EARLY DISCOVERY OF THE WESTERN CONTINENT – CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS – OTHER NOTED DISCOVERERS

The history of every American Locality, in its various relations and associations, necessarily dates back to the discovery and occupation of the continent by the adventurous and enterprising European.

One of the great endowments which nature has bestowed upon mankind, is the universal tendency to seek, grasp and gradually develop such knowledge as contributes to the advancement, welfare and preservation of his own existence. When any great discovery or revelation is necessary for its well-being of man, the means and opportunities are naturally sought, and ultimately produce and made available for the accomplishment of the grand object. Sometimes the development may be sudden, or accidental, but more generally is promoted and advanced to final consummation by slow and progressive degrees.

The discovery of America may truly be viewed in this light. The time had arrived in which the existing circumstances made apparent the great advantages to the world such as revelation would afford. The age was of great intellectual restlessness. What commercial intercourse that then existed among mankind, afforded many blessings to the different regions of the known world. The little oriental traffic that percolated through Mohammedan channels materially enriched those countries in Europe that then monopolized it. The Indies, with the fabled land of Cathay, the mines of Golconda, the golden kingdoms of Cipango and Mango, were themes in which imagination ran riot. Of all the channels of enterprise, maritime discovery was the most tempting, and it was making rapid strides of progress. The compass and astrolabe had been recently adapted to navigation. But the pursuit of exploration had yet reached a basis of scientific probability, and much absurd fiction was mingled with ascertained fact.

The genius who grasped the great problem of maritime discovery, who, by his noble work, opened to civilization a new theatre of action, was a sea-farer of the city Genoa; one of jumble condition, but who, through years of scientific research and a life of patient toil, wrought out the theories which at last he so triumphantly verified. But the first visible development had occurred ages before, when a rude and unlettered sea-ranger had been driven, by adverse winds, across the sea which he had thought to be boundless, to a land whose existence had never entered his imagination.

Before proceeding to allude further to the great discoveries of Columbus and his successors, we will recount, as far as history affords data, the exploits of those adventurous and ignorant seamen of Northern Europe, who, nearly five hundred previously, had involuntarily found a continent beyond the wild Atlantic, which was then known as the "Sea of Darkness," and regarded by mariners with extreme dread and superstition.

Those hardy people, called Northmen, or Norseman, were Scandinavians, who then inhabited that portion of Europe embraced by Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland, and being a brave, adventurous race, accustomed to hardships and possessed with nautical skill, made themselves masters of the northern seas, and became a terror to other nations, more honestly engaged in maritime traffic, by whom they regarded as pirates and freebooters. Their vessels were craft of a few tons burden, rudely equipped, clumsily rigged, always carrying on a prow the image of the head of a dragon of some imaginary monster, and generally commanded by the sons of Jarls, or Earls, who were themselves but retired searobbers. The historical chronicles of Iceland, called the Saga, which have been the subject of great research by modern historians, furnish much data and many interesting facts concerning these wild rovers of the sea. The pirate captains were called Vikings and they were as severe and tyrannical, over their mariners and fighting men, as they were remorseless in the treatment of their victims. Lawless marauders, as were the Vikings and their followers, they were the best and most adventurous navigators of the age, as well as fearless and redoubtable warriors.

As early as the commencement of the ninth century, they had discovered and established colonies, or stations, on the Faroe Islands, whence they made frequent and bloody incursions into Scotland and Eangland, and whence, about that time, a commander named Naddok, on one of his expeditions, penetrated so far north that he sighted the hitherto unknown island of Iceland. He seems to have been more disgusted than otherwise at its bleak barrenness, for he made no attempt at occupation; but after skirting its shores and mountains, called it *Snowland*, and returned home.

Subsequently, "a certain pyrate, whose name was Flokko," (this is the language of the historical chronicles of Iceland,) having heard Naddok's account, set sail for the new country in 865, and being resolved no only to see, but to colonize it, he took with him, from Norway, some families, implements and cattle for that purpose. This, of course, was not a piratical outfit.

The Vikings having no knowledge of the mariner's compass, Flokko took with him three ravens, which had previously received the rite of consecration from the priests of the pagan god *Odin*. These birds were depended on to give the navigator information in regard to the proximation of land. When a few days out he liberated the first raven, which at once returned in direction whence the ship had come, and led him to infer that there was no land nearer than the port from which he had sailed. Farther on, the second bird was released, and after hovering in a confused manner for some time, returned to the vessel. To days later, upon being again set free, it rose to a great height, and then sped straight to the northwest. The Viking followed the feathered pilot, and soon reached the land of his search.

The colony proving a failure, Flokko and his people returned to Norway, perhaps as much disgusted with the country as Naddok had been, for they gave discouraging reports of it and bestowed upon it the name of *Iceland*.

In the year 874, A. D., the Earl of Ingolf, who had, in some way, incurred the displeasure of his king – Harold the Fairhaired, of Norway – put his family and all his goods on board a ship and fled to Iceland, where he established a colony, which proved a permanent one, and which has now an existence of over one thousand years duration.

Not long after the settlement of Iceland, a sailor named Gunnbiorn, upon one occasion, had the misfortune to be blown off the coast, before an easterly gale, across the narrow sea which separates the island from Greenland, and thrown upon the coast of that inhospitable country. From thence he succeeded in returning to Iceland, bringing glowing accounts of his new discovery. But no colonists went there until 985, when Earl, Eric, the Red, himself an outlaw in Norway, as Ingolf had been, fled his country and migrated to Greenland, from whence he spread such favorable reports, (after the custom of founders of new colonies,) that in the year 989, twenty-five vessels loaded with families, goods and cattle, sailed for the new land. Eleven of these ships were unfortunately lost on the passage, but fourteen arrived safely, and by these Greenland was extensively settled, and for many years emigration thence, from Norway and Denmark, was considerable.

In the year A. D. 1000, there was a bold young Danish Viking named Biarn, who, returning from a long voyage, learned that during his absence, his father named Hejulf, had emigrated to Greenland and joined the colony of Red Eric. He immediately set sail thither, without even discharging his cargo, and this hardy Viking ventured upon an unknown and boisterous ocean, in the midst of strong weather, in his rude, tiny vessel, without a compass. A heavy gale blowing from the northeast, amidst a thick fog, he missed his destination, and after being driven for many days before the wind, he came in sight of land which he at once knew was not Greenland, for it was flat wooded country, with no lofty ice-hills, such as he had been told to expect.

It is generally supposed, though not certainly known, that the land first seen by Biarn was the cost of Nova Scotia; but whatever it was, there can be no doubt that he and his crew were the first Europeans who ever saw land belonging to the North American Continent. Little did they comprehend the magnitude or importance of their discovery.

The crew had great desire to go on shore, but the captain refused, and turning his course more towards the north, keeping well out to sea, sailed for two days and nights, after which he again approached the coast, but still found the same low, level shore, thickly timbered, and having no resemblance to the land he sought. Again he stood away on his course for two days, and then for the third time he made land. This he found to be "high and mountainous, with snowy mountains." By sailing close along the shore, he discovered it to be an island, not the haven he wished for, and once more he stood out, and ran before a brisk southwest wind for three days and nights, when at last he saw the rugged coast of Greenland, and soon had the joy of meeting his father whom he had so long sought.

When Biarn related to Earl Eric, and the other colonists, the story of his involuntary voyage to the unknown country, he was censured by them for having failed to explore or land upon it. But his chief desire was to reach the land where his father had made his home, and after that to make regular voyages between Greenland and Norway, in which traffic he hoped to realize much gain. Now that he had reached the place where his father had settled, called *Herjulfness*, he was too much overjoyed to indulge in any regret for his neglect to explore the land he had seen, or to feel any wish to return to them for further observation.

To the sons of old Eric, the Red, however, and particularly to Lief, the eldest of them, the desires to visit and explore the new regions which Biarn had seen, became overpowering, and with Eric's sanction he purchased, in the year 1001, Biarn's ship, and fitted her for the cruise. A crew of thirty-five men were employed, and Biarn himself consented to accompany the expedition. The old Earl himself had been

prevailed upon by his son to command, but as he was riding to the port from whence the vessel was to depart, the horse on which he rode, stumbled and threw the old Viking to the ground. Profoundly superstitious, he saw an omen, which he declared was a warning to him to attempt no more voyages fro the discovery of new countries. His son Lief then sailed in command of the vessel, which left her port most auspiciously, and stretched boldly away southwestwardly over the unknown sea.

It was the intention of Lief to retrace, as nearly as possible, the vessel's former track, thus to make, first the high rugged island which Biarn had last seen, and from thence to skirt the land until he should reach the other points seen by the bold young navigator. The voyage prospered, and in due time they saw before them the lofty hills, which Biarn at once recognized as those of the island whence he had taken his last departure. It was not intended to stop long here, but the new commander went on shore and made some explorations, which showed him it was a most forbidding place, the entire space from the sea to the base of the mountain being covered with flat stones, which lay so thickly, that no soil or vegetation appeared among them. With a feeling of disappointment he named the discovery *helluland*, from the word *hella*, which in the Norse dialect, signifies a flat stone. He then re-embarked, and after a further exploration by water, among the deep bays, harbors, and coves, with which the island was greatly indented, he proceeded on his way to seek the lands which had first greeted the eyes of Biarn – that level wooded country, which he had described, and which seemed like a paradise to the imaginations of those rough rovers, whose whole lives had been spent upon the stormy seas, and among the glaziers and wild crags of the barren north.

Keeping away to the southwest, he again made land; this time a fair looking region, covered with trees, to which he gave the name of *Markland* (or Woodland). There is little doubt that this is the island now know as Cape Breton.

Beyond this he made another landing, finding still the same distinguishing natural features. But his love of adventure and thirst for discovery was not yet quenched, and he again stood bravely on towards the southwest before a brisk northerly wind. After three days and nights, steadily on this course, again came the welcome cry of land, and while waiting for good weather a landing was made to examine the region. It was never been satisfactorily settled, precisely where this land was, but beyond doubt, was a part of New England coast, and it is quite generally believed to have been the island of Martha's Vineyard, south of the State of Massachusetts.

Lief made a short stay here, then coasted along the shore and proceeded, as the Saga records, "up a river which came through a lake." Here he ordered the vessel to be securely moored, and preparations to be made for winter quarters. Autumn had already made its appearance, but rude houses were speedily built and soon all was made secure. Among the crew was a man named Tyrker – not one of their own countrymen, but a Southron, from the land of Vineyards – and he, in one of his rambles on shore, found grapes in profusion, growing wild in the woods. The discovery was hailed with great joy by these Northmen, who had never seen grapes in Greenland, Iceland or Norway. The ripe grapes were gathered and eaten by Lief's people, which they found delicious to the taste, and they cured great quantities of them by drying in the sun. Lief was highly elated with the mild climate and the delicious fruit, and in his exstacy he named the country *Vineland* – the Home of the Vine. Soon, however, the bright days of Indiana Summer were gone, and the snow storms and shrill winds of winter came; but the Viking's crew had seen the deeper snows of Norway, and had felt the sting of the icy gales which roar across the Arctic Circle, and they could laugh at the rigors of a New England winter. During this season they gathered great store of the different kinds of timber and wood, which grew so profusely in "Vineland," but were scarce and highly prized in their own country. On the opening if spring, they loaded their ship with these, and then filling their long boat, and all available space on the vessel with dried grapes, they left their winter home and sailed for Greenland. On the homeward voyage, a day or two before his arrival, Leif rescued and saved a shipwrecked crew, which he brought along to the port if his destination. One of these was a woman, named Gudrind, wife of the captain of the wrecked vessel, who soon died, and then his widow married Thorstein, a brother to Leif, and son of the Earl, Eric the red.

The place where Leif and his followers had passed the winter, and which they had named Vinland, is generally supposed to have been situated on an arm of Narragansett Bay, below the mouth of the Taunton river, and near to the present town of Tiverton, in Rhode Island. And of this land, the explorers brought back to Greenland the most marvelous accounts. It was , they said, a region of almost unbroken summer (it is not strange that they thought is such, considering how cold and sterile was the land wich they called home). And they told how delightful was its location, how great its fertility, and how abundant its rich fruits and rare woods. They indulged to the full, that propensity which is everywhere found in human

nature, and which seems to be universal among those who visit remote regions; gross exaggeration of facts relating to the wonders they had seem in their mysterious journeyings. If they did not paint these in colors as glowing as those in which the Spanish explorers depicted the golden El Dorado and the Fountain of Youth, it was probably less on account of their stricter adherence to truth, than because they lacked the vivid and gorgeous imaginations of the Southern adventurers.

So the wonderful tale was told from mouth to mouth. The newly discovered land became known as "Vinland the Good." And its enterprising discoverer received the name of "Leif the Fortunate." Soon the story was carried to Norway and Denmark, from whence, eventually, it was heard of in a dim, vague way, in other parts of Europe.

Soon after Leif's return, he made a journey to Norway, and while there became converted from the Norse paganism to Christianity, and when he again returned to Greenland, he took with him some Christian priests, which act greatly incensed his father – for Red Ericwas firm in his pagan faith, and continued unshaken in the worship of the Viking's gods, Odin and Thor, until his death, which occurred soon after.

Having now, by his father's death, become the head of the family. Leif unwillingly abandoned the project which he entertained of another voyage to Vinland the Good; and, indeed, he resolved henceforth to live quietly at home, as his father had done, and so no more was ever heard of the ocean adventures or exploits of Leif the Fortunate.

But his brother Thorvald (who had also embraced the Christian religion through the labors of the Norwegian priests) took up the enterprise, and soon departed, in his brother's ship, for the western land, where he arrived safely after a short and prosperous voyage.

Having without difficulty found the houses erected by his brother, he took possession, and there passed the winter.

The next year, he pushed his explorations far to the westward (probably through Long Island Sound), as far as "another lake through which a river flowed to the sea." The explorers were enchanted with the green grass, the groves of great trees, and abundance of vegetable growth which were all so strange to them. The made many landings upon the Islands, and each time their joy and admiration was increased.

Thorvald and his men also passed the following winter in the cabins built by Leif, and again, in the spring, made voyages and journeyings to the northward and eastward, passing Cape Cod, and, it is supposed, penetrating up Massachusetts Bay as far at the vicinity of Boston.

They had never yet seen any of the natives of the country, until, upon one of their expeditions, they suddenly came upon three boats, made of skins, and set up as tents. Under these were nine savages, asleep. The Viking and his man had the greatest contempt for these beings, and bestowed on them the name of Skrallings, which, in the Norse language, as a term of the bitterest opprobrium. In fact, they considered them as no better than wild beasts; and so, when they found these, sleeping so quietly, and unconscious of danger, they followed the instincts of their Northern nature, and falling at once upon the unoffending natives, they slew all but one, who escaped with his life, but greatly terrified.

As they cam to a pleasant point of land, covered with the dark evergreen of fir trees, Thorvald said to his followers: "Here, on this cape would I wish to raise my dwelling." He little thought how soon his desire would be realized.

The frightened native, who had escaped slaughter by the Northmen, had aroused great numbers of his people, who were then determined to avenge the cruel murder of their companions, and remained hidden until an opportunity whould present itself. So, a little farther on, at a time when the party of explorers were resting in fancies security, they were surprised by the sound of the terrible war-hoop, and an attack by a great number of Shraellings. In dismay they fled to their vesses, and raised the wooden shield, behind which they were wont to fight their enemies. From thence they discharged the arrows, and soon the natives retired, but not until one of the white men had been wouded in the side, by a dart from the Skraellings. The wounded man was none other than Thorvald himself; and when he withdrew the dart from the wound, and knew that his hurt was mortal, he told his followers to bear him to the pleasant promontory, and bury him among the fir trees. "It may be," said he, "that it was a true word which I spake, that I would dwell there for a time; there shall ye burry me, and set crosses at my feet and head, and call the place *Krossaness*,* forever, in all time to come." His men obeyed the dying command of the young sea-king, and left him there, with the Christian cross (the first ever erected on the American Continent) marking the spot where he slept in peace beneath the evergreens.

**Krossaness*, in Norse language, signifies *Cross Cape*, and this place is supposed to be identical with the point now called Point Alderton, in Boston Harbor.

The party was now without a head, and, being entirely disheartened, returned to Greenland.

Then, Thorstein, another son of Eric, victualled a vessel and sailed in search of the body of his brother, resolved to bring it back to the family tomb. This was in the year 1005. His company numbered twenty-five men, and he made a most faithful search, but failed to fine the point called Krossaness, and so, after a time, returned unsuccessful, and soon after died of scurvy, contracted on the voyage. Thorstein was the last of the sons of Eric who ever journeyed to America, but the blood of Red Earl would not be still. His daughter, Freydis, sister of Leif, Thorvald and Thorstein, next planned an expedition to the land of vines. She was the the wive of Thorvald, the captain of a trading ship; and he, with one Thorffinn Karlsefne, a rich merchant of Iceland, fitted out three vessels, with which they sailed in the spring of the year 1007.

The wife of Karlsefne, was none other that Gudrid, the widow to Thorstein, she had been rescued from shipwreck by Leif, on his return voyage from Vinland. Beside Freydis and Gudrid, many other women were taken; as well as cattle, implements, and abundant stores, for it was intended to found an permanent colony.

The company numbered more than one hundred persons, with Thorffinn in command, though the woman Fredis, was in reality the master spirit of the enterprise.

Their outward voyage was a prosperous one. On arriving at the lands near their destination, they found a huge carcass of a whale which had been stranded high and dry upon the sandy shore, and this was not only a great accession to their commissariat, but was esteemed and most delicious food by those hyperborean epicures.

It is not known whether or not they settled at the place where Leif built his houses; but they found abundance of game and fish, and great trees covered with grapes, while a little way off were "fields of self-sown wheat," (by which is probably meant the Indiana maize). Here they expected to pass a pleasant and unmolested life; but soon they were visited by the "Skraellings," who were described as "black and illfavored, with coarse hair on the head, with large eyes and broad cheeks." They seemed to be entirely ignorant of the used and capabilities of edged implements, and it is told that one of them playfully handling one of the Norse battle axes, apparently ignorant that it was a more formidable weapon than those of their own rude fashioning, dealt to one of his companions a blow which was instantly fatal.

These natives, however, offered no violence to the whites, but, after satisfying their curiosity, went away for a time; soon, however, returning in great numbers, and wishing to barter valuable skins and furs for red cloth, of which the colonists seem to have had a large quantity, and with which the natives were greatly pleased. Cow's milk was also freely given them by the colonists, and this they appreciated highly.

But of a sudden, when all was progressing pleasantly, a bull, belonging to Thorffinn, burst out from among the trees, and with a roaring, which shook the very earth, rushed full upon the poor Skraellings, who, thereupon, fled to their boats in the greatest terror. For a long time they remained away, but after a while they returned in a great body, and gave battle to the Northmen, who, being vastly outnumbered, fled to the woods, after many had been killed by those natives whom they so much despised; and it is related that they would all have been slaughtered, but that Freydis, seizing a weapon from the body of one of the slain men, rushed upon the savages with great fury, making loud and piercing cries and wild gestures by which the Saga says: they were as much terrified, as on a former occasion they had been, by the bellowing of the bull. They rushed pell-mell to their boats, fled in dismay and were seen no more.

This attack and its results greatly discouraged the colonists; who at once demanded of their leader, Karlsefne, that they should return home without delay. He, being a merchant of wealth and consideration in Iceland, acceded to their wishes and returned to that country, where he passed the remainder of his days in ease and splendor.

But Freydis, being a very bold and ambitious woman, was by no means satisfied with the result. She wished to found a permanent colony, in which herself and her husband Thorvard should be chief personages.

Three years later, she organized another expedition, fitted out in partnership with two brothers – Icelandic – named Helgi and Finnbagi. In 1011, they sailed for the place where Leif had laid hi winter quarters ten years before. There they arrived without accident or delay, and found the booths, or housed, still standing, and in tolerable repair. But quietude did not reign there. In fact, peace could nowhere long exist, where lived the fierce and ambitious daughter of the Red Eric.

She quarreled with the brothers, Helgi and Finnbagi, and plotted to take their lives; inducing Thorvard also to enter into the infernal conspiracy. Inspired by her malignant counsel, Thorvard persuaded his own followers to join the plot, and together they fell upon the brothers and their company, in their separate quarters, and slew them.

Of these unhappy victims, there was five women, whom the male conspirators would gladly have allowed to live, but the tiger spirit of Freydis would not have it so, and finding that her followers refused to do the murder, she killed all with her own hand, disregarding their piteous appeals for mercy.

Nothing but disaster and gloom followed this bloody deed, and the long and dreary winter which ensued was filled with remorse and dread for the guilty colonists. So, when spring came again, it was unanimously agreed to abandon the settlement and return to Greenland.

When Leif the Fortunate was told of his sister's crimes, he debated whether he should visit a just punishment upon her; but his brotherly feeling prevailed, and he allowed her to escape with her life, but disowned her, and predicted for her remaining years, only woe and execration, which, the chronicle says, was completely fulfilled.

This was the last Norse expedition to the American coast, of which there was any account, which seems at all authentic. One Saga has it that the place was visited several times afterward – among these visitors being a priest named Eric, who saw the land in 1321, but of this there is great doubt, and we are left to conclude that the entire period during which the Northmen sailed to, and transiently occupied, the place which they called Vinland, covered a space of less than fifteen years. Why such an enticing field should have been so suddenly abandoned by them, must always be a mystery. Certainly it could not have been through dread of the savage natives, for those ocean freebooters hardly knew fear; and it could not have been that they thought the country not worth the occupation, for the land seemed limitless in extent, and far richer and more productive than any which they had ever dwelt in. The most reasonable theory is, that the cause lay in the overwhelming troubles which we know cam upon Greenland and Iceland soon after, resulting in the total extinguishments of the colonies in the former country, and in the almost complete abandonment of navigation in the northern waters.

A frightful disease, known as the Black Death, spread over the countries of Northern Europe, and from thence was communicated to Iceland and Greenland, resulting almost in depopulation. In the midst of this visitation, the Esquimaux opened unrelenting war on the Greenland settlements, and to add to those horrors, there occurred two successive winters of such extreme severity, that the adjacent seas were blocked with ice of incredible thickness, and forever cut off the settlers from their fellow-men. That was the last ever heard if the colony founded by Eric the Red. All knowledge of the country called Greenland faded away into a shadowy tradition; and it was not until ages afterward, that its re-discovery brought it again to the remembrance of man. It was but natural, therefore, that in the oblivion which settled down on the parent country (as Greenland might properly be called) the veil of forgetfulness should also fall on the half known land, which her sons had discovered.

The story is shadowy and incomplete, and might, by many, be regarded as mythical, but for the proofs which exist in clearly cut Runie inscriptions, engraved on the face of rocks near the town of Dighton, in southeastern Massachusetts, which remain there now, as they were found by the Puritan settlers who came there in 1620, and gave authentic support to the Saga's romantic account of the Northmen's voyages to Vinland.

As we have said, the knowledge of the discoveries of Biarn and Leif, slowly spread from Norway to other Portions of Europe.

In seventy-five years, it had reached Germany, being brought there by a historian called Adam of Bremen, who had visited Sweden at that time.

By most of those who heard these rumors, they were regarded as mere inventions; but the mind of Columbus – nearly five hundred years later – accepted them as possibilities, to say the least; and it is known that he made a journey to Iceland for the purpose of determining how far they were true. We do not know to what extent he received them as substantiating the theories which he had deduced from his scientific investigations – whether they made him more firm in his determination to solve the great problem which was the idea of his life – but whether they did or did not, can never bedim the surpassing lustre of his achievements, or cause us to give to any name but that of Christopher Columbus, the honor of First Discoverer of the land we live in. To render a proper appreciation of the magnitude of his great undertaking, and innumerable obstacles and difficulties with which it would necessarily be associated at that unlettered age of the world, we cannot do better than to give the following