

He sailed the ocean blue

by BRIAN LOCKHART

Exactly who were the first Europeans to set foot on North American soil?

In Canada, it is common knowledge that Leif Erikson and his band of Norsemen landed on Newfoundland shores and built a village over 1,000 years ago.

His travels to the New World weren't an accident. In 985, another Norseman named Bjarni Herjólfsson and his band of merry men on a small ship were lost at sea.

They stumbled upon land that they realized was different from what they were used to. He decided not to go ashore and instead returned to Greenland where he reported his findings.

Leif Erikson did find Newfoundland. In fact, he and his band of adventurers built a small village. The remnants of that village are still there.

It is not known exactly how long they remained in that village. Some historians estimate that there were people there for one year.

However, Leif Erikson didn't really have a vision of what could be accomplished on these newfound shores. Living in a remote place with nothing to do, just wasn't for the Vikings.

They eventually packed things up and returned home.

In the US, they teach that the explorer Christopher Columbus discovered America. They make a big deal about this, even having a national holiday called Columbus Day in October.

Columbus, in fact, never set foot in the continental United States.

Recently U.S. President Donald Trump made a declaration to remove the recognition of Indigenous Peoples Day from the holiday to 'restore what he argues are traditional American icons.'

But why the obsession with a man who found new land totally by accident? At the time, Europeans had no idea that two massive continents were on the other side of the Atlantic.

Columbus wasn't looking for land, he was looking for a shipping route to the Far East.

When he did find land, he behaved like a pirate and a criminal.

A look back into history reveals why the U.S. celebrates Columbus Day and glorifies a murderer and slave trader.

At the time of the American Revolution, the country was new - brand new. Because of that, the U.S. did not really have any national heroes. The Founding Fathers wanted to find someone they could use to rally public support. They needed a hero.

At the time, Columbus was just considered another explorer who sailed around the world looking for gold and new places. He was not considered a stand-out as an explorer.

At that time in history, several great explorers were sailing the seven seas and two oceans.

The Founding Fathers decided to make him a national hero and promoted him as the 'discoverer of America.'

During Columbus' first contact with people in the West, he immediately took some of them prisoner and insisted they lead him to the source of their gold.

He wrote in his journal: 'I could conquer the whole of them with fifty men, and govern them as I please.'

On his next stop, he took more prisoners. He presented some of them to royalty as trophies.

On his second voyage, Columbus ordered some of his men to go across the island of Hispaniola and force it under Spanish control.

His men proceeded to murder, rape, and enslave some of the people on the island. Columbus waged war on the island until they finally surrendered and paid tribute.

They rounded up 1,500 of the locals and around 500 were sent to Spain as slaves. He treated the locals in a brutal fashion.

There is no doubt that Columbus had a great impact on the world and how history evolved after his voyages, however, there were a lot of other notable explorers of the era who managed to sail oceans without killing and robbing everyone they met.

For the first 100 years after his death, Columbus' legacy was buried in history.

He somehow became this hero despite the atrocities he committed against innocent people.

At one point in the 19th century, some Catholics tried unsuccessfully to promote him for canonization to be declared a saint.

The Vatican realized that bestowing sainthood on a man who clearly was no saint, was not a good idea.

Some heroes need to be remembered for what they did, but not necessarily celebrated.

Columbus may have been an intrepid explorer, but I can't see having a national holiday for a man who murdered, took slaves, and abused the people he 'discovered.'