

Travellers' Tales

For many of my early years the subject of history would leave me cold and uninspired. I partly attributed that to an education full of fusty information, battles and dates, coupled with a distinct lack of enthusiasm for the topic on my behalf. The teachers I encountered weren't able to portray the richness of times past and so this area of my interest had yet to be awakened.

The sense of belonging and discovery in all its forms has since become a motivation in my more mature years to develop a wider knowledge of the world in which we live and our place within it.

It was on one of these such adventures ten years ago when I visited a bucket list country for many. Iceland and its fascinating culture beckoned and armed with a to do list of the usual tourist attractions I relished the arrival of the upcoming trip. The hotel had been chosen at random, fairly close to the capital's bustling centre and immediately opposite the main Cathedral of the city. An imposing building dominated the skyline and was one of the tallest structures in the country. Perfect spot for exploring.

On arrival at the hotel and with bag unpacked I was immediately drawn to cross over the short distance to view this wonderful church for myself. The crisp November air and fading daylight hastened my approach. I was stopped in my tracks by an imposing statue in the grounds of the church and was surprised to learn that my hotel had been named after this great and intrepid Icelandic explorer known as Leif Erikson. I vowed to discover more about his life and his apparent importance which warranted this huge statue in such a prominent place.

The hotel information leaflet was full of myths and legends dating back around 1,000 years ago telling of Leif's exploration and conquests and dubious family background but I definitely felt he held heroic status. It was difficult to imagine his life back in those times particularly in the harsh conditions of these raw northern climes.

Since my visit and maybe imbued by this hero's endeavours I have been fortunate since then to have undertaken my own exploration of varying cultures in overseas visits. My own trips of course have satisfied a personal curiosity and thirst without the risks involved of those ancient travellers.

So, here I was on my latest journey abroad. As I descended the airplane steps it occurred to me that as I was about to set foot on American soil, I would be the very latest traveller to arrive in the New World. I was here to visit my family but many before me had arrived looking for a new start in a strange land.

Staying with family in Pennsylvania I was curious to learn of the derivation of the state's name and soon learned it had been named after a British Quaker named William Penn. William rejected his Anglican religion and adopted the Quaker values following a visit to Ireland. In 1662 he was expelled from University for his continued interest in promoting the values of The

Society of Friends. He was subsequently imprisoned for stating his beliefs and was reviled by respectable society.

It was against this background and unlikely friendship with King Charles II, who was ruling England without Parliament at that time, that a settlement of the King's debt to William's late father was reached. William was allocated a vast province of 45,000 square miles in the American colonies, an area almost the size of England itself. Penn hoped to provide a refuge for the persecuted Quaker followers and build a Christian commonwealth in this New World. The King saw this as a way of settling his outstanding debt at the same time as ridding the country of the Quaker movement. The King called this "Penn's Wood", later to be called Pennsylvania. The modern "City of Brotherly Love" known as Philadelphia reflects his desire that his colony would serve as a haven for Quakers and other oppressed Christians seeking religious freedom.

I wished to further my knowledge and was delighted to learn that Penn's first landing ground was only a short drive away. The very next day I visited a small town called New Castle on the banks of the Delaware River and viewed the very spot where William Penn took his first steps off his ship called "Welcome" onto American colonial land. A plaque and statue were proudly displayed marking this momentous arrival in 1682.

The local antique centre beckoned and on receiving a warm welcome from the town's sage, and on hearing my English accent, he asked after my visit. I explained my interest in William Penn's arrival but he quickly said that William had only been one of those to arrive in the country looking for a new life and did I realise that a few hundred years earlier Christopher Columbus had also sailed to these shores. Of course, I didn't want to dampen his enthusiasm but as I was showing interest in his country's origins, he pointed me in the direction of the local historical society building.

Imbued with this latest information I chatted with a very knowledgeable volunteer at the society. The lady was kind enough to regale me with stories about the European settlers around the time of Columbus which also included Vasco de Gama and Amerigo Vespucci. Amerigo Vespucci was an Italian explorer from whom the country of America was named.

However, she concluded, Columbus is all well and good but did I know that he wasn't the first man to set foot in this country as is widely acknowledged. Expressing a look of surprise and continued interest I asked if she meant an arrival a few years before Columbus. She replied "Oh no, my dear I mean over 400 years before Christopher Columbus' arrival, our history confirms that an Icelandic explorer was blown off course from his exploration of Greenland and eventually landed on the shores of our continent some 1,000 years ago. Not many people are aware of that. He was an ancient explorer of Scandinavian descent named Leif Erikson!

Leif Erikson! Hastily sifting through my travel history brain, I began to place the mystery Icelandic hero back to my visit ten years earlier to Reykjavik to the man who had sparked my historical curiosity ... and it all fell into place. Leif was the first man to set foot in this new land and here I was, the latest arrival with am sure a similar sense of adventure. Who knew that today's story would end where it began.

I reflected on my gathered knowledge and felt so very grateful that I now knew that history most definitely has a relevant place today and I felt very connected with the past.

Encircling the history of my travels and spanning a millennium, here I was a modern-day Leif Erickson who has once more had made landfall in America

We are all travellers in time, with our unique tale to tell. With a thirst for knowledge and a desire to better our lives, the stories and quests continue.

