

Columbus' Violent First Contact on Future US Soil

We might pause to consider the nearly lost tale of Columbus' first landing on what is now United States soil and how it began a conflict that continues in different forms to this day.

By Jeffrey R McCord, TRUTHOUT
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Landing of Columbus, 1847, John Vanderlyn (1775–1852), oil on canvas - Columbus' discovery of the New World in 1492. The crew displays a range of emotions with some searching for gold in the sand while the natives watch from behind a tree. (Image: Architect of the Capitol)

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As we observe the 522nd anniversary of Columbus landing in the “New World,” we might pause amid parades, football games, hot dogs and beer to consider the nearly lost tale of Columbus’ first landing on what is now United States soil. It began a conflict lasting 400 years.

The [Taino Native Americans](#), who once populated Caribbean islands, are the virtually anonymous authors of several nouns used in daily conversations across our globe, for example: hurricane, canoe, barbecue, tobacco and hammock. Yet, beyond unwittingly expanding world language, these aborigines played a key role in Columbus’ discovery of the New World in 1492 and in the dramatic 1493 landing during his second voyage on what is now the US Virgin Islands.

As Washington Irving famously tells us in his 1828 history, the gentle, friendly and naked Tainos greeted the European arrivals on October 12, 1492, with exotic fruits, vegetables and a subservience that led Columbus to remark that they’d make great servants. During this first landfall, on the Bahamian island of San Salvador, Columbus [seized a few Tainos](#) and brought them on board his ships to learn their language and customs.

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From Tainos, Columbus learned of another Native American tribe who eventually gave the Caribbean Sea its name – the Caribs. The Tainos said Caribs were cannibals. Although scholars today dispute whether they really were, what's important is that Columbus and his men believed them to be. That may explain what happened on November 14, 1493.

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On that day, Columbus in his new larger fleet admired vast areas of cultivation as they sailed along a new island, which he named Santa Cruz (St. Croix), in an unknown archipelago, which he named the Virgin Islands. Columbus and his captains saw a river and a village along its banks.

Dr. Diego Alvarez Chanca, physician for Columbus' second expedition, later described in a letter what happened as the expedition approached St Croix and what is now called the Salt River:

“At the dinner hour [on November 12, 1493], we arrived at an island which seemed to be worth the finding, for judging by the extent of the cultivation in it, it appeared very populous. We put in a harbor and the Admiral immediately sent on shore a well-manned barge to hold speech with the Indians in order to ascertain what race they were . . . and gain some information on our [navigational] course. And, some of the men who went in the barge [went] on shore and [entered] a village [from] whence the inhabitants had already withdrawn and hidden themselves. [But, our men were able to capture five or six enslaved Taino women and some boys from whom they] learned that the natives of this place were Caribbees.”

“As [our] barge was about to return to the ships with the captures they had made, a canoe came along the coast containing [several Caribs]; and when they saw [our] fleet [which Dr. Chanca says consisted of 17 ships and almost 1,200 fighting men] they were so stupefied with amazement that for a good hour they remained motionless at a distance of nearly two cannon shots. In this position they were seen by those in the barge and also by all the fleet.”

At this point, the commander of the barge and landing party, Count Michele de Cuneo, a childhood friend of Columbus (both grew up near Genoa, Italy) saw the Carib’s canoe. De Cuneo described the encounter in a letter translated and published by naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison:

“[The canoe had on board] three or four Carib men with two Carib women and two [male Taino] Indian slaves, of whom they had recently cut the genital organ to the belly, so that they were still sore; and we having the flagship’s boat ashore, when we saw that canoe coming, quickly jumped into the boat and gave chase to that canoe.”

No doubt, Count Cuneo had seen de-neutered male slaves before. Indeed, in his day, slavery was common in Genoa, where merchant sailors traveled to Muslim and Slavic lands in the East and brought home captives sold as servants and concubines. Castrated Taino males could serve Carib women without worry of unwanted sex. Eunuchs served the same function in the Middle East of Columbus' day.

Also, males would fatten-up more quickly without genitals, if destined for Carib dinner tables as Columbus' men believed.

Dr. Chanca continues the story of Count Cuneo's canoe chase:

"Meanwhile, [our men] in the barge moved towards the canoe, but so close in to shore, that the Indians, in their perplexity and astonishment as to what all this could mean, never saw [our men], until [they] were so near that [the Carib's] escape was impossible; for our men pressed on them so rapidly that they could not get away, although they made considerable effort to do so.

"When the Caribbees saw that all attempt at flight was useless, they most courageously took to their bows, both men and women; I say courageously because they were only four men and two women [and two slaves, according to Cuneo], and our men numbered twenty-five. Two of our men were wounded by the Indians, one with two arrows in his breast and another with an arrow in his side, and if it had not happened that [our men] carried shields and bucklers and that they soon got near [the Indians] with the barge and upset the canoe, most of them would have been killed [by] their arrows."

One of the wounded Spanish soldiers did have a thick leather shield, but an arrow went through it and penetrated his chest three inches. He died in a few days.”

Dr. Chanca continues:

“[The Indians, even while in the water, were] still using their bows as much as they could . . . [so that it was very hard for our men] to take them; and [of all of the Indians] there was one of them whom they were unable to secure until he had received a mortal wound with a lance, and whom thus wounded they took to the ships.

“[The Caribbees we took had] curly designs drawn with sticks on their faces and foreheads and had their eyes and eyebrows stained, which I imagine they do for ostentation and to give them a more frightful appearance . . .”

The Carib and Taino captives were taken on board Columbus’ flagship. The Indian women were given as slaves to Columbus’ officers.

Thus, ended the first battle between Europeans and Native Americans.

Part of the US Virgin Islands National Park, the Salt River battle site is today described by the Park Service as a “dynamic, tropical ecosystem home to some of the largest mangrove forests in the Virgin Islands” as well as coral reefs and an underwater canyon.

Gone are the Carib/Taino cultivated fields and village. Even later European sugar plantation clearings are overgrown with more than 100 years of trees,

bushes and guinea grass.

Surprisingly, some Tainos managed to survive 500 years of European disease and Spanish enslavement. From a pre-Columbian population of 3 million, Smithsonian Magazine reports a few hundred members of the tribe continue to live in Cuba and some survive in the mountains of Puerto Rico.

Although bloodshed between Europeans and Native Americans mostly ended on US soil during the last years of the 19th century, the sad legacy of European “discovery” continues to plague aborigines in the Amazon basin and elsewhere in the Americas.

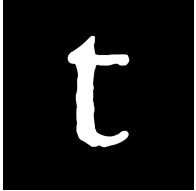
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