**Columbus Mythbusters**

**by Joseph M. Laufer**

*International Columbian Quincentenary Alliance
P.O. Box 1492
Columbus, NJ 08022*

***MYTH****: Columbus set out to prove the earth was round.*

**FACT**: At the end of the 15th Century, most everyone knew the earth was a sphere. What was in question, however, was the size of the earth – its circumference. Columbus underestimated the size of the earth by one-fourth.

***MYTH****: Queen Isabella sold the crown jewels to pay for Columbus' voyage.*

**FACT**: The queen may have suggested this at some point, but her financial advisers assured her that there were other ways to finance the enterprise. One way was to make the city of Palos pay back a debt to the crown by providing two of the ships. Another way was to get Italian financial backing for part of the expenses. The crown had to put up very little money from the treasury.

***MYTH****: The crew of the three ships on the voyage of discovery was made up mainly of criminals and nare-do-goods.*

**FACT**: The crew was primarily comprised of seasoned sailors from the towns of Palos and Moguer, Spain, thanks to the efforts of the Pinzon brothers. Just in case Columbus might have had trouble attracting a crew, the crown did offer amnesty to criminals. However, only four criminals were on board: one a convicted murderer (he killed a man in a quarrel); the other three, accused of freeing him from prison.

***MYTH****: The initial voyage from Spain to the new world was perilous – fraught with bad weather and lack of food. Several sailors died on the way.*

**FACT**: No one died on the maiden voyage. There was enough food aboard for one year. The weather was almost ideal – no storms were encountered. However, on the return trip to Spain there was a major hurricane which almost destroyed the two remaining ships.

***MYTH****: There was a priest on board the Santa Maria in 1492.*

**FACT**: There were no friars or priests on the first voyage in 1492, despite Columbus' deep religious fervor. Many of the paintings of the first landfall in the new world on San Salvador show a priest with Columbus – contrary to the facts. There were five priests on the second voyage: Benedictine Father Buil; the Jeronymite Father Ramon Pane; and three Franciscans.

***MYTH****: Several hundred sailors were aboard the three caravels on the initial voyage in 1492. The ships were relatively large for the anticipated long journey on an unpredictable sea.*

**FACT**: Only 90 men made the first voyage of discovery. The ships were quite tiny by modern standards – no longer than a tennis court, and less than 30 feet wide. The Santa Maria had 40 men aboard, the Pinta, 26, and the Ni$a, 24. Only the Ni$a and the Pinta returned to Spain, as the Santa Maria was shipwrecked on Christmas Day, 1492. 39 men volunteered to stay behind at the fortress called "La Navidad" on the northern coast of present-day Haiti (they all perished at the hands of the Indians prior to the return of Columbus the following year).

***MYTH****: There is no doubt that Columbus was of Italian descent.*

**FACT**: Much controversy surrounds the origins of Columbus. Some say he was a "converso" – a converted Jew. Others say he was born on Corsica, and there is even a theory that traces him to Viking ancestors. The prevailing theory is that he was a Genoese, born and raised in that seaport city in what is now Italy.

***MYTH****: Columbus suffered from syphilis and probably died from it.*

**FACT**: Columbus suffered in later life from a form of gout – an arthritic condition in his joints caused by the rigors of the sea. His eyesight was also declining. While syphilis was introduced into Europe after 1492, probably by the Indians Columbus brought back to Spain or by the sailors who had contact with them in the new world, Columbus was not infected by it.

***MYTH****: Columbus died a pauper, in chains, in a Spanish prison.*

**FACT**: Despite the fact that the Spanish crown retracted some of the privileges promised to Columbus, he was a relatively rich man at the time of his death. Although he returned to Spain in chains in 1500 after his third voyage, the King and Queen apologized for the misunderstanding and had them removed. Columbus died quietly at the age of 55 in Valladolid, Spain, on May 20, 1506 in his own apartment attended by family and friends.

***MYTH****: Columbus is buried in Santo Domingo, the Dominican Republic.*

**FACT**: There is much controversy surrounding the whereabouts of the remains of Columbus. There are records of the transferral of his remains on different occasions, so that it is possible that parts of his remains are in several locations. The prevailing belief, however, is that his primary burial place is in the Cathedral of Seville, Spain, with some of his bones or ashes in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, and some in Genoa, Italy. At one time they were in Cuba.

***MYTH****: Columbus set foot on North American soil at some point now a part of mainland United States.*

**FACT**: Columbus never saw North America. His first landfall was in the Bahamas, probably the current San Salvador (Watlings Island), although even this is disputed (Samana Cay, an island 65 miles south of San Salvador is a strong contender). There are proponents for seven other possible island landing sites. The only current U.S. territories either sighted or visited by Columbus are the U.S. Virgin Islands, which Columbus named on his second voyage, and Puerto Rico. While in anchor of St. Croix (USVI) on November 14, 1493, some of Columbus' crew experienced the first hostile encounter with the Indians. Five days later he landed at San Juan Bautista, now Puerto Rico. Later he would visit the northeastern tip of South America and the eastern coast of Central America, but never mainland U.S.A. The fact is that Columbus never admitted that he had discovered a new continent.

**SOME OTHER INTERESTING FACTS**

WOMEN were not on the first or second voyages of Columbus. The first women colonists appeared in 1498, when Columbus was allowed to recruit one woman for every ten emigrants on the third voyage.

HORSES were introduced to the new world by Columbus on his second voyage.

SEVENTEEN SHIPS and over twelve-hundred men made up "The Grand Fleet" of the second voyage in 1493.

TOBACCO was introduced into Europe because of Columbus' discovery of its use by the Indians.

CELESTIAL PHENOMENA were observed by Columbus on several of his voyages. He observed a "marvelous branch of fire" that fell into the sea (a meteor or a comet?) in 1492 on his first voyage. There is a record of a 280-pound meteorite which landed near the Alsatian town of Ensisheim and seen by the German King Maximilian in 1492. There was a total eclipse of the moon on September 14, 1494 (second voyage), which Columbus used to clarify his position (erroneously) near Asia. On the fourth voyage Columbus used his foreknowledge of a total eclipse of the moon on February 29, 1504, to convince the Indians of his supernatural powers.