Leif Eriksson
The First European to Set Foot in North America

Leif’s Early Year

(1) Leif Eriksson was born in Iceland sometime around 960 A.D.. His father, Erik the Red, moved to Iceland with Lief’s grandfather who was expelled from Norway for killing a man during a dispute.

(2) Like many Viking boys, Leif spent some of his childhood years away from his family. At the age of eight, he lived with a man named Thyrker, a man his father captured for a slave in a raid on Germany. Thyrker was well educated and taught Leif how to read and write runes, how to speak the languages of Ireland and Russia and how to be a good trader. Leif also learned the old Viking sagas, how to recognize valuable plants and how to be a skilled warrior. Leif’s love of the sea was probably learned early too. He would often watch the ships come into the harbour of his Iceland home and listen to the sailors’ tales of adventure and of far-off lands Leif had not yet seen.
Erik Banished From Iceland

(3) When Leif was 12, he returned to his home in Iceland. In the spring of the following year, his father Erik was asked to appear at the Thingvellir (pronounced thing ved ler), the lawmaking body of the Vikings. Erik took Leif with him. While there, Erik met a man with whom he had once quarreled. A fight started and Erik, known for his quick temper, murdered the man. The Thing Council banished Erik from Iceland for three years.

(4) Unable to return to Norway from which his father had been exiled, and now banished from Iceland himself, Erik the Red decided to sail westward to investigate the rumours of a new land over the western horizon. In 986, with Lief, the rest of his family, some slaves and plenty of supplies, Erik sailed towards the setting sun. After a couple of days, they reached new land. Erik called it Greenland. Although it’s mountains were covered in glaciers and its seas infested with icebergs, the lowlands were green with grasses suitable for pasture. He hoped the name would bring other settlers. It was during this voyage that Leif learned about sailing the deep ocean.

Erik Setsles Greenland

(5) Erik the Red spent three years in Greenland. From his settlement called Ericholm, he explored its coastline and taught his son Leif how to be a great sailor. When Erik was able to return to Iceland, he talked of Greenland and its bountiful riches of reindeer, seal and walrus. He encouraged others to return with him to settle this new land. Because of the famine in Europe, the depletion of the scarce forests of Iceland and the promise of a better life elsewhere, many people decided to follow Eric the Red. In the spring of 989, he set out with twenty-five ships loaded with
supplies, settlers and livestock. It was a disastrous voyage. Towering waves and strong winds battered the ships. Some were forced to turn back and were never seen again. Only 350 colonists in fourteen ships set foot on Greenland. The survivors created two settlements. In time, the two tiny communities would be the home of over 3500 Vikings. The Vikings would stay in Greenland for over 400 years.

Leif’s First Voyage

Leif’s first voyage without his father was a trip to Norway to bring gifts to Olaf, a great Viking king. It was a trip that would bring many changes to Leif’s life. It was 984 and he was just 24 years old.

With his mentor Thyrker and a crew of fourteen, Leif planned to sail eastward to Iceland and then on to Norway. But, difficult sailing conditions pushed him south to the Hebrides off Scotland. While there, the daughter of the island’s lord gave birth to Leif’s son.

When Leif finally arrived in Norway, he met King Olaf. The king was very impressed by the young Viking. While playing chess with Leif, King Olaf told him of how he had once worshipped the Viking gods. He also told him of how a plague had struck Norway and killed many people. When he began to worship the God of the Christians and was baptized along with thousands of other Norwegians, the plague ended. Leif became very interested in Christianity. He agreed to be baptized and accepted this new faith. On his return voyage to Iceland and Greenland, he brought along a priest to spread the Christian message.
Leif Learns About A New Land

(9) The sagas record that in 986, a ship belonging to a Norwegian merchant named Bjarni Herjolfsson sailed into the harbour of Leif's Greenland home. The voyage to Leif's home had not been without incident. Bjarni had left Iceland bound for Greenland in search of his father who had left Iceland a year earlier with Erik the Red. But, foggy weather and stormy weather prevented him from using the north star and the sun to navigate. When the weather settled, Bjarni spotted land. It wasn't the Greenland the Icelanders had described. Instead of seeing glaciers and grassy knolls, Bjarni saw a coastline hilly and green with trees. Bjarni did not stop to explore this land. Instead, he immediately set sail for Greenland.

(10) This mysterious land to the west interested Leif. He spent many hours learning about it from Bjarni and his crew. Little did he realize that this interest would one day secure his place in history.

(11) Leif became restless in his Greenland home. He decided to search for the land of which Bjarni had spoken some fourteen years earlier. Leif asked his father, Erik the Red, to head the expedition. His father's courage and seamanship would be important especially if the new land could not be found and the crew grew anxious. But Erik refused, believing he was now too old for such a voyage. After much pleading, Erik finally agreed and Leif prepared the ship he had purchased from Bjarni. On his way to the dock, Erik fell from his horse and sprained his ankle. Being superstitious, Erik
considered the fall a bad omen. He lost his desire to lead the voyage. Lief was now on his own.

Discovering Vinland

(12) Leif Erikkson set sail with a crew of 34 men from Greenland in the year 1000 A.D.. As was the Viking way, he steered his ship by the sun during the day and the stars at night and retraced Bjarni’s journey but in the opposite order.

(13) Before long, off to the west, Lief and his crew spotted land. They went ashore but weren’t impressed by what they saw. The flat stone-covered beach gave way to huge glaciers and barren land. It was not the land Bjarni had described. Leif named the land Helluland, after the flat stones that littered the shoreline. Today, we call this land Baffin Island.

(14) Disappointed, Leif and his men sailed south and west and within days spotted a wooded shoreline that rose gently from the sea. Again, Lief named the land according to its nature and called it Markland, meaning “land covered with wood”. Today, we call this land Labrador.
Leif Reaches Vinland

(15) Still uncertain that he had reached his destination, Leif set sail once again. The strong northeast winds took his ship southward along the coast of Labrador. Two days later, more land was sighted. This time, it was a small grass-covered island. In the distance was more land. Leif sailed on, through a channel, past a cape and into a bay of shallow water. Leif and his crew went ashore and explored a stream that glistened with salmon. They found a forest filled with spruce trees and a meadows covered with thick grasses. Leif realized this land had everything necessary for a permanent settlement. The salmon would feed them, the forest would provide timber for their boats and homes and the grasses would feed their livestock.

(16) As winter approached, Leif and his crew decided to build a camp and to continue to explore this new land. One of his crewmen found vines filled with grapes. Since grapes did not grow in Greenland, this was a very important find and would bring them much profit upon his return. Leif named this new land Vinland or Wineland. Some historians argue that the term Vinland refers not to the wild grapes but to the grasses that were so important to feeding their livestock.
(17) When spring came, Leif and his crew set sail from Vinland with the **hold** of their ship filled with the riches of this new land. Because he had **travelled** such a great **distance** and found such great wealth without any troubles, Lief became known as “Leif the Lucky”.

(18) We now know that Vinland was at least the Atlantic Canada portion of North America and that the exact location of Lief’s permanent settlement was at L’Anse Aux Meadows at the tip of the Northern Peninsula on the island of Newfoundland.

**Vinland Settled**

(19) For a few more years, other Vikings returned and **attempted** to settle Vinland. The L’Anse aux Meadows settlement was used as a base from which the Vikings **explored** the land around the shores of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Some **historians** believe the Vikings explored the coastline of eastern North America as far south as Florida. It is supported by what some believe are rune stones in New England and a Viking coin found in an Indian grave. Both have proven to be fakes.

(20) Unfriendly and violent **encounters** with the **skraelings** (the Vikings word for natives) and more **profitable** trade with Europe made the effort to settle Vinland unworthy. After just three years, the settlement at L’Anse aux Meadows was **abandoned**. Shortly after its discovery by archaeologists in 1960, its importance in human history was recognized. In 1976, it was declared an Historic Site in Canada. Two years later in 1978 its was declared a World Heritage Site by the United Nations. This **recognition** has attracted visitors from around the world.
Leif’s Final Years

(21) Very little is known about Leif’s later life. He became an important person in Greenland after the death of his father. It is not known when Leif died, but his son Thorkell became the master of a settlement in about 1025, so it is assumed he died sometime before then.

Millennium Anniversary of the Visit of Leif Eriksson to North America

(22) Leif Eriksson was famous a century ago, then forgotten until historians became interested in Viking exploration and the stories in the Icelandic sagas. Lief the Lucky is now famous once again. The year 2000 marked the 1000th anniversary of Leif’s exploration of North America. Celebrations of this accomplishment were held in North America and in Scandinavia. Newfoundland had special celebrations planned throughout the summer. Tourists and historians from around the world visited the Viking World Heritage Site at L’Anse Aux Meadows. Since it is only a five to six hour drive from most places in Newfoundland, maybe you and your family will visit too.
Leif Eriksson:
The First European to Set Foot in North America

Vocabulary Read each of the meanings listed below. Find the word in the paragraph indicated in brackets that has the same meaning. Write your choice on the line.

(1) to be forced out of country ........................................
(2) to identify ..................................................
(3) argued ........................................................
(4) gossip, idle talk ............................................
(5) occurs when food is in short supply .....................
(6) a journey by sea ...........................................
(7) a person from whom you learn life and/or skills .........
(8) a sickness that kills many people ........................
(9) to steer a ship by sun, stars and maps ..................
(10) to hold in place ...........................................
(11) a voyage of discovery ....................................
(11) a sign, usually of bad luck................................
(15) the place to which you are going ......................
(15) shone, sparkled ...........................................
(17) the part of the ship where the cargo is stored .......
(19) people who study history ...............................
(20) meetings, sometimes not pleasant ones ................

© Prepared by Jim Cornish, Gander, Newfoundland, Canada.
Long Answer Questions

1. What did Lief Erikkson learn from Thyrker, the German slave?
2. How did Lief Erikkson learn about Vinland?
3. What lands did Lief discover on his voyage and what do we call these lands today?
4. What did Vinland offer that convinced Lief to create a settlement there?
5. Why was the Viking settlement at L’Anse aux Meadows abandoned?
6. How did Lief Eriksson earn the name Lief the Lucky?
7. How has the importance of the Viking settlement at L’Anse aux Meadows been acknowledged?

Thinking About What You Have Read and Learned

1. If the Viking had a reputation for being such fierce warriors, why were they driven out of Vinland?
2. If the Vikings were such skilled seamen, why were many of their discoveries accidental?
A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words

Study the graphic below and complete the questions that follow.

1. What three kinds of information is included on this map?

2. What important landmasses in the Vikings movement westward are included?

3. What important events occurred around the following dates: 874, 960, 986, 1000?

4. From the time they first arrived in Iceland, how long did it take for the Vikings to reach Newfoundland?