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Richard Ameryk and the name America

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DURING the celebration of the four hundredth anniversary of the discovery of the Continent of North America by John Cabot, which took place in Bristol in the year 1897, an ancient manuscript, which had then recently been discovered among the muniments at Westminster Abbey, was, by permission of the Dean and Chapter, sent down to Bristol for the inspection of the Marquis of Dufferin and others interested in the celebration. This manuscript "the Customs Roll of the Port of Bristol, for A.D. 1496 to 1499," and its chief interest lay in the fact that among the payments recorded in the years 13 and 14 of King Henry VII - *i.e.*, between September 29th 1497 and the same date 1499 - are two payments of twenty pounds each to John Cabot.

This shows, what we did not know previously,¹ that John Cabot returned to Bristol after his second voyage of 1498, and claimed the pension which had been conferred by the King on "him that found the new Isle;" *i.e.*, North America. So much interest was taken in the manuscript in Bristol, that it was arranged to reproduce it in *facsimile*, Mr. Edward Scott, M.A., at that time "Keeper of Manuscripts in the British Museum" undertaking the translation and transliteration, while I contributed a brief introduction. This was published by Messrs. Georges Sons, of Bristol, in the autumn of 1897, under the title of *The Customs Roll of the Port of Bristol, A.D. 1496-99*, with three autotype *facsimile* reproductions of the original document, full size. Fig. 1 is an enlarged photograph, by Mr. William Moline, of the name of the man from whom Cabot received his pension, Richard Ameryk, as it appears in the Roll for 1497-8.



FIG. 1.

There is no longer any doubt that on his return from his second voyage, John received for the second time the handsome pension conferred upon him by the King, from the hands of the Collectors of Customs of the Port of Bristol. One of these officials, the senior of the two, who probably was the person who actually handed over the money to the explorer, was named Richard Ameryk (also written Ap Meryke in one deed) who seems to have been a leading citizen of Bristol at the time, and was

¹ Mr. Henry Harrisse, in his "John Cabot the discoverer of North America," p. 134, wrote, of the 1498 voyage, "We do not know when they returned to England, nay, whether John Cabot survived the expedition."

and was Sheriff in 1503. Now it has been suggested both by Mr. Scott and myself that the name given to the newly found land by the discoverer was “Amerika,” in honour of the official from whom he received his pension. We know from contemporary records that John, on his return from London after his visit to Court, was received in Bristol with great honour; he dressed in silk and was called “the Great Admiral.” And also that, being somewhat over elated with his triumph, he apparently made rather a fool of himself. See, for instance, the account of his conduct given by Raimondo di Soncino to the Duke of Milan, in December in 1497.¹

“The Admiral, as Master Joanne is styled, has given a companion an island, and has also given another to his barber, a Genoese - some Italian friars have the promise of being bishops,” etc. If John was so free with his gifts to his poorer friends, we can quite understand his wish to show gratitude to the King's official, and that he may have done so by conferring his name on “the new island,” which was then supposed to be not a new Continent, but to be situated off the coast of China, or India. Now, have we any evidence that the name America was known in Bristol at this time? Possibly we have, or should have if the lost “Fust MS” could be re-discovered.

There was formerly in the possession of the Fust family, at Hill Court, Gloucestershire,² a manuscript which has often been quoted, but the original of which is lost.

It was one of the “Calendars” in which local events were recorded, similar to the well known “Bristowe Kalendar” of Robert Ricart, and others which still remain. Under the mayoral year, 1496-7, it was recorded that John Drews was Mayor, Hugh Johnes, Sheriff, Thomas Vanghan and John Elyott, Bailiffs, and that “This year (1497), on St. John the Baptist's day (June 24th), the land of America was found by

¹ *John and Sebastian Cabot*, by C. R. Beazley, London, 1898, p.65

² See Weare, *Cabot's Discovery of North America*, pp. 116-122

the merchants of Bristow, in a ship of Bristowe called the 'Mathew,' the which said ship departed from the port of Bristowe the 2nd of May and came home again the 6th August following." Mr. Beazley¹ in quoting this, says: "No great confidence can be expressed in the tradition of the lost manuscript - *The use of the term America shows that it is not a strictly contemporary document.*" But if our suggestion as to the origin of that name be correct, this manuscript may be looked upon as contemporary evidence of the fact, that the newly discovered land was already called America in Bristol long before that name became known on the Continent,

For nearly four centuries it has been supposed that the name America had been given to the land by the friends of a certain Italian of good birth, Alberico or Amerigo Vespucci, who was certainly not the discoverer of the land. Columbus we know, and Cabot we know, but what had Vespucci to do with the discovery? It has always struck me as curious; that, several years after its discovery, the new continent should have received the name — and the *Christian name* be it remembered — of such a comparatively obscure person as this Italian "purveyor of beef" or "ship chandler" as he has been called. It is also difficult to see how the name America, or Amerika as the Germans and Dutch write it, was derived from that of the Italian Amerigo or Alberico.

His name is variously given by old authors, but in the State Archives of Mantua there is a letter dated December, 1492, by himself, which is signed "Ser Amerigho Vespucci, merchante florentino in Sybilia." He is sometimes called Amerigo or Americo, sometimes Alberigo or Alberico — in Latin Americus or Albericus Vespuccius - and sometimes Morigo Vespuche, which was probably the name by

¹ *John and Sebastian Cabot*, p. 90.

which he was known to his Spanish friends. The name Amerika was not given to the land in Spain, but “by foreign writers” (*see* Las Casas later), and if so possibly in England. Amerika seems much more like the name of the Bristol Customs official, than that of the Italian, and what I venture to suggest is that after having been invented in Bristol, by Cabot, and having been the only name for “the new island” for more than ten years after its discovery, the resemblance of the name to that of Vespucci struck the “foreign writer” at Freiburg (to whom the English “Richard Ameryk” was quite unknown), and thus through an error of his editor, to Vespucci was transferred the honour that the discoverer of North America, John Cabot, had intended to confer on the Bristolian “Ameryk.”

“As early as 1507,” says Herr Otte,¹ “the name *Americi terra* had been proposed for the now continent by a person whose existence was undoubtedly unknown to Vespucci, the geographer Waldsee-Müller (*Martimis Hylacomylus*), of Freiburg ... in a work entitled *Cosmographies Introductio, insuper quatuor Americi Vespuccii Navigationes.*”

Vespucci was born at Florence, and was baptized in the Church of San Giovanni (The Baptistry) in that city, 18th March, 1452. He died 22nd February, 1512, in Seville.

About ten years ago a lost fresco by Domenico Ghirlandajo was discovered in the Church of San Salvatore d'Ognisanti in Florence, among the adornments of a tomb of the Vespucci family.² One of the figures in this fresco is said to represent the explorer from whom America has been supposed to have taken its name.

Unfortunately much confusion arose among the recorders of the transatlantic voyages of Cabot, Columbus and their successors, which gave rise to an opinion, apparently widely believed in in the early part of the 16th century, that the first

¹ Humboldt's *Cosmos*, note by the editor, E. C. Otté, in Bohn's edition, vol ii, p. 676.

² *Architect*, February 11th, 1898.

voyage in which A. Vespucci took part, *preceded* that of Columbus, and that therefore Vespucci (they seem to have ignored Cabot) was the actual discoverer of the New World. In a quaint dramatic poem of the beginning of the reign of Henry VIII. probably about 1519, the recent discovery of the new land in the West is alluded to, and the discovery is distinctly ascribed to Amerigo Vespucci:—

But these new lands found lately
Be called America, because only
Americus did first them find.¹

In 1527, Las Casas writes, in his preface “Prologo” :- “To Amerigo alone without naming any other, the discovery of the continent is ascribed . . . Circumstances have led some to attribute to him that which is due to others, and which ought not to be taken from them” - namely, Columbus and Cabot. And again, “The foreign writers call the country America; it ought to be called Columba.”²

Fifty years after the voyages of Columbus and Cabot, in 1543, the great astronomer, Nicholas Copernicus, in his *Revolutionibus orbium coelestium*, vol. vi, ascribed the discovery of the new part of the globe to Vespucci.

“Accident, and not fraud and dissensions deprived the continent of America of the name of Columbus,” says Alexander von Humboldt (*Cosmos*, vol ii. p. 676, Bohn’s edition). The charges made by many writers on the character of Amerigo, who attribute to “a fraudulent attempt to arrogate to himself the honour due to Columbus” (and to Cabot) are now generally believed to be unfounded. The publisher of Vespucci’s narrative of his voyages, under the impression that his first voyage was made before that of Columbus, believed Amerigo to have been the discoverer of the

¹ “A new Interlude . . . of the IV Elements. Printed 1519-20,” Copy in British Museum, Press-mark C 39. 6. 17. Beazley, pp. 131—134.

² *Historic General de las Indias*, A.D. 1527-59, by Fra Bartholomé de las Casas.

new world, and therefore, it is said, gave his name to the land.

Whither Humboldt is right in denying that Vespucci had any voice in “the fraudulent attempt to arrogate to himself the honour due to Columbus” and to Cabot, is still somewhat uncertain, and perhaps never will be clearly established. Some later writers are not so well disposed to the Florentine and have hard things to say about him. “The Florentine contractor was merely a landlubber fond of airing his classical knowledge inaccurate in his narratives and regardless of the truth, as was ably shown by Las Casas, while he habitually assumed the credit of works which belonged to his superiors, and . . . was disloyal to the men under whom he served. He certainly was not a practical navigator or pilot.” All this and more is recorded by Sir Clements Markham in his “Letters of Amerigo Vespucci,” Hakluyt Society. 1894.

In the year 1543 an accusation was brought against Vespucci, by the astronomer Schoner, of Nuremberg, of having inserted the words “Terra di Amerigo” in charts which he had altered. Las Casas (*Historia Generate*) 1559, mentions this report. “He is said to have placed the name America in maps, thus sinfully failing towards the Admiral” (Columbus). But there appears to be no evidence of this, and so far as is known the first appearance of the name America is on a map in an edition of Ptolemy's “Geography” printed in 1522, twenty-seven years after we suggest that it was given to the country by Cabot, and fifteen after it had been suggested by Hylacompylus.

Amerigo seems to have been on good terms with Columbus and his family, which we should hardly have expected to have been the case if the Florentine had during the lifetime of the Admiral, claimed to have himself been the discoverer of the new lands.

If our suggested origin of the name be correct, it seems curious that we have no further evidence of it in Bristol records, except that of the lost Fust manuscript. But as

Richard Americk died several years before we have any evidence that the name was attributed to Vespucci, and the Bristol official was quite unknown to Continental writers, one can imagine how the mistake may have arisen.

The family of Merrick, or A'Meryk, or Ap Meryk seem to have been settled in Bristol from early times, and several of the members are mentioned in Bristol wills.

Richard Amerycke was a person of importance in Bristol towards the end of the fifteenth century. He was elected Sheriff of Bristol in 1503, and according to Mr. Weare, died during his year of office, when he was succeeded by Robert Thorne, one of the Founders of the Bristol Grammar School.

In his "Manorial History of Clifton" published in the *Transactions* of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society, iii, 223-4, Mr. Ellis writes :— "We find in 1470, one third" (of the manor of Clifton) in possession of a wealthy citizen of Bristol, named Richard Amerycke, who had also been purchasing large estates in Somersetshire. By charter dated the last day of August that year he conveyed the same to John Broke and Joan his wife, and the heirs of John, remainder to the right heirs of Hugh Broke. This John was a lawyer, and Joan his wife was one of the daughters and co-heirs of Richard Amerycke, who died June 9th, 1501." Mr Ellis is certainly in error when he states that "Richard Amerycke died June 9th, 1501," as all the Calendars give him as Sheriff in 1503-4,¹ associated with Henry Dale, or Deal, as Mayor, and Wim Bedford as Bailiff. A daughter of Richard, named Joan, married John Broke, Serjeant-at-Law to Henry VIII, and a Justice of the Assize in the Western circuit. He died in 1525, and was buried in the Church of St, Mary Redcliff, where his fine monumental brass with effigies of himself and his wife Joan, can be seen. On this

¹ See "Two Bristol Calendars" *Transactions* Bristol and Gloucester Archaeological Society, vol. xix, pp. 128-9.

brass are the Arms of Broke impaling Americk, the latter being :— Paly of six, Or and Azure, on a fess Gules, three mullets Argent; which, rather than the Stars and Stripes, might have been the Arms of America.

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NOTE.

The publication of this paper has been delayed in the hope that a copy of the Fust manuscript, which is supposed to have been in possession of the late Mr. William George, of Bristol, might have been found, but so far the search has not been successful. The original MS, was purchased by one of the original members of our Club, the late Mr. Thomas Kerslake, and unfortunately perished, with many other valuable manuscripts and works in the fire which destroyed his premises in Bristol, in 1860.