodlands that surround the Great Lakes and the rivers that flow into the Atlantic, the tribes built their homes close to the water. They used the trees' bark, both for small things like bowls and cups and also to craft graceful canoes. Even their houses were made from bark, layered skillfully over frames made from flexible young trees. Some of these bark houses were small and round, called *wigwams*, and some of them were truly enormous: *longhouses* that stretched for 200 feet or more, with ceilings 25 feet high. These would be divided up, inside, with walls made from colorful blankets; each family in the longhouse would have its own space. Bonfires burned along the center, with the smoke escaping through holes in the roof. A longhouse would be measured by the number of fires it could contain. A 12-fire house was a large home, indeed.

The forest provided them with all they needed. They hunted deer, fished for trout and eels, and gathered mussels and oysters from the ocean. They used polished shells to make beads, a craft they called *wampum*; these they traded with other tribes further inland for furs and corn. When their work was done, they played games, including a fast and wild sport that involved tossing a small ball into the air and catching and passing it with long, netted sticks; today, many people still enjoy this game, which we now call *lacrosse*.

To the south, in the lowlands and gentle hills, the early descendants of Cahokia's mound builders continued to be skilled farmers. Like many other tribes, they grew the "Three Sisters": corn, beans, and squash. The corn would be planted first in a

little hill with a piece of rotted fish as fertilizer. When the corn had begun to sprout and grow, the bean and squash seeds would be added. The beans could then twine themselves around the corn, using the tall stalks for support, and the squash vines would spread around the mound, keeping the ground cool and moist. Planting this way allowed the farmers to grow as much food as they possibly could in a single field. Corn was vastly important, so much so that the Natives of the southeast marked the start of each new year by the ripening of the first ears of corn.

Their houses were built from wooden poles and planks that were plastered securely with mud. Farther south, where the land was wet and even swampy, the people constructed their houses on raised platforms so that they could stay comfortable and dry and perhaps catch a cooling breeze in the evenings.

They hunted, too: deer, rabbits, and even, in the farthest parts of the southeast, alligators.

To the west, in the great stretch of plains, Native Americans were less tied to specific patches of ground. They moved from place to place, following the enormous herds of bison that roamed the grasslands. The bison provided them with all the things that the northeastern Natives gained from trees: clothing, shoes, and shelter made from hides; knives, cups, bowls, and needles made from bone.

Their shelters were called *teepees*: a kind of tent made of bison skins sewn together. This covering was arranged over a tall frame created by leaning five poles against each other and tying them together at the top. Each teepee was furnished with a low, round door, which was usually pointed toward the east so that the teepee faced the sunrise. The teepee was cool and dry in the summer and warm and snug in the winter. A small fire would be set burning at its center, and the smoke would drift out the top through a skillfully-engineered flap.

The Natives of the Plains could pack up their teepee villages whenever the bison moved or whenever the weather grew harsh. They roamed back and forth easily across the Great Plains,

measuring their year by the seasons. They started each new year's calendar on the day of the first snowfall.

In the northwest, along the cool, green coastline of the Pacific, the people marked the seasons differently. They looked for the return of the salmon, a fish that swims far out in the ocean for most of the year until its instincts call it home, in the fall, back to the stream where it was born. As the salmon returned each fall, the people of the northwestern coasts captured them with nets and baskets and then smoked and dried the fish to feed themselves throughout the year to come. They added to their storehouse of food, like so many of the other first Americans, with skilled hunting. Their prey was found in the ocean: otters, seals, and even whales. Unlike the Plains people, these Natives of the northwest lived in permanent houses, with fires along the center like the longhouses far to the east. These homes were built of sweet-smelling wood from cedar trees, with the tall ceilings often held aloft by totem poles. Each totem pole was a single large log, stripped of its bark and branches and carved and painted with animals of all sorts, some of them fantastical like the thunderbird, a mythical creature whose billowing wings they believed caused the deafening clap of the thunderstorm. Many families would live in one such house, and they celebrated important days by inviting another household to join them in a special kind of feast: a *potlatch*, where the host of the feast would give gifts to everyone who attended.

This was America: bark canoes and bison hides, teepees and wigwams, longhouses and pueblos. The people living as they had for hundreds of years, no doubt assuming that life would continue much as it always had.

But it wouldn't.

A change was coming, an astounding change, coming from across the sea, sailing toward them on a new tide, in the year fourteen hundred and ninety-two.



## Chapter 3

# Toscanelli's Map

### *Sail West to Reach the East*

In the year 1474, in the city of Florence, which lies right near the center of Italy's boot, a scholar named Paolo Toscanelli had drawn a map of the world.

Since his youth, Toscanelli had been interested in geography, the study of the earth's surface. He had sought out stories from sailors and travelers; he had studied the writings of the ancient Greek philosophers and tested with his own mathematics their estimations of the size of the globe. He had read a book written almost 200 years earlier by the explorer and merchant Marco Polo, who described his journeys in far-off Asia. He exchanged letters with other scholars, discussing the Earth's distant reaches. Slowly, over the years, as he thought about all of this, Toscanelli came to a startling conclusion: if a person wanted to follow in the footsteps of Marco Polo and travel to the lands of the East—and in 1474 there were many who wanted very much to do just that, for reasons that we shall see—perhaps that person should board a ship and sail boldly out into the ocean, not eastward, but to the west, instead.

But wait, you might be asking, how can that be? Surely east and west are opposites, and thus forever separate from one another! How can you reach the East by sailing west?

The answer, of course, lies in the fact that the earth is a sphere, which Toscanelli, like most of the educated men of his day, knew very well. Since the time of the ancient Greeks, who used shadow and light to measure the curve of the earth's surface, people had been aware of the world's roundness; they had known, too, that there were three parts to it—Africa, Asia, and Europe—and that these continents were cradled on all sides by the great “Ocean Sea.”

If you study your globe and put one finger on China and the other on Italy's boot, you can see how Marco Polo would have needed to travel toward the east to get from Italy to China. But suppose he had sailed off to the west, instead? If you trace your finger to the west, all the long way around, eventually you'll come to China that way, too. That's how the west can bring you, eventually, to the east.

Toscanelli created a map to illustrate this idea. He plotted it carefully, drawing the outlines of the three parts of the known world: he put Europe on the map's right side, with Africa below it, and then, off to the left, to the west, the wondrous lands of Asia: Cathay, which we know today as China; India, with a spray of islands scattered before it; and the then-fabled Cipango, the island of Japan. When he was satisfied with it, he copied it carefully onto a fresh sheet of parchment, packaged it up, and sent it off to Alfonso V, king of Portugal, along with a letter urging the king to give the idea his careful consideration. “Be not amazed,” he cautioned, “if I call west [the place] where the spice grows, for it is commonly said that it grows in the east, yet whoso steers west will always find the said parts in the west, and whoso goes east overland will find the same parts in the east.” Whether you travel east or west, he was saying, you will eventually arrive in Asia.

Toscanelli knew that King Alfonso would be intrigued by the possibility of a new western route to Asia. In the year 1474,



when Toscanelli had completed his map, getting to Asia had become very troublesome.

In centuries past, throughout the long years of the Middle Ages, travelers such as Marco Polo made their way into Asia by following the Silk Road: a long, well-trodden way that stretched from the easternmost parts of Europe and the Mediterranean Sea; through Turkey and along the northern reaches of Persia and India; and across the entire length of China, to the city of Shanghai on China's eastern coast. For over a thousand years, since before the birth of Jesus and the fall of Rome, this road had been the gateway for trade, through which the people of Europe had been able to acquire the riches of Asia: soft silk fabric, sweet-smelling woods, glossy porcelain bowls, smooth white paper, rich black tea, fossilized amber and gleaming pearls, and, most of all, spices. The Silk Road carried with it the scent of cinnamon and nutmeg, pepper and clove, all of them grown far to the east, mostly on islands off the coasts of India and China.

Now, of course, you know these spices if you've ever dipped a fork into a slice of pumpkin pie after Thanksgiving dinner or drunk a cup of ginger tea on a cold winter evening. But, for Europeans in the 1400s, the importance of spice went far beyond mere deliciousness. In those days, long before the invention of electricity and refrigerators, keeping food fresh and sweet was a mighty struggle. Spices helped the food taste better, even if it were on the edge of spoiling, and so the cooks used spices in every dish: meats, fruits, vegetables, desserts. Even wine and beer were spiced with pepper and nutmeg. People would chew cinnamon and licorice root to freshen their breath and clean their teeth in the same way you might reach for a toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste. Spices were used as medicine, too, to combat coughing fits and upset stomachs and painful bruises. For the wealthy, a dining table adorned with bowls of mounded spices was a sign of high status, because the spices were expensive and rare and had traveled such a long way. Spices were so desirable

that, during the Middle Ages, pepper or nutmeg could be used as a substitute for money, and landlords would accept spices as payment for rent or taxes. A baron in England, in his cold stone castle, would feel a little warmer as he drank his nutmeg-spiced wine.

The Silk Road made that possible.

But, in 1453, the mighty city of Constantinople, which had stood unbowed since the days of the Roman Empire, fell to its enemies. Its conquerors were the Ottoman Turks; they were followers of a religion called Islam, with which the Christian nations of Europe had been at war, off and on, for 500 years. The new masters of Constantinople charged enormous taxes to any European merchant or traveler wishing to travel through their lands on the Silk Road, making the luxurious goods of Asia, which were already expensive, suddenly much more so. Few of the merchants were willing to pay such high prices, and travel and trade between Europe and Asia abruptly declined. It became very difficult to acquire nutmeg for the wine.

Of course, the merchants and traders of Europe, along with all of Europe's kings, were determined to find a way around the Turks—some kind of back door to Asia. Perhaps, if not by land on the Silk Road, they could go by sea? They began looking thoughtfully to the south, to Africa. Might a brave man be able to sail down along Africa's coast and find a route around its uncharted length and so make his way to India and China and the Spice Islands? After all, Africa couldn't be endless, could it?

It was at this point, with these musings weighing on his mind, that King Alfonso of Portugal received Toscanelli's map.

King Alfonso considered it: Could this be the back door to Asia that all of Europe was looking for? Could one reach the East by sailing out to the west, across the vast and unknown Atlantic, the mysterious Ocean Sea? A fascinating idea, to be sure, but no one had ever heard news of any sailor accomplishing such a feat. The kingdom of Portugal sits like a mask on the

face of Spain, looking out over the Atlantic's green waters and beyond. Past that western horizon, no one knew what dangers might await, and the ships of Portugal, though they ventured far, tended to stay within an easy distance of the shore. In any case, surely such a journey—straight out across the ocean, to the far side of the world—would take too long. No ship could carry enough food and water to sustain its crew across this immense distance! Perhaps it would be more sensible to hold fast to their previous plan: sail down the coast of Africa and try to find a way around its southern tip. Atlantic or Africa? West or South? Alfonso considered and met with his advisors, and they long debated the question.

But, as they debated, the map and the ideas it contained became known to someone else: a sailor from Genoa, Italy, named Cristoforo Columbo. We know him today by his English name: Christopher Columbus. He was very intrigued by Toscanelli's map, because he had his own ambitions about reaching Asia, his own secret ideas about finding a new route, and they both involved sailing out, far out, into the ocean blue.