

ON WATLINGS ISLAND

DISCOVERY OF THE SPOT WHERE COLUMBUS LANDED.

Walter Wellman Tells How He Explored the Bahamas and Settled the Controversy Concerning the First Land Sighted by Columbus—A Fascinating and Instructive Narrative.

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In May, 1891, the editor of the Chicago Herald wired me at Washington, "Can you find the spot where Columbus discovered America and mark it with a memorial?" My reply was, "Will try." If it had been a request to find the north pole or capture a mermaid I suppose the answer would have been the same. The newspaper correspondent is not surprised at anything.



WALTER WELLMAN.

The plan of The Herald was easy to understand. For centuries the identity of the island which Columbus first landed upon had remained unknown. The quadricentennial of the discovery of the New World was about to be celebrated in Chicago with a great exposition, and The Herald thought it proper that the spot at which occurred the most tremendous event in history should be sought out and appropriately marked.

This was a queer task, but a fascinating one. I went at it in characteristic American fashion—that is, jumped at it. I ransacked the Congressional Library and other libraries. I called to London for a book which was not to be found in America. I procured from the hydrographic office charts of the Bahamas made by our government and the British admiralty.

Night and day study of the mystery of the discovery quickly showed these facts: In all history there is nothing that throws light upon the landfall save the journal kept by Columbus himself. Five islands had been put forward as the real San Salvador, and hundreds of books and pamphlets written in support of these theories. The correct theory must be based upon two conditions: The island itself must have certain features described by Columbus—lagoon, reefs, harbor hard by a headland through which the sea had cut its way, etc.—and it must lie at certain distances and in certain directions from five other islands visited and described by Columbus. As to the latter condition, inspection of the charts showed Watlings to be the only one that would fit the geometrical lines of Columbus' first voyage through the Bahamas. If it contained the physical features which Columbus had found in his San Salvador, then the mystery was solved. Oddly enough, the learned historians, geographers and cartographers who had supported the claims of the rival islands had not taken the trouble to visit the region of which they discoursed. Had they done so their controversy might have come to an end long ago.

Early in June our expedition sailed from New York. We went by Ward line steamer Santiago to Nassau, the capital of the Bahamas, having on board in addition to Charles Lederer, the famous artist of the Chicago Herald, a stonemason, a marble globe, a memorial tablet, thirty barrels of cement, a man servant, a photographic outfit and sundry boxes, barrels, demijohns and bottles containing the necessities of life. At Nassau we had a narrow escape. The governor of the Bahamas was to leave for England within an hour or so after our arrival, and without his authority we could do nothing. An hour of hustling, the assistance of the American consul and a letter which I had brought from Sir Julian Pauncefote, British minister at Washington, and Governor Shea gave us a letter commanding all the local officials of the Bahamas to place themselves at our command. Lucky for us that we caught kindly Governor Shea. The lieutenant governor, who came into power the minute the governor sailed, was against us. "Impertinent, presumptuous Yankees!" he exclaimed; "to think they can come down here and in a few weeks settle one of the great mysteries of history! If the lieutenant governor had had his way we should have been sent back to New York quicker."

Watlings was 200 miles away. We had decided that if a visit to Watlings produced the physical evidence necessary to establish its claims beyond doubt, well and good. If not, we were to study the other islands in the order of their theoretical probability. How to get to Watlings was the question. In the harbor were sloops, yachts and schooners galore. One smelled of her last cargo, Jamaica rum; another of sponges, a third of fish, a fourth of poultry. The cabins of all were mere cells. And it was the season of the year when emms reigned for days at a time. The only steam vessel in port was the steamship tender, a crude craft with a bottom as flat as a street car, keelless and not lovely. Besides she cost a pretty penny. But we bothered the expense and took her, hove into her our cement and supplies, employed some more masons with their tools, bought half a ton of precious

ice, hired "Sandy," the most famous pilot of the Bahamas, borrowed an American flag of the consul, and with the stars and stripes flying at masthead steamed away.

A day and a night of alternating calm and storm, through rocky passages and over dangerous shoals, and we were at Cat Island, which Washington Irving made famous and our old geographies solemnly confirmed as the San Salvador of Columbus. For half a day we steamed along the coast of Cat Island, and I examined it very carefully. It bears no resemblance whatever to the island which Columbus described in his journal. For fifty years it has been a San Salvador under false pretenses.

In the afternoon we reached Watlings. Palm trees and hazy vistas, thatched huts and outlying reefs over which the surf broke lazily marked its shores. A boat at once put off to us. It contained all the officials of the island—the local magistrate, the port officer, the postmaster, the sheriff, the colonel of the militia and many more—all in the person of Captain Maxwell Nairn, the only white resident of the island, a veritable Pooch Bah, monarch of a coral isle. His salary is \$200 a year, and he has been there thirty years.

Captain Nairn became our guide, counselor, friend and foe. With him we explored the island. A coral rock it is, a dozen miles long and half as broad, containing large lagoons of brackish water, covered with tropical vegetation, nearly surrounded by reefs. Eight hundred negroes live here, tilling altogether probably a score of acres of land, subsisting principally on fish and other sea food. They are an honest, pious, temperate people. Their chief failing is a predisposition toward piracy, and woe to the cargo of the ship that is wrecked upon their shores. This piratical tendency they came naturally by, for this coral island was once the rendezvous of infamous Blue Beard, and some of these poor people are no doubt his direct descendants.

But I could see little in this island save Christopher Columbus. At every turn the great discoverer was suggested. The salt lagoon appeared to echo back his name; the sands of the shore seemed to bear the impress of his feet; the surf breaking over the reefs chanted the "Te Deum" in imitation of Columbus himself. The spirit of Columbus dominates everything in Watlings, overshadows everything, leaves nothing else to be thought of or written about.

And no wonder. Here was everything that Columbus described in his journal—the "large lagoon in the middle of the island," the luxuriant verdure, the "reefs running all round that island," the hills near the shore, the "piece of land like an island, yet which is not an island, but could easily be made one," as an admirable sight for a fort; the harbor lying hard by, in which "all the ships of Christendom could lie." All these and many more of the things which Columbus had described we found, and at first knew instinctively, and later proved to a mathematical certainty, that this was the birthplace of the New World.

A little bay, two miles from the "piece of land like an island," I chose after much exploration as the very spot at which the landing was made. That this island was the San Salvador of Columbus I know; that this pretty bay, with its overhanging headland and shining beach, was the more particular scene of the discovery I believe. In the nature of things it cannot be proved, though there is much in its favor. Near it is a high hill which Columbus probably first saw in the moonlight of that fateful morning. It is the first bit of coast to the south, free enough from reefs to permit safe landing. It is at a point whence Columbus would have roved "north north-easterly to see the other side of the island," as he says he did the second morning after his arrival, on this occasion discovering the "piece of land like an island" and the wonderful harbor "in which the water is still as in a well."

On the promontory which lifted its head above the little bay we erected a memorial. It was constructed of coral limestone found hard by. Thirty native workmen were employed cutting roads with their machetes, bringing forward materials, mixing mortar and carrying cement up the hillside. Skillful boatmen brought supplies from the steamer through the dangerous coral reef. The American flag floated from a staff as we worked, and the monument grew day by day. The sun beat with tropical fierceness; our drinking water was dipped out of the hollows of the rocks, warm and brackish. But no one fell ill, and finally the work was finished. It had been well done. Plenty of cement bound the stones firmly together. The result was beautiful. In the coral limestone are all the tints of the rainbow, and the marine forms. Land and sea together had built a memorial to Colum-



HERALD MEMORIAL TO COLUMBUS.
Not the most expensive in the world nor the least artistic. We dedicated it with prayer and addresses. Magistrate Nairn watches over it week by week. A recent letter from him informs me that the natives under his leadership will celebrate Discovery Day at the base of the simple memorial which bears this inscription in marble:

On this spot
CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS
First set foot upon the soil of the
New World.
Erected by
The Chicago Herald
June, 1901.

WALTER WELLMAN.

THE MAP COLUMBUS USED.

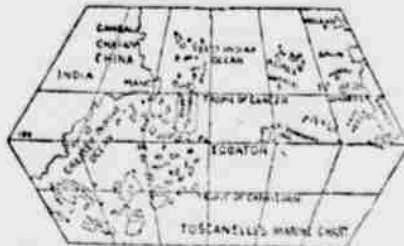
It Was Purely Theoretical and Placed India Where America Lies.

Maps based on ascertained facts are a modern idea. Prior to the age of the discovery in which Columbus is the most illustrious figure, known facts were not thought absolutely needful in the drawing of maps. Maps were plenty; facts for them were used as far as they would go; after the facts were exhausted, geographical theories answered as well.

Thus Ptolemy, in the map which served Europe for a dozen centuries, sketched the lands about the Mediterranean with at least a recognizable degree of correctness. But when he reached the limits of the explored regions he did not hesitate to finish his map; he simply put beyond the known frontiers what he thought ought to be there. He believed that beyond the visited portions of the earth were only vast deserts or impenetrable swamps. He had no idea of open oceans beyond the known lands. Ptolemy, however, understood and represented the sphericity of the earth. What is still more curious, he estimated the earth's circumference astonishingly near the truth. He made it only 3,300 miles too little.

But after Ptolemy, about 550 A. D., a geographer of the church arose whose name was Cosmas. He scorned the blasphemous idea that the earth was round. He laid out the whole universe in about the shape of a "Saratoga trunk," to follow the figure of Professor John Fiske.

But discoverers had been pushing eastward across Asia. Some monks sent out as missionaries, in about 1250 A. D., learned from Chinese whom they fell in with that on the eastern shore of China was a vast ocean.



The ideas of Ptolemy about the sphericity of the earth were beginning to be held again. It was therefore not a great leap to think that perhaps the ocean on the east of China and the ocean on the west of Spain were the same ocean. Roger Bacon thought so, saying he fancied the distance from Spain to Asia was not so very great. Columbus thought so too. He never dreamed a continent lay between. He argued that he had only to sail westward and he would soon come to the eastern coast of China or Japan, or, as he called them, Cathan and Zipangu.

Columbus was aided by the map work of Toscanelli. This distinguished astronomer, who drew his map about 1470, calculated the circumference of the earth prodigiously near the truth—he made it only 124 miles too great. This accuracy for that day is simply amazing. Toscanelli, however, was all in dreamland about Asia; he elongated Asia till it covered the whole Pacific ocean. Then he pictured open ocean, beginning at about the longitude of California and extending east to Europe.

Columbus pored over this map and carried it with him on his voyage as the nearest thing to a chart which was obtainable. Nevertheless Columbus had a theory of his own about the width of the Atlantic ocean and about the circumference of the earth. Columbus believed that Toscanelli's figure of the earth's circumference was all too large, so instead of about the true circumference Columbus went back and accepted Ptolemy's estimate, and thus made it 8,300 miles too little. He calculated that to reach the wonderful island of Zipangu, or Japan, he would have to sail only about 2,500 miles from the Canaries. In other words, he put Japan a little nearer Europe than the West Indies. Columbus squeezed the earth up till he made its circumference just too small for America. Yet the continent that his theory made impossible was to be his immortal glory.

It was very lucky, however, that Columbus thus jumped America in his reckoning, and that Toscanelli had stretched Asia across to California. For had Columbus known that the real distance from the Canaries to Japan was 12,000 miles he of course would never have dreamed of undertaking that voyage; America would have waited for her discoverer till she revealed her presence by some accident.

Here are two exceedingly interesting facts: Columbus sailed westward with a scientific purpose, in a scientific spirit, simply in order to demonstrate the sphericity of the earth as a practical means of reaching China, and in process of that demonstration he ran against an unlooked for continent. Mark Twain truthfully declares that Columbus could not help discovering America; he only had to sail on till he bumped. Yet, though the finding of America was purely an accident, the whole voyage was more of a scientific undertaking than if Columbus had fancied a new continent was to be found. Had he gone to seek a continent he would have gone only on such a knight errand quest as had been common enough during the ignorant Middle Ages. It would have taken no more bravery and been no more significant than a thousand chivalrous and foolhardy quests after nothing by the knights of Christendom.

His voyage was significant because it was undertaken in the interest of science—the new science of Europe. Columbus was the first man who had cared or dared venture out through what had been called the Sea of Darkness to demonstrate a properly arrived at scientific theory. This constitutes the real glory of Columbus over Leif Ericson, who may have visited America, but who was too much a barbarian to appreciate its significance.

The other interesting fact is, that unless Columbus had made the ludicrous error in his science he would never have made his extraordinary venture.

FRANCIS BELLAMY.



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