

Juan Caboto (John Cabot)

c1450 – c1500



He was born in 1450 in Genoa and by 1471 was accepted into one of the most prestigious religious confraternities in Venice. This suggests that he was already a respected member of the community. By 1476 he had full Venetian citizenship, which made him eligible to engage in maritime trade in the Eastern Mediterranean. Through this he gained knowledge of Eastern merchandise, such as spices and silks. Venetian records of the late 1480s indicate that he was married and already had multiple sons. Records also show that he was involved in house building in the city, but got into financial difficulties and later left Venice, as an insolvent debtor. He then moved to Spain as a civil engineer, but did not seem to have had a successful career. He then moved on, firstly to Seville and then to Lisbon, to try to get support for an Atlantic Expedition, but having no luck, he then came to London.

Here he got backing from the Italian Community, through an Augustine Prior, Father Carbonaris (who went on Cabot's first expedition) It was through the prior that Cabot was introduced to Henry V¹¹. His next move was to Bristol, which at that time was a major maritime centre and the only city to have undertaken exploratory expeditions into the Atlantic. Cabot was given a

royal patent in 1496 stating that any commerce resulting from any of his discoveries, must be conducted with England alone and goods must be brought into the country through Bristol (with the King getting a fifth of the profits) This would make Bristol into a monopoly port. King Henry had seen Seville and Lisbon do this.

Records indicate that in 1496, Cabot set sail from Bristol with an uncooperative crew and few supplies. He soon experienced bad weather and made the decision to return to port. On the 2 May 1497 he set sail again, this time with a crew of 18 which included 2 Bristol merchants. His vessel, the *Matthew* sailed west and north, believing that the route to Asia would be shorter than the one Columbus took along the Trade Winds route. On 24 June he made landfall on the coast of North America, but it does not seem clear exactly where. Cape Breton I, St Johns, Nova Scotia and others have all being mentioned. Out of these Cape Bonavista made the greatest claim and celebrated this on the 500th anniversary of his landing. It is recorded that Cabot came ashore just long enough to raise a Venetian Papal banner in recognition of the religious authority of the Roman Catholic church, to claim the land for King Henry and to take on fresh water.

He returned to Bristol on 6 August and received a £10 reward (about 2 yrs pay for a labourer) and the King's gratitude. This was followed in Dec 1497 by him being awarded a yearly pension of £20 backdated to March.

In 1498 he was given permission to make a new voyage to N. America. This time he had 5 ships. His real intention was to find Japan. Some of these ships contained merchandise which included cloth caps, lace and other items which indicate that he intended to trade on this expedition. One of his ships was caught in a storm and only made it to Ireland, but it is not really known what happened to Cabot himself.

There are various theories. Did he die at sea ? Did he make land and live in America ? Some claim he returned to England and died there in 1501. His son Sebastian followed in his footsteps.,

There are many replicas, statues and memorials to his achievements especially in Bristol and also in N America.