



1492 Columbus sails from Spain.

1620 The Pilgrims land at Plymouth Rock.

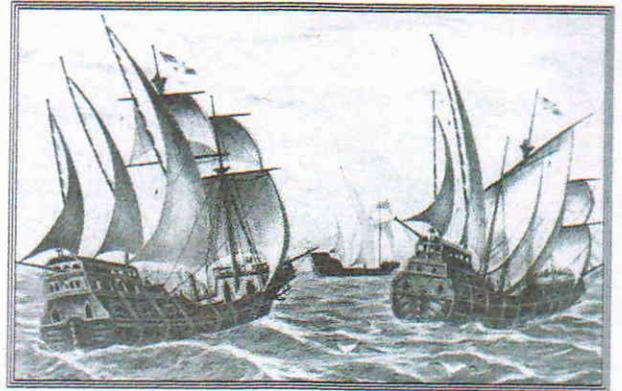
1654 The first Jewish settlers arrive in New Amsterdam.

Also in this chapter: The year the first rabbi came to the New World. What was his name?

# The First Jews in America

The story of the Jews in America begins in Spain, just before America was discovered. In 1478 King Ferdinand set up the Inquisition to seek out people who said they had converted to the Catholic faith, but secretly practiced other religions. These included many of the Jews in Spain.

For fourteen years the Inquisition used torture and death as its weapons against Jews who had only pretended to become Catholics. These were the “crypto” or “secret” Jews. They were often helped by Jews who had refused to convert. Finally, on March 31, 1492, the king ordered all Jews in Spain to convert to Catholicism or leave the country by July 31.



**Conversos was the name given to Jews who converted to the Catholic faith. Those called crypto Jews only pretended to convert, while secretly continuing to practice Judaism.**

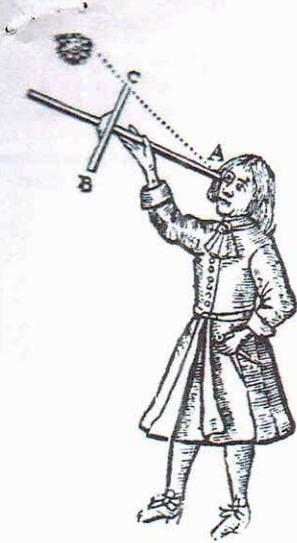
The first Jew to set foot in America arrived in that same year. His name was Luis de Torres, and he was a *converso*—he was born a Jew, but converted to Catholicism just before sailing away from Spain. History might have forgotten all about him, except that he sailed with one of the most important explorers of all time.

When Christopher Columbus was getting ready for his famous voyage in search of a new passage to the Far East, he needed an interpreter. He chose Luis de Torres. It was a good choice. Luis de Torres knew Hebrew and Spanish as well as Aramaic and some Arabic. Knowing that all Jews—even those who had only pretended to convert—would soon be forced to leave Spain, the opportunity to sail with Columbus came just at the right moment for Luis de Torres.

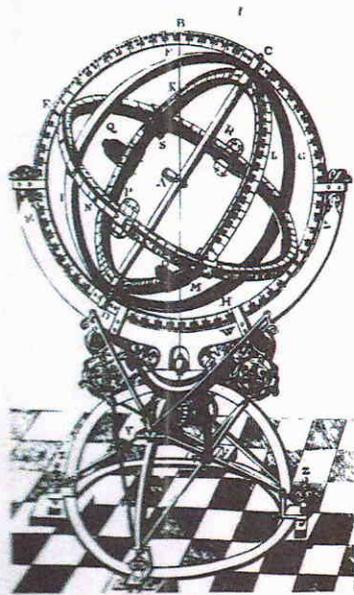


▲ During your first history lessons you probably learned the names of Columbus' three ships (pictured above). Did you know that at least six members of the crew came from families that were once Jewish?

◀ Between 1481 and 1492 some 13,000 Jews were put to death by the Inquisition, often in public burnings like the one shown in this drawing.



▲ Using the “Jacob’s staff,” or quadrant invented by Levi ben Gershom, ships’ navigators could calculate their location during daylight hours.



▲ The astrolabe, an instrument used by Jewish astrologers, allowed sailors to navigate at night by measuring the position of the planets.

## How the Jews Helped Columbus

Columbus received advice and help from Jewish experts and scientists. He talked about geography with the best mapmaker of the age, Judah Cresques. He plotted the course of his ships using the writings of the Jewish astronomer Abraham Zacuto. And on his three ships Columbus had the help of at least five *conversos*, including his surgeon, the fleet physician, and Luis de Torres, his interpreter.

You may have heard how Queen Isabella gave Columbus some of her jewels to buy the ships and supplies required for the journey. Yet much more money was needed, and it came from ordinary people—merchants and investors. Among these were a number of *conversos*, including another Luis—Luis de Santangel. Luis de Santangel was the chancellor of Spain, the country’s most important money-manager. Not only did he convince Queen Isabella to support Columbus’ exploration, he also made an additional large personal loan to the explorer. In these ways, the Jews of Spain played an important part in the discovery of America.

## The First Jew in the New World

Columbus and his crew set sail on August 3, 1492. The three ships—the *Nina*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa Maria*—reached land on October 12 of the same year.

**Columbus “discovered” what Europeans called a New World. It was not called America until 1507, when it was named for the explorer Amerigo Vespucci.**

Columbus first landed on a small island in the Bahamas and then on the island now called Cuba. He was disappointed with his explorations and returned to Spain. But Luis de Torres decided to remain. He had made friends with the natives and learned their language, and one of the chiefs gave him some land.

History has all but forgotten Luis de Torres, but he was one of the first Europeans in America, and certainly the first who had been born a Jew. Was he also the first Jew to find religious freedom in America? We can only wonder whether Luis de Torres, free of Spain and the Inquisition, continued to be a Catholic or returned to his Jewish faith.

**S**ome historians say that Luis de Torres gave Columbus a letter to deliver to his relatives in Spain. He invited other Spanish Jews to join him in the “new” world. That letter was written 500 years ago. *If you were to write a letter to Jews in Spain today telling them why you think America is a good place to live now, what would you say?*