

Origin of the Name America

[A theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1875/03/origin-of-the-name-america/630553](http://theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1875/03/origin-of-the-name-america/630553)

March 1, 1875

By Jules Marcou

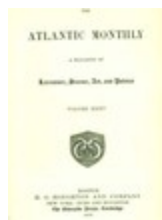
THE controversy as to the priority of discovery and the honor of bestowing a name on the New World has been so long undecided, — almost three centuries, — that any light thrown upon this intricate problem may help its true solution, if the truth be discoverable at this late day; and with this hope I offer the following contribution.

Americ, *Amerrique*, or *Amerique* is the name in Nicaragua for the high land or mountain range that lies between Juigalpa and Libertad, in the province of Chontales, and which reaches on the one side into the country of the Careas Indians, and on the other into that of the Ramas Indians. The Rios Mico, Artigua, and Carca, that form the Rio Blewfields; the Rio Grande Matagalpa, and the Rios Rama and Indio, that flow directly into the Atlantic; as well as the Rios Comoapa, Mayales, Acoyapa, Ajocuapa, Oyale, and Terpenaguatapa, flowing into the Lake of Nicaragua, all have their sources in the Americ range.¹

Enjoy a year of unlimited access to The Atlantic—including every story on our site and app, subscriber newsletters, and more.

Become a Subscriber

The names of places, in the Indian dialects of Central America, often terminate in *ique* or *ic*, which seems to mean “great,” “elevated,” “prominent,” and is always applied to dividing ridges, or to elevated, mountainous countries, but not to volcanic regions: for instance, Nique and Aglasinique in the Isthmus of Darien (Estados Unidos de Colombia); Tucarique and Amerrique in Nicaragua; Amatique, Manabique, Chaparristique, Lepaterique, Llotique, and Ajuterique in Honduras ; Atenquique (Estados Unidos de Mexico): Tactic and Poloclic in Guatemala ; Topic, Acatic, and Mesquitic in the state of Jalisco. The list of Indian local or other names, with the termination of *ique* or *ic*, as Cacique or Cacic, great chief, might be easily lengthened.



View This Story as a PDF

See this story as it appeared in the pages of The Atlantic magazine.

Open

It is now well known, through the learned researches of philologists for the last twenty years, that no denominations are more securely established than the names of localities — mountains, valleys, lakes, rivers. Even the most absolute conquest, unless it totally exterminate the aboriginal race inhabiting a country, does not destroy entirely the names of localities, or *lieux-dits*, as the French so well express it. These names may be slightly modified, by various spelling, but the primitive sound remains. And even where the aboriginal race entirely disappears, the names of places are often preserved, at least as synonyms; of which there are many examples in Canada, in New England, in the State of New York, and elsewhere throughout the Union.

The question to be decided is, whether the word Americ or Amerrique, designating a part of the *terra firma* discovered by Cristoforo Colombo, on his fourth and last voyage to the New World, was known to the great navigator, and consequently could have been repeated by him or by the companions of his voyage. There is no certainty of this ; for the word is not found in the very brief account he has left us. But as the origin of the word Americ has been until now an enigma, in spite of the different interpretations of it that have been given, and as Vespucci had nothing to do with this name, entirely unknown to him, — the inventor of the word Americi or America being a printer and bookseller in a small town hidden in the Vosges Mountains, — it is perhaps well to review the facts, and to show where lies the greatest probability for a true solution of the origin of this word America, which denominates alone a hemisphere.

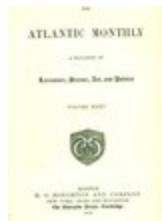
In the Lettera Rarissima of Cristoforo Colombo giving an abridged description of his fourth voyage, 1502-3, he says that after having passed the Cape Gracias a Dios, on the Mosquito coast, he reached the Rio Grande Matagalpa, which he called the Disaster River, and after remaining anchored there for several days, he stopped some time for repairing his ships and giving rest to the crews, between the small island of La Huerta (the Garden Quiribiri) and the continent, opposite the village Cariaï or Cariay. Cariaï is so like Carcaï, or the dwelling-place of the Carcas Indians, who still live in that neighborhood, that it is possible the variation is caused by an error in reading the manuscript letter of Colombo, the c having been mistaken for an i.

The great object of the desires and researches of Colombo and his company was the finding of gold mines; and of these the inhabitants of Cariaï or Carcaï had much to relate; they led Colombo to another village called Carambaru, whose inhabitants wore golden mirrors round their necks. These Indians named several places where mines of gold existed, the last named being Veragua, twentyfive leagues distant on the coast.

Colombo and his company were struck by the number of sorcerers (medicine men) among the Cariaï or Carcaï; and the sailors afterwards thought they had been bewitched by them, as they suffered from the many tempests and mishaps of all sorts they were obliged to endure for the rest of the voyage.

Browse Newsletters

What was the geographical position of Cariaï (Carcaï), Carambaru, and Veragua ? Veragua is known to be in the great Bay of Chiriqui (Costa Rica) : Colombo says in his narration, “It is the custom in this territory of Veragua to bury the chief men with all the gold they possess; ” and in these last years gold has been found in the tombs of the aborigines of that country. Carambaru was at least twenty-five leagues distant from Veragua (Chiriqui), which brings us a little to the north of the Rio San Juan and Greytown. Cariaï (Carcaï) must have been a little farther north, in the neighborhood of the mouth of the Rio Blewfields (of which the Rio Carea is one of the affluents), where are several islands, and this accords with the narration of Colombo. The Carcas Indians inhabit all this region, and work to-day in the gold mines of Santo Domingo and Libertad, on the Rio Mico, another affluent of the Blewfields, at the foot of the Americ (or Amerrique) range. Carambaru was probably near the Rio Rama, and in the country of the Ramas Indians. Now the Ramas and Carcas Indians have always resisted all attempts at civilization; most of them, especially the Ramas, are wholly savage, and allow no one to penetrate into their country; they have remained the same as they were when Colombo visited them in 1502.



Explore the March 1875 Issue

Check out more from this issue and find your next story to read.

[View More](#)

It is well known with what tenacity the Indians attach themselves to all their surroundings; and the Americ or Amerrique range forms the highest chain of mountains in the country of the Carcas and Ramas Indians, the average being three thousand feet; making a dividing line between the waters flowing directly into the Atlantic, and those that empty into the Lake of Nicaragua. According to travelers who have visited certain places in the neighborhood of Libertad, Juigalpa, and Acoyapo, this mountain range is very conspicuous; it is seen from afar, with its precipitous rocks, great white cliffs, and huge, isolated, rocky pinnacles. This ridge divides the country into two parts, distinguished by totally different climates. To the east continual rains have caused impenetrable forests, and to the west of this dividing line the country is arid and unproductive for want of rain. The Americ range prevents the passage of all the moisture from the Atlantic. The direction is from north-northwest to southsoutheast, and the last spur of the range is on the Atlantic coast a little to the north of Greytown; the ramifications being in the country of the unapproachable and savage Ramas Indians.

There is the strongest evidence that this word, denoting the range and the rocks of Amerrique, Amerique, or Americ, is an indigenous word, the terminal *ique* or *ic* being common for the names of locality, in the language of the Lenca Indians of Central America, a part of Mexico; and that this name has been perpetuated without alteration since the discovery of the New World, by the complete isolation of the Indians who live in this part of the continent, who call their mountains by the same word to-day as they did in 1502, when Colombo visited them, Amerrique, Amerique, or Americ. These mountains are auriferous; at their foot lie the gold mines of Libertad and Santo Domingo, and further, the gold of the alluvium or the placers is entirely exhausted, which can only be explained through a previous washing by the Indians themselves; at present the gold is to be found only in the veins of quartz rock.

Colombo says the Indians named several localities rich in gold, but he does not give the names in his very curtailed account, contenting himself with citing the name of the province of Ciamba; but it is highly probable that this name Americ or Amerrique was often pronounced by the Indians in answer to the pressing demands of the Europeans of the expedition. The eagerness for gold was such among the first navigators that it formed their chief preoccupation everywhere; and it is almost certain that to their continual questions as to the place where the gold was found that the Indians wore as ornaments, the reply would be, from Americ, this word signifying the most elevated and conspicuous part of the interior, the upper country, the distinguishing feature of the province of Ciamba.

It does not follow that Colombo was ignorant of the word Americ because he has omitted it in the Lettera Rarissima, which was addressed by him to his Catholic Majesty, the powerful King of Spain. It is evident, from his mention of several places where gold was to be found, as the Indians had told him without giving their names, that he did not tell all he knew; and it must be remembered that the Lettera Rarissima was written under the most painful circumstances. He was a prisoner in the island of Jamaica, loaded with chains, old, infirm, and overwhelmed by suffering and injustice, and not in a position to make a very full report of his expedition. His account of his fourth voyage is the least clear and precise of all his writings, showing in its confused and melancholy style the sad condition to which he was reduced, and although the name Americ is not seen therein, the region may have been considered by Colombo and his companions as an unexplored El Dorado, occupying the interior of the country in the province of Ciamba, along the coasts of which they had navigated.

We may suppose that Colombo and his companions on their return to Europe, when relating their adventures, would boast of the rich gold mines they had discovered through the Indians of Nicaragua, and say they lay in the direction of Americ, This would make popular the word Americ, as the common designation of that part of the Indies in which the richest mines of gold in the New World were situated.

The word Americ, a synonym for this golden country, would become known in the sea-ports of the West Indies and then in those of Europe, and would gradually penetrate into the interior of the continent, so that a printer and bookseller in Saint Dié, at the foot of the Vosges, would have heard the word Americ without understanding its true meaning as an indigenous Indian word, but would become acquainted with it in conversations about these famous discoveries, as designating a country in the New Indies very rich in mines of gold.

Hylacomylus² of Saint Dié, ignorant of any printed account of these voyages but those of Albericus Vespucius, — published in Latin in 1505, and in German in 1506, — thought he saw in the Christian name Albericus the origin of this, for him, altered and corrupted word, Americ or Amerique, and renewing the fable of the monkey and the dolphin, who took the Piræus for a man, called this country by the only name among those of the navigators that had reached him, and which resembled the word Americ or Amerique.

In order to accomplish this it was necessary to change considerably the Christian name of Vespucius, and from Albericus, Alberico, Amerigo,³ and Morigo, — which are the different ways of spelling the first name of Vespuzio, or Vespuchy, or Vespucci, —he made Americus! Thus, according to my view, it is owing to a grave mistake of Hylacomylus that the aboriginal name of the New World, Americ or Amerique, has been Europeanized and connected with the son of Anastasio Vespuzio.

Had this mistake occurred in Spain, Portugal, or the West Indies, evidently it would have been corrected; for Vespuzio and many of the companions of Colombo were still living. But in the little town of Saint Dié, the name of which probably was never known to Cristoforo Colombo or Alberico Vespuzio, distant from any sea-port, this little pamphlet of the bookseller Hylacomylus⁴ was restricted to a small circle; and in truth it is around this limited area that the error was propagated and prolonged by the publication of a new edition of the pamphlet of Hylacomylus at Strasburg in 1509, and by the appearance at Basle, in 1522, of the first map upon which was seen America provincia.

This map, with the name America upon it, reached Spain long after the death of Cristoforo Colombo, which took place in 1506; and the companions of his expedition, almost all unlearned men, were also either dead or gone back to the Indies, and no one was there who could correct the mistake, even supposing that the map gave the origin of the word. The name Americ had been heard, not as that of a man, but of a country, of an undetermined portion of the terra firma of the New World, and it was accepted without difficulty, no attention being paid to the mistake of the printer and bookseller of Saint Dié, whose pamphlet was probably unknown in Spain.

There can be little doubt that the word Americ was not only known, but popularized to a certain extent, in the sea-ports of Spain, Portugal, and the Indies, or it would not have been thus at once accepted by universal consent, without discussion. This is all the more probable from the fact that Hylacomylus, beside the marked alteration of the first name, Alberico,

disregarded the rule which has always been followed in naming countries, by giving the first name instead of the family name of his hero; he should have called the New World Vespuzia or Vespuchia.

The Christian name of an ordinary man is never used to designate a country, but only that of an emperor, king, queen, or prince; thus we say Straits of Magellan, Vancouver's Island, Tasmania, Van Diemen's Land, etc., while we have, on the other hand, Louisiana, Carolina, Georgia, Maryland, Filipinas, Victoria, etc. There is no exception to this rule in the case of Cristoforo Colombo, for no one has thought of giving the name of Cristoforia to a country, and that of Cristoforo to a town; while at several epochs many names of Colombia, Columbia, Columbus, and Colon have been given. Furthermore, in giving to Vespuzio the honor of naming the New World, Hylacomylus, using the Christian name contrary to all precedent, should have named it Albericia or Amerigia or Amerigonia or Morigia, and not America.

The only way to explain this name, reached with such difficulty, is that Hylacomylus had previously heard pronounced the name Americ or Amerique.

Amerigo Vespucci (as the name is written by Cristoforo Colombo in his letter dated Seville, 5 February, 1505) died in 1512, long before the publication at Basle of the map in *Mela cum Commentatio Vadiani*, without knowing "the dangerous glory that was preparing for him at Saint Dié," as Humboldt expresses it; he believed until the end of his life that the New World was the coast of Asia, and died as he had lived, *piloto mayor de Indian*.

This belief in the Indies, and the nearness to the river Ganges of their discoveries, prevented Colombo, his contemporaries, and his successors, from giving the countries they found a collective name. The idea originated with men in the interior of the Continent of Europe, unacquainted practically with the navigation of those times, so feverish with the excitement of voyages; and who, repeating the sayings of the sailors, without knowing very well what they were about, applied a name already known to those who had returned from the Indies, but which was without any exact geographical position, to an entire group of newly discovered lands, hardly then recognized as a whole.

The mistake of the theoretical geographers of Saint Dié, Strasburg, and Basle could hardly have been corrected, unless by Colombo, who was no longer in this world; and then the discoveries of Cortez, Pizarro, and others, came to change the direction of ideas as to the countries fabulously rich in gold.

Although Nicaragua was conquered in 1522 by Gil Gonzales de Avida, a part of it remained wholly unknown, especially the region extending from the Atlantic to Lake Nicaragua, in which lies the Amerrique range; and the ignorance of this part of America has continued so long, that the Californian emigration even has passed by it across the Isthmus of Nicaragua without any knowledge of or interest in its existence. It may be said that the region of country

lying between the Caribbean Sea and the dividing line for the waters that flow into Lake Nicaragua is to this day entirely unknown; the Carcas and Ramas Indians, especially the latter, oppose any entrance into their country, rejecting even the Indians who search for caoutchouc, and who intrepidly pursue their work in countries as yet closed.

The theory I have presented has some great advantages. In the first place, it takes nothing from the glory of Colombo, the name of the continent discovered by him being an indigenous name which, from designating a small and limited country, has been extended to include the whole of the New World, through the mistake of a teacher, printer, and bookseller in a little town hidden among the Vosges Mountains.

The accusations of plagiarism from which Alberico Vespuzio has suffered are abolished, and there is no longer any reason to reproach him with having imposed, or having suffered to be imposed, his Christian name on a whole continent; inasmuch as this name was never Americ or Amerique, but Alberico or Amerigo. The name Americ, although aboriginal, makes no confusion between a part and the whole, because the locality where it exists as lieu-dit is too small, obscure, and insignificant to give rise to any false or double meanings of the term. Finally, this name appears to be admirably chosen, extending as the Americ range does from the centre to the extremities of the continent, radiating as it were, giving one hand to the North and one to the South, looking to the Antilles and to the Pacific, and being even the central point of the immense chain of mountains which extends from the Tierra del Fuego to the borders of Mackenzie River, and forms the backbone of the western hemisphere; in truth, the longest range of mountains upon our globe.

It is well chosen, also, as it probably was heard by the great Admiral Colombo on his fourth voyage, the illustrious discoverer of the New World being the first European who heard and pronounced the word Americ or Amerrique, although we have no material certainty of this. Had the name belonged to a part of either extremity of the continent, it would hardly have been so readily accepted; but it grasped and took the New World as it were round the centre, vaguely, merely signifying a region very rich in gold mines; and it was employed and accepted without a thought of the pilot Alberico Vespuzio; it was a long time after that discussions arose among learned geographers, and that the gross mistake of Hylacomylus was imposed upon the world as truth. In a word, the name Americ is American.

Jules Marcou.

1. *See public documents of the Nicaragua government ; and The Naturalist in Nicaragua, by Thomas Belt, Svo, Loudon, 1873.*↵
2. *This teacher, bookseller, and printer of Saint Dié (Vosges) is so little known that even his name is not exactly known ; it is thought to have been Martin Waldseemüller or Waltzemüller, and that the Latin name of Hylacomylus was adopted by him in accordance with the custom of the time.*↵

3. *It is important to remark that Hylacomylus knew only the names Albericus and Alberico, which renders the creation by him of the name America still more improbable, if he had not heard the indigenous name Americ. The first name of Vespuzio was only spelt Amerigo and Morigo in Spanish documents that remained unpublished until many years after the death of Hylacomylus.*↵
4. *Entitled, Cosmographiæ Introductio cum quibusdam Geometriæ ac Astronomiæ principis; ad eam Rem necessariis insuper quatuor Americii **Vespucii** Navigationes ; p. 52 in quarto, 1507.*↵