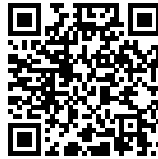




THE NEW LAUNDE: HOW A VENETIAN EXPLORER BROUGHT ENGLISH TO NORTH AMERICA

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The story of how the English language first came to North America is older than the efforts of [Henry Hudson](#) or [Walter Raleigh](#), for it goes back to the very first explorations of the New World.

Christopher Columbus's [epic voyage in 1492](#) brought him to what is now known as the Caribbean. But he was unaware that another continent lay to the north. The discovery of North America would be made only five years later by another Italian, a Venetian by the name of Giovanni Caboto, or to give him his English name, [John Cabot](#).

Cabot's two voyages to the New World (in 1497 and 1498) were sponsored by the Tudor king of England, [Henry VII](#). Thus Cabot "Englished" North America.

Behind this story, indeed, lies the world of the late Renaissance in which [powerful banking families](#) sought ways and means to access the wealth and resources of the Orient; their ventures were fueled by the belief that individual effort can change the world.

In the year 1497, three epic voyages took place:

- On May 10, [Amerigo Vespucci](#) sailed from Cadiz for the New World, following the route set out by Columbus.
- On May 20, John Cabot sailed from Bristol, intending to find a new route to the Orient.
- On July 8, [Vasco da Gama](#) sailed from Lisbon to seek a sea-route to India.

These expeditions of discovery profoundly changed the world. Because of Vespucci, South America became Spanish and Portuguese. Because of Vasco da Gama, a sea route was established to India; as well, the western half of India became Portuguese (and would remain so until the 1960s). Because of John Cabot, North America became English.

Why is it that all the early explorers were Portuguese or Italian, including Columbus?

The reason is that from the late fourteenth to the early sixteenth centuries, Italy was a dynamo of new ideas – ideas that were backed by the prosperity of its various city-states.

These ideas were generated by men like [Fibonacci](#), [Fra Mauro](#), [Toscanelli](#), [Alberti](#), [Martini](#) and [Leonardo da Vinci](#).

The work of these men yielded:

- The numerical system, which made mathematical calculation easy.
- The gnomon, which gauged the sun's rotation (to aid in navigation).
- The idea that by sailing west one could reach the east.
- The longitudes and the latitudes.

- Accurate cartography.

In 1444, [Niccolo de' Conti](#) returned to Venice, with descriptions of China and India as lands of great wealth.

About twelve years earlier, in 1432, a delegation from China had come to [Pope Eugene IV](#), and their descriptions had fired the imagination of Europe – and men like Conti.

In turn, Conti fired the imaginations of men like [Ludovico di Varthema](#) and [Antonio Pigafetta](#) – and Toscanelli, who first conceived the idea of sailing west in order to get to the east.

Toscanelli wrote his ideas down in a letter and sent it to Columbus, along with a map that he had drawn which detailed what Columbus might find if he were to sail west.

And when Columbus sailed, he indeed had with him both Toscanelli's map and letter. Thus, it was Toscanelli's reaction to Conti's account that established the idea of sailing west to get to the east.

It is within this historical context that Giovanni Caboto first emerges. Venice was an important trading and sea-faring city.

But this importance, more than two centuries old by the time of Caboto, had been eroded because of a pivotal event which occurred in 1453 – [the fall of Constantinople](#) to the Ottoman Turks.

One of the consequences of this fall was the choking off of the old trade routes to the east. Venice was desperate to find another way of trading with China, India, and the Moluccas (now Indonesia).

The sea was the answer – a way had to be found to get to the east by sea. One of the men inspired to find this route was Giovanni Caboto. His early years are a mystery, but he is often heard of in various courts of Europe (Spain, Portugal, and Milan), where he sought support for his idea of finding a sea route to the east. He had no success.

The next time we hear of him, Caboto is in London at the court of the Tudor king, Henry VII. By this time Columbus had found land across the sea – but only in the southern hemisphere. There was uncertainty as to what lay to the north.

But Caboto was certain that there was land to the north of where Columbus made landfall. And here there is some intriguing evidence which accounts for Caboto's certainty.

He was now living in London, along with his wife and son, and was known as, John Cabot. He was also a frequent visitor to Bristol, in the west of England.

There is evidence to suggest that Bristol sailors knew that there was a huge land mass across the

Atlantic, which they called "the newe launde" or the Isle of Brasil – because they regularly sailed there to fish for cod, which were plentiful then off the coasts of what are now the New England states, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland.

As well, Bristol traded regularly with Iceland and information about "[Vinland](#)," "[Markland](#)," "[Helluland](#)," or "[Great Ireland](#)" (the names given to North America by the Vikings [who were its first discoverers](#)) was well known. There are also the curious legends of the island of [Antillia](#), and of [Madoc](#), the Welsh prince who sailed off to North America around 1170.

And in 1480, John Jay, the younger, [sailed for the Isle of Brasil](#), and there are also records of Bristol sailors buying large quantities of salt to take on their voyages westwards – to salt cod.

Thus sailors from Bristol had found the New World some ten years before Columbus. Cabot likely knew what he sought, and he might well have believed that what the sailors called the Isle of Brasil was the eastern shore of China, since he believed in the idea of Toscanelli – of sailing west to reach the east.

During this time, as well, there was a "race" by the important European courts of Madrid and Lisbon to establish sovereignty over the New World. London wanted "a piece of the action," since Henry VII was a usurper king who eagerly sought legitimacy in any form.

Eventually, Cabot found both financiers and the approval of King Henry, and he set sail in 1496. When he sailed, he had convinced the king and his backers that he would find a trade-route to the east.

However, when he set sail from Bristol on his first voyage, he was heading for failure. He had only managed to get financing for one ship, which he called "the Matthew," after his wife, Mattea.

He was plagued by bad weather and lost his way. The crew grew restless, and food and water began to run low. Finally, he made the painful decision to turn back to Bristol. It was a personal disaster.

But not long afterwards, Cabot convinced his backers and the king to sponsor a second voyage across the Atlantic. Again, he got financing for only a single ship.

This time, however, on June 24, 1497, Cabot reached North America. It is a matter of controversy as to where Cabot first landed – either in present day Newfoundland or Maine.

But regardless of where he landed, his discovery had far-reaching consequences – North America would forever be aligned with English and England, despite later Dutch and French "incursions." Of course, Cabot still believed that he had landed in China.

The most important source for Cabot's second voyage is a letter written to Columbus, since Columbus was concerned that Cabot might be intruding into territory that belonged to Spain.

But this was not so – and Cabot claimed the continent of North America in the name of King Henry VII of England. He gave it a literal name – “New found land.”

Thus, on June 24, 1497, English arrived in North America - to stay for good.

When Cabot returned to England, he was given a hero's welcome, with Henry VII granting him a life-long royal pension. As well, the king agreed to finance a third voyage, with the aid of other rich merchants.

This time, Cabot commanded a fleet of five ships that set sail in May of 1498, laden with trade goods for China – everyone believed that Cabot had finally found a westward sea-route to the Orient.

There is mystery as to what exactly happened next. Two possibilities exist.

First, as is traditionally believed, that Cabot was lost at sea, along with four of the five ships, and that he died at sea.

The [second possibility suggests](#) that he might well have [returned to England](#) in 1500.

Closely associated with Cabot's expeditions is the question of how “America” received its name. The answer to this question is not crystal clear either.

Here too there are two schools of thought. One suggests that the name is the result of a swindle by the Florentine explorer, Amerigo Vespucci, in that he managed to hoodwink a group of mapmakers to name the New World after him, through a feminized version of his first name (Amerigo into America).

The second maintains that the continent is named after an English financier of John Cabot, a merchant named Richard Amerike. This school of thought suggests that since Cabot made maps of the eastern coast of North America, from Newfoundland to Maine, he honored his financial backer by naming the land he had found after him.

Thus, Amerike became America. It is known that Cabot's maps were sent to both Columbus and Vespucci. Was it for this reason that Columbus did not object to the entire New World being called “America?” Nor did Vespucci object, which means that he did carry out any swindle. All this certainly strengthens the second possibility.

All great events have deep consequences. Here are some fruits of Cabot's accomplishment.

North America became officially English and it is now the largest English-speaking landmass in the world.

This is also supported by linguistic evidence since the English spoken in North America is actually an older version of the language than the version spoken in England today.

North American English preserves fifteenth-sixteenth century English (chiefly that it is rhotic), which was the form current in England at the time of Cabot's expeditions. Thus, even though Cabot was Italian, he brought English to North America.

Cabot's son, [Sebastian](#), led a subsequent expedition, followed by another by [William Weston](#). It was Weston's expedition that brought the first settlement of English-speakers to North America.

The earliest foundation of English North America, then, is the result of a single man and his crew of 20, sailing in a single ship, and discovering land.

In this way, John Cabot forever changed the nature and shape of the world by taking the first step in establishing English-speaking North America.

The [photo](#) shows, "The Departure of John and Sebastian Cabot on their First Voyage of Discovery, 1497," painted in 1906, by Ernest Board.

