

# **COLUMBUS: FACT vs. FICTION**



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# Columbus: Fact vs. Fiction

## Introduction

This study on Christopher Columbus was undertaken by the Commission for Social Justice, the anti-defamation arm of the Order Sons of Italy in America (OSIA) in response to growing concerns about the celebration of Columbus Day in America.

For much of its history, the United States considered Columbus a man worthy of admiration. Columbus Day is one of America's oldest patriotic holidays, first celebrated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. America has more monuments to Columbus than any other nation in the world. Generations of American school children studied his life and accomplishments. Teachers held him up as an example of a person of character, who overcame strong opposition and great disappointment but never gave up trying to prove what he believed to be true.

Since 1992, however, the reputation of Columbus has suffered at the hands of special interest groups who have used this 15<sup>th</sup> century Renaissance navigator to further their 21<sup>st</sup> century political and social agendas.

As a result, today Columbus is often depicted as a slave trader, racist, and even “the Hitler of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.” A small but vocal number of historians, journalists, text-book writers and teachers have helped spread these charges despite their questionable foundation in historical fact.

They have done so principally by judging a quintessentially Renaissance man and his actions by contemporary values. It bears noting that England did not outlaw slavery in its colonies until 1833; the United States until 1865 and Brazil in 1888. Some nations in the Mid-East, Asia and Africa continue the practice today.

Despite this controversy, Italian Americans continue to hold Columbus in high regard both for his historic achievements and also because Columbus Day is the only day our nation recognizes the heritage of an estimated 16 to 26 million Americans of Italian descent, who are relentlessly stereotyped by the entertainment, news and advertising industries the other 364 days of the year.

Increasingly, however, Italian American communities are finding their Columbus Day celebrations marred by demonstrations and their First Amendment rights denied by special interest groups who sometimes turn violent as has been happening in Denver since 2000.

We therefore offer this study on Columbus as an attempt to bring more balance to the examination of this first important Renaissance navigator, his life, character and explorations.

We thank Columbus scholars Robert Royal, Ph.D., president of the Faith and Reason Institute; Joseph Scafetta, Jr. and David Curfman, M.D., president of the National Columbus Celebration Association in Washington, D.C., for sharing their impressive knowledge of Columbus with us.

This study was prepared by Dona De Sanctis, Ph.D., OSIA Deputy Executive Director. First released in 2002, the present report updates and expands the previous version.



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# COLUMBUS: FACT VS. FICTION

A Report from

THE ORDER SONS OF ITALY IN AMERICA

THE COMMISSION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

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On the cover:

*The Landing of Columbus* by the early American artist John Van der Lyn (1846). This painting, which hangs in the U.S. Capitol, was the subject of an 1892 U.S. postage stamp commemorating the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Columbus' first voyage to the Americas.

# Columbus: Fact vs. Fiction

## **FICTION: COLUMBUS DID NOT DISCOVER THE AMERICAS. THE VIKINGS DID.**

**FACT:** In 1950, a map surfaced in Europe that shows the “Island of Vinland” in the northwest Atlantic Ocean. The map’s text in Medieval Latin explains that Leif Erickson and his Vikings found Vinland in the year 1000 A.D.

The Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., dates the map’s parchment to around 1434 A.D. – nearly 60 years before Columbus’ first voyage. But when researchers at London’s University College used a laser technique to test the map’s ink, they found it contained a chemical substance called *anatase*, which was not synthesized until 1923, proving that the map is a forgery.

**Did Columbus “discover” America? In every significant way, he did. Even if others visited the continent sporadically before he did, their voyages had no historical significance.**

Columbus’ voyages, however, marked the end of thousands of years of isolation between the Western Hemisphere and the rest of the world. **The recorded history of the Americas and the Caribbean starts with Columbus.**

## **FICTION: COLUMBUS FOUND SOPHISTICATED NATIVE CIVILIZATIONS.**

**FACT:** Most of the native tribes Columbus found were hunter-gatherers who engaged in bloody tribal wars and, in the case of the Arawaks, Caribs and Canibs, slavery, torture and cannibalism.

To survive, the native populations depended on “slash-and-burn” cultivation of the land along with hunting, fishing and collecting edible wild plants, seeds and shellfish. They had no written language, history or literature. In their struggle for survival, these peoples were not the champions of the environment that they are often portrayed as today.

## **FICTION: COLUMBUS WAS A SLAVE-TRADER.**

**FACT:** Columbus never owned any slaves or brought any to the Western Hemisphere from Africa.

During his first voyage in 1492, Columbus landed on the island of Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic). There, with the help of a tribe of friendly Taino Indians, he built a fort called *Navidad* and left 40 of his crew there when he returned to Spain in January 1493.

On his return to Hispaniola in November 1493, he learned that all his men had been massacred by another Taino tribe. Columbus and his men fought with these Indians, capturing about 2,000 and in 1495, sent 500 of these prisoners of war (POW) to Spain to be sold as slaves, as was the custom in 15<sup>th</sup> century Europe. He sent another 30 Indian POWs to Spain the following year, but the Spanish monarchs ordered him to stop the practice and he never again sent Indians to Europe to be sold as slaves.

**It is important to note that slavery was not unique to Europe. Columbus found it practiced in the Caribbean by the Caribs and Canibs who made slaves of the tribes they conquered and also ate their victims. (Hence the word “cannibal”.)**

Later Spanish explorers in Mexico and Central America found that even the more advanced civilizations of the Aztecs, Incas and Mayans kept slaves. **These civilizations also practiced torture, ritual murder and the human sacrifice of their own women and children as well as of prisoners of war.**

Such practices horrified the Spanish and caused them to look down on native cultures. In fact, the Spanish arrival in the New World was the decisive factor that eventually ended human sacrifice and cannibalism there.

**FICTION: COLUMBUS WAS A RACIST.**

**FACT: No evidence indicates that Columbus thought the islanders he met were racially inferior in any way.**

In fact, in the journal of his first voyage, Columbus describes the Tainos and other tribes as *“well-made with fine shapes and faces...their eyes were large and very beautiful...straight-limbed without exception and handsomely shaped...”* He praises their generosity, innocence and intelligence, saying they could *“readily become Christians as they have a good understanding.”*

Initially, Columbus had friendly relations with the five Taino tribes he met during his first voyage. These relations soured with four of the five tribes after he found the colony of men he had left behind in the fort *Navidad* had been slaughtered.

**He became good friends, however, with one tribe of Tainos led by Chief Guacanagari, who helped Columbus build his fort and fought alongside Columbus against the Taino tribes that wanted to kill the Europeans.** Guacanagari paid heavily for his friendship with Columbus. His village was burned; he was wounded in battle and fled to the mountains where he died.

**FICTION: COLUMBUS COMMITTED GENOCIDE.**

**FACT:** The destruction of the native populations of North and South America over the centuries is a complex historical tragedy. No one knows exactly how many people were here when the Europeans arrived. The numbers vary from 8 million to 145 million. Many researchers believe the number to be around 40 million.

**Columbus made four voyages to the Caribbean in a twelve-year period (1492-1504), spending from only seven months to two years and nine months (including the year he was shipwrecked on his fourth voyage.) It is inconceivable that he could have killed millions of people in so short a time.**

Responsibility for the deaths of many thousands of natives can justly be attributed to the Spanish conquistadors and other Europeans who followed Columbus here. But even in this case, since there were more natives than Europeans, the loss of millions of lives could not have been caused by the Spaniards’ warfare and forced labor alone.

**In fact, most of the native populations perished because they lacked immunity to such diseases as small pox, typhoid and diphtheria as well as the non-fatal childhood diseases of measles and mumps that they caught from the Spanish explorers.** These diseases were not transmitted deliberately and cannot be considered a tool of genocide. Scholars estimate that 80% of those who died were infected without ever seeing a white man.

Tragic as this epidemic was, it also bears remembering that prior to the Europeans' arrival, the Western Hemisphere was no Garden of Eden. New medical research on pre-Colombian mummies in Peru, Chile and remote areas far from the early European colonies reveals that tuberculosis, long thought European in origin, was rampant among the Indian tribes before the arrival of Columbus.

**Arthritis, periodontal disease and significant bone erosion also afflicted the native populations well before the voyages of Columbus and other Europeans.** Most adults, only in their 20s and 30s, had terrible teeth or none at all. Very few lived past age 40. **The native populations gave the early explorers syphilis, which they brought back to Europe.**

Clearly, blaming Columbus for the extermination of the native populations is as fair as blaming the native populations for killing people who die from using tobacco and cocaine, which the natives introduced to the Europeans.

#### **FICTION: COLUMBUS DESTROYED THE BALANCE BETWEEN MAN & NATURE.**

**FACT:** Columbus and the other Europeans brought with them Old World agricultural techniques, including crop rotation and animal breeding. They also introduced new tools (including the wheel) as well as new plants and domesticated animals, including the horse.

**These imports led to improved farming methods, a greater diversity of crops and a more dependable food supply that benefited the native populations.** Perfected over the centuries, they have helped make the nations in the Western Hemisphere a significant source of food for the rest of the world.

#### **FICTION: COLUMBUS AND OTHER EUROPEANS STOLE THE NATIVES' LAND.**

**FACT:** A sad fact of human civilization is that powerful nations usurp the land of the vanquished. The Spanish conquistadors who followed Columbus in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries were establishing an empire through military conquest. They did what Egypt, Persia, Rome and China did before them in the Middle East, Europe and Asia.

They also did what the Aztecs, Mayans, Incas and many North American Indians did in the Americas. "The Iroquois Federation in North America subjugated so many Indians," writes Richard Gambino, "that historian Francis Parkman calls them 'the Romans of the New World.'" But Columbus himself had no part in this.

It is worth pointing out that the Europeans brought considerable benefits to Latin America. Their arrival gave the entire continent a common language, while in North America, land taken from the Iroquois and other tribes eventually became **the United States, a haven for the poor and oppressed from all over the world, who find opportunities and freedoms here that their own countries deny them.** And it all started with Columbus.

# What Columbus Accomplished

## *HISTORICAL:*

- Columbus proved that it was possible to safely cross the Atlantic Ocean.
- Columbus founded the first permanent European settlement in the Western Hemisphere, Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic).
- Columbus was the first to open relations between Europe and the Western Hemisphere. His voyages mark the beginning of more than 500 years of cultural, economic and political relations between Europe and the Americas.
- The recorded history of the Western Hemisphere begins with Columbus. There was no written history about these vast continents before his arrival in 1492.

## *NAVIGATIONAL:*

- Columbus was the first European to realize the full importance of the Atlantic wind pattern called the prevailing Westerlies, which blew steadily west to east. This convinced him it was possible to sail west with the Trade Winds to the New World and return to Europe with the Westerlies.
- During his four transatlantic voyages, Columbus chartered the route for what today are the islands of Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, the Lesser Antilles and the coasts of Panama, Honduras and Venezuela.
- Columbus' trans-Atlantic route lay the foundation for future navigation in the region. His maps were used by Amerigo Vespucci (after whom the American continent takes its name), whose maps were used by later explorers of South America.
- The route across the Atlantic Ocean that Columbus charted in the 15<sup>th</sup> century is still used by sailors today.
- Columbus introduced the principle of compass variation (the variation at any point on the Earth's surface between the direction to magnetic and geographic north) and observed the rotation of the Pole star.

# Why We Should Celebrate Columbus Day

- Columbus Day recognizes the achievements of a great Renaissance explorer who founded the first permanent European settlement in the New World. **The arrival of Columbus in 1492 marks the beginning of recorded history in America and opened relations between the Americas and the rest of the world.**
- **Columbus Day celebrates the beginning of cultural exchange between America and Europe.** After Columbus, millions of European immigrants brought their art, music, science, medicine, philosophy and religious principles to America. These contributions have helped shape the United States and include Greek democracy, Roman law, Judeo-Christian ethics and the belief that all men are created equal.
- **Columbus Day is one of America's oldest holidays.** The tradition of observing Columbus Day dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century in this country. It was first celebrated on October 12, 1792, when the New York Society of Tammany honored Columbus on the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his first voyage.
- **Columbus Day is a patriotic holiday.** In fact, the Pledge of Allegiance was written in 1892 in honor of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his first voyage. That year, President Benjamin Harrison declared Columbus Day a legal holiday.
- The United States has long admired Columbus. **America has more monuments to Columbus than any nation in the world,** according to the Christopher Columbus Encyclopedia. These include a Columbus statue in Providence, R.I., cast by Frederic Auguste Bertholdi, who created the Statue of Liberty, and one in New York City, created by one of the six Piccirilli brothers who carved the Lincoln Memorial.
- **The United States has a significant collection of Columbus memorabilia,** including his desk, papers, and the cross he used to claim the New World for Spain. These are in the Columbus Chapel in Boalsburg, Pennsylvania.
- In 1905, Colorado became the first state to declare Columbus Day a holiday. **In 1971, Columbus Day became a federal holiday in all 50 states after Congress passed a law declaring the second Monday in October Columbus Day.**
- Columbus Day also commemorates the arrival on these shores of more than 5 million Italians beginning in 1880. Today, the children and grandchildren of these early **Italian Americans constitute the nation's fifth largest ethnic group,** according to the U.S. Census Bureau.



Columbus was long considered a hero by Americans. In this 19<sup>th</sup> century painting he is pictured (third from left) with Lincoln, Washington and other American leaders.

# Christopher Columbus: Biography

- 1451** Christopher Columbus (Cristoforo Colombo) is born in Genoa to Domenico Colombo and his wife, Susanna Fontanarossa. They were weavers who lived above their small shop. At that time, Genoa was a naval power and independent republic that rivaled Venice and traded with the Orient. In 1453, two years after Columbus' birth, Constantinople fell to the Moslems, cutting off Europe's eastward trade routes to the Orient and making the finding of a westward route imperative.
- 1465** Columbus takes his first sea voyage at age 14. Later he studies navigation in Greece and mapmaking in Portugal, where he lives for nine years in a colony of Genoese businessmen and shippers. He also travels to Africa, Ireland, England and Iceland.
- 1479** Columbus marries Felipa Perestrello y Moniz (1479), has a son, Diego, and is widowed (1480). [Later, he has another son, Fernando, with Beatriz Enriquez de Harana, whom he never marries.]
- 1483** Columbus presents his plan to reach the Orient by sailing west across the Atlantic to the kings of Portugal, England, France and Spain. Only Spain's King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella accept his offer, but it takes Columbus six years (1486-1492) to convince them to underwrite his explorations.
- 1492** On August 3, Columbus sails from Palos, Spain. On October 12 at two o'clock in the morning, land is sighted. It was an island which he names San Salvador (Holy Savior). Deeply religious, Columbus believes one of his missions is to bring Christianity to the New World.
- 1502** Columbus takes his last voyage across the ocean. He crossed the Atlantic four times in 10 years: 1492, 1493, 1498 and 1502.

On his **first voyage** he lands on Haiti and the Dominican Republic, which he calls "Hispaniola," where he founds the first permanent European settlement in the Western Hemisphere. On his **third voyage**, his political enemies bring him back to Spain in chains, but the Queen absolves him of any blame. On his **fourth voyage**, he was shipwrecked for nearly a year on what is today Jamaica.

- 1506** Columbus dies in Valladolid, Spain, on May 20 at age 54. He insists on being buried with the chains he wore when he was brought back to Spain, following his third voyage. No one is sure where he is buried. Some scholars believe his remains are in the Lighthouse of Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic while others believe they are in Spain in the Cathedral of Seville.



## The Columbus Coat of Arms.

The castle and lion symbolize the Spanish cities Castille and León; the third quadrant represents the islands he discovered while the five anchors are his family crest.

## COLUMBUS AND THE INDIANS: FRIEND OR FOE?

*An Essay by Joseph Scafetta, Jr.*

“Columbus not only symbolizes the process of conquest and genocide which eventually consumed the indigenous peoples of America, but bears the personal responsibility of having participated in it,” according to Indian activist Ward Churchill in his essay, *Confronting Columbus Day*. Along with genocide, Churchill and other foes of Columbus have charged him with slave-trading and stealing the Indians’ land. Let’s look at the facts.

### COLUMBUS AS FRIEND

Initially, Columbus made many friends among the Taino Indians he met on his first voyage. In the ship’s log he kept Columbus described them as “well-made with fine shapes and faces...their eyes were large and very beautiful.” He found them so intelligent that they “could readily become Christians as they have a good understanding.”

**Columbus treated the Tainos fairly** as revealed in a letter he wrote to the Spanish monarchs in February 1493 on the ship taking him back to Spain. In it he said they were “trustworthy and very liberal with everything they have” and criticized his sailors for trading broken plates, pieces of glass and even shoe lace tips for the Tainos’ gold and silver. “However, I forbade that things so small and of no value should be given to them....because it was very wrong,” Columbus wrote.

Columbus himself gave the Tainos gifts so that they would be friendly to him and also so that “they might be made worshipers of Christ...and full of love toward our king, queen and the whole Spanish nation.” Clearly, **he came in peace and with the mission not only of finding gold but of bringing Christianity to the New World.**

These overtures gained their friendship and the trust of their chieftain, **Guacanagari**, one of five *caciques* or native kings who ruled Hispaniola (today’s Haiti and the Dominican Republic) when Columbus arrived there in 1492.

In his letter, Columbus wrote that Guacanagari “gloried in calling me his brother.” This was the beginning of a strong friendship between the two men. The Taino chieftain and his people helped Columbus build a fort on Hispaniola, which he named *Navidad* because it was established during the 1492 Christmas season. When Columbus sailed back to Spain in January 1493, he left behind 40 volunteers at *Navidad*.

### COLUMBUS AS FOE

Columbus returned to the New World in November 1493 with a fleet of 17 ships, and 1,200 men. On one island, one of his search parties was attacked by Caribs, who killed one of his men and wounded two others. This skirmish was the first of many deadly exchanges between the natives and the Spaniards.

Back on Hispaniola, Columbus and his men found abandoned villages belonging to the Caribs, who had fled fearing the arrival of the Spaniards. In the huts they discovered human bones and partly consumed cuts of human flesh. In one village they also found two castrated boys and 12 pregnant teenage

girls, who were Taino Indians, captured by the cannibalistic Caribs, who, the girls said, planned to eat the babies.

Later on Hispaniola, Columbus found the naked bodies of two bearded men. Since the natives did not have facial hair, Columbus immediately rushed to the fort where his friend, Chief Guacanagari told him that the conduct of the 40 men in the fort angered another Taino chieftain named **Caonabo**, who hunted down and slaughtered them all. When Guacanagari and his men tried to help the Spaniards, they were also attacked. Guacanagari was wounded and his village burned to the ground.

This news angered Columbus and ended the good relations between him and the other Taino tribes. It is at this point in his life that Columbus is charged by Indian activists with genocide, slave-trading and stealing Indian land.

## **GENOCIDE?**

During his four voyages, Columbus spent most of his time on land on the island of Hispaniola which is about 30,000 square miles in size. No one knows exactly how many Indians lived there in 1492. In his book *Columbus and the Age of Discovery* Zvi Dor-Ner estimates “about 500, 000,” a questionable figure since most of the island was dense jungle unfit for human habitation.

A Spanish census taken in 1514, ten years after Columbus’ last voyage, showed an Arawak population of 26,000 on Hispaniola. Unfortunately, by 1542, exactly 50 years after Columbus first arrived there, that number was reduced to zero. What happened?

Although Columbus’ men fought many natives, how many they killed is unknown. **It is unlikely, however, that the number reached the “tens of thousands,” as many Indian activists allege since Columbus didn’t have enough men to carry out such a massive slaughter.** The largest number to accompany him at one time was 1,200, but 600 of them contracted malaria and returned to Spain shortly after their arrival and there is no evidence that Columbus himself killed a single Indian.

Thousands of natives did die over the decades that followed Columbus’ four voyages, largely from diseases contracted from Spanish explorers. In his book *Ecological Imperialism*, Alfred W. Crosby lists smallpox, measles, typhoid fever, cholera and influenza among the most common diseases the Spaniards gave the natives.

However, genocide is the *planned* annihilation of a people. No one can reasonably argue that the Spanish deliberately infected the Indians because these men of the 16<sup>th</sup> century had no idea how disease was transmitted. As far as Columbus is concerned, no scholar has discovered how many of these diseases were actually transmitted by Columbus’ crews.

**Conversely, as Crosby points out, the natives inadvertently exported to Europe syphilis, hepatitis, encephalitis, polio, tuberculosis and intestinal parasites.** A month after his return to Spain, Martin Alonzo Pinzon, the captain of the *Pinta*, died from syphilis which he had contracted from a native woman. Today most of the European-borne diseases, except for measles and influenza, have been eradicated while the native diseases of syphilis and hepatitis are still worldwide problems.

The Indians also unwittingly introduced Europeans to two deadly vices. Columbus found natives smoking rolled dry tobacco leaves during his first voyage and other natives chewing coco leaves in Venezuela

during his third voyage. Over the past 500 years, smoking and drug addiction have killed millions worldwide yet no one blames this tragedy on 16<sup>th</sup> century Indians.

## **SLAVE TRADER?**

In 1494 the Taino chief Caonabo, who had led the *Navidad* massacre, united four of the five Taino tribes to exterminate the foreigners. Columbus' friend, Chief Guacanagari, however, refused to join the league. Instead, he informed Columbus of the plot and assisted him in his expedition against the Indians in 1495. For this, Guacanagari was attacked by the other Tainos. He fled to the mountains where he later died.

Columbus rounded up 500 Tainos that he had captured as a result of these hostilities and shipped them to Spain. Since the gold he had discovered in the New World did not cover what the monarchs had spent to outfit his second voyage, Columbus planned to recompense the king and queen with the money he would receive from selling these Indians as slaves. During the voyage about 200 died of exposure and another 150 of the surviving 300 natives arrived in Seville sick. Nevertheless, all were sold on the auction block.

The next year (1496), Columbus returned to Spain with 32 native prisoners of war including the Taino chief Caonabo. During the voyage Caonabo died of exposure and his body was thrown overboard. The surviving natives were also auctioned off as slaves.

In 1498, Columbus again planned to send natives captured in battle back to Spain as slaves, but the Spanish monarchs directed him not to do so and Columbus never raised the issue again.

**In all Columbus was responsible for selling 331 Indians into bondage and causing the death of another 200.** Unquestionably, this is a blot on Columbus' record, but it bears remembering that enslaving prisoners of war was not invented by Columbus. This has been a common practice all over the world since ancient times. The Jews reached Europe in 70 A.D. when they were defeated in battle by Emperor Vespasian and taken as slaves to Rome. The native tribes and civilizations in the New World, from the Caribs to the Aztecs, enslaved their captured enemies and some African and Far Eastern countries still practice slavery today.

These facts do not justify Columbus' actions but rather place them in the context of the time in which they occurred. **It is unreasonable to hold Columbus to a modern standard established in the United States as late as 1865 when his actions were considered acceptable in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.**

It also bears noting that Columbus did not sell innocent men, women and children into bondage. **He did not bring one single African to the New World and never kept any slaves himself.**

## **THIEF?**

Finally, today's Indian activists charge that Columbus stole land from the natives. This accusation arises from an event that took place during his third voyage in 1498. When he arrived in Santo Domingo, Columbus found that about 220 Spaniards, led by Francisco Roldan, the chief justice of Hispaniola, were rebelling against his brother, Bartolomeo, who was the acting governor in Columbus' absence.

**To end the rebellion, Columbus agreed to a number of terms Roldan proposed, including one that gave any man who wanted to settle on Hispaniola a plot of land and all the natives living on it as slaves.** The native chiefs agreed to this arrangement in exchange for Columbus' promise to revoke the quarterly gold tribute that he had imposed during his second trip to Hispaniola.

This land grant agreement became the foundation of the notorious *repartimiento* system that the Spaniards later employed in settling Central and South America. **However, Columbus did not invent this system, which was first used by the Spanish on the Canary Islands off the coast of Africa nor did he suggest it as one of the terms to end the rebellion.** Nevertheless Columbus has been roundly condemned for it.

## **COLUMBUS IN CHAINS**

Many activists today point to the fact that Columbus returned from his third voyage in chains, which they take as proof of his criminal behavior in the New World. This last allegation is a deliberate twisting of the facts.

Following the rebellion, a new chief justice named Francisco de Bobadilla was sent to Santo Domingo in 1500. When he arrived, he found seven Spanish corpses hanging from the gallows. The men had been punished for rebelling against the royal authority given Columbus by the Spanish monarchs. The executions took place while Columbus was hunting rebelling Spanish and Indian insurgents hiding in Hispaniola's interior.

A shocked Bobadilla arrested Columbus and his two brothers, Diego and Bartolomeo, impounded all their property and gave the brothers' wealth to the Spaniards in the fort. In October 1500, the three brothers were chained and placed in the hulls of two caravels headed for Spain. **Upon his arrival at the court, Columbus presented his case to Ferdinand and Isabela, who dismissed all charges and freed the three.**

## **THE GARDEN OF EDEN?**

Today, Indian activists portray the New World as an earthly paradise. If so, this was a "paradise" where **the natives practiced cannibalism, ritual human sacrifice and slavery and suffered from syphilis, hepatitis, addictive cocaine use and cancer, caused by smoking.**

Despite some of his own questionable deeds, which as we have seen, have been greatly exaggerated, the New World was better off thanks to Columbus. **After him came millions of Europeans who brought medical science, mechanical inventions and democratic government to a continent that knew none of these benefits before 1492.**

*Joseph Scafetta is a patent lawyer in Virginia who has written extensively on Columbus and other topics of interest to Italian Americans.*

## WHY COLUMBUS MATTERS

By Dona De Sanctis

Every October a group of dedicated Italian Americans in Denver holds their annual Columbus Day parade....or tries to.

Participants in the parade must contend with Native American activists, who claim Columbus Day is a reminder of their persecution at the hands of white people who came from Europe. They block the parade and hurl insults at the marchers, justifying their behavior because the parade “is a form of hate speech” and constitutes “ethnic intimidation.”

### TWO WRONGS

No one would argue that Native Americans suffered greatly at the hands of the American government in the 19<sup>th</sup> century or that the 16<sup>th</sup> century Aztecs and Mayans of Central and South America paid dearly when the Spanish conquistadores arrived on their shores.

At the same time, it is untenable to conclude that because of these long-past injustices, 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans who honor Columbus should be denied their First Amendment right to free speech. Two wrongs do not make a right. Never have. Never will.

But let’s take a step back to see how Columbus became the poster child for man’s inhumanity to man.

### THE QUINCENTENARY DEBACLE

**“For America to live Europe must die,” proclaimed Russell Means, a founder of the American Indian Movement (AIM).** He made this statement before several thousand people who had come from all over the world to attend the Black Hills International Survival Gathering in South Dakota in 1980.

In his speech, Means urges the rejection of all things European, including writing, which he sees as “one of the white world’s ways of destroying the cultures of non-European peoples” who transmit their history orally. He also warns young college-bound Native Americans to be wary of having “a red skin but a white mind.”

Means’ speech helped set the agenda that AIM and other minority activist groups would carry out a decade later in 1992 as the country prepared to celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of Columbus in the New World.

**AIM took a leadership role in turning the Columbus Quincentenary celebration into an opportunity to broadcast the race-based political and social agenda of the nation’s minorities,** helped by a sympathetic news media, willing to give them ink and airtime to recount the many wrongs their people had suffered at the hands of the white man.

As a result, instead of a celebration marking the permanent opening of communication between two great continents, the 1992 Columbus Centenary became a battleground. And Columbus lost.

Since then, the textbooks used in American schools and colleges have revised the traditional portrayal of him as a skilled sea captain and deeply religious man, who fearlessly crossed a huge ocean to prove there was a westward route to the Orient.

Instead, Columbus is portrayed as a blood-thirsty, gold-hungry slave-trader who destroyed the Garden of Eden civilizations he found on the islands he discovered “by chance.”

At roughly the same time, school systems throughout the United States introduced “multi-culturalism” into their curricula. Students began learning about Native American, Hispanic American and African American history. They started reading books and writing reports about the contributions many other non-white minorities made to America.

These efforts to instill in children an appreciation and tolerance for people of different cultures are commendable. More’s the pity then that they were introduced to *replace* rather than enhance what had been traditionally taught about the contributions of Europeans to America.

## WHY COLUMBUS MATTERS

The current fascination with multi-culturalism makes Columbus and his holiday more necessary than ever before in our history.

**Columbus matters because after him came millions of other Europeans who brought their art, music, science, medicine, philosophy and religious principles to America.**

Columbus matters because Greek democracy, Roman law, Judeo-Christian ethics and the tenet that all men are created equal are all European contributions that have made the United States what it is today.

Columbus matters because his holiday recognizes not only the achievements of a great Renaissance explorer, but the success of the millions of immigrants from all over the world, including Europe, who followed him, seeking religious freedom, political stability and the chance to give their children a better tomorrow.

## COLUMBUS AS INSPIRATION

Columbus Day is a reminder that from its earliest beginnings, the struggling American republic found its inspiration in the figure of Columbus. In fact, October 12<sup>th</sup> is one of America’s oldest holidays, first celebrated in 1792 on the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his first voyage.

**In the early years of the American republic, Columbus was an American icon, admired as much as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.** The nation’s capital was named for him and his image is captured in paintings and statues throughout the Capitol Building, the very seat of American government.

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Columbus had become a symbol of American patriotism. The Pledge of Allegiance was written in 1892 in honor of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his first voyage. Also that year, President Benjamin Harrison declared Columbus Day a legal holiday and Columbus was hailed as the symbol of America’s achievements and progress and even as a saint, led by God to the New World. [See “*St. Christopher Columbus?*” on page 16.]

## **COLUMBUS AS ICON**

Columbus is an icon to most Italian Americans for another reason. His holiday commemorates the arrival on these shores of more than 5 million of their ancestors more than a century ago. Today, their children and grandchildren constitute the nation's fifth largest ethnic group, but despite their numbers and sterling record of achievement, Italian Americans are routinely stereotyped in this nation as goons and/or buffoons.

Columbus Day is the only holiday on which the nation officially recognizes the presence if not the contributions of an estimated 16 to 26 million Italian Americans. For that reasons, organizations like the Sons of Italy, lobbied for years to make it a federal holiday. They succeeded in 1971 when Congress passed a law declaring the second Monday in October Columbus Day in all 50 states.

## **THE FUTURE OF COLUMBUS DAY**

Now that law is being challenged in a number of states, including Colorado. As a result of the disruption of the 2004 parade and the subsequent exoneration of the eight activists who had been arrested, the mayor of Denver decided to bar the 2005 parade.

A state legislator introduced a measure to repeal the holiday in the entire state and local activists lobbied to replace Columbus Day in Colorado with a "multicultural celebration" that would surely exclude European culture.

So far, these measures have been successfully thwarted. Alerted by its Colorado state chapter, the Sons of Italy launched a national letter-writing campaign to the mayor and the legislator. Local Italian American leaders, including the Sons of Italy's Colorado chapter president Pam Ciancio-Wright and the local Italian consul, contacted the mayor and other decision-makers and changed their minds...at least for the time being.

They also convinced the city council to pass an ordinance making it an offense to "knowingly interfere with a permitted parade." Such a law would enable anyone who blocked the parade this year to be prosecuted.

## **WHAT'S NEXT?**

But despite these efforts, Columbus Day is in danger of being eliminated. What's next?

Do we ban St. Patrick's Day celebrations because of the long and bloody struggle between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland? Do we abolish Thanksgiving because the Pilgrims invaded Indian territory? And what are we going to do about the Fourth of July? See why Columbus matters?

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## SAINT CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS?

In 1882, ten years before the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Columbus's first voyage to the New World, a group of Irish Catholics in New Haven, Connecticut, founded a Catholic men's fraternal organization they called the Knights of Columbus.

Its mission was to assist the needy and to boost Catholics' pride in their religion, which was frequently challenged in the anti-Catholic climate of late 19<sup>th</sup> century America. They named their organization after Christopher Columbus because he was Catholic and discovered the Americas.

Shortly after the Knights of Columbus was formed, Italian Americans launched a campaign to have Columbus canonized as a saint of the Roman Catholic Church because his writings reveal that he saw bringing Christianity to the Indians as part of his mission in the New World.

After a sufficient number of signatures was obtained, Pope Leo XIII opened an inquest into the life of Columbus to determine whether his behavior was worthy of imitation as a saintly person. The Knights of Columbus supported this initiative.

The papal investigation, however, rejected his candidacy for sainthood because Columbus had had a 20-year affair with Beatriz Enriquez de Harana, who bore him an illegitimate son, named Ferdinand, in 1488.

Despite the fact that Columbus remained faithful to Beatriz and even provided for her in his last will, the inquest concluded that a person living in an open and notorious unmarried relationship was not a candidate for sainthood.



*Christopher Columbus-Discovery* by Constantino Brumidi (1859). The fresco is one of a dozen images of the great Italian explorer that adorn the U.S. Capitol building.

# Little-Known Facts From Italian American History\*

*For more information about Italian American issues, history, and culture,  
Visit the Sons of Italy web site at*

- **John Cabot** [1450 c. - 1498], born Giovanni Caboto, discovered North America in 1497. Cabot sailed for the British. His voyage led to the English colonization of America. His son, Sebastian **Cabot** [1482-1557] explored South America for Spain.
- Two signers of the Declaration of Independence were of Italian descent: Maryland's **William Paca** and Delaware's **Caesar Rodney**.
- Five to ten thousand Italians fought in the Civil War for both the Union and the Confederacy. Three were Union generals. One Union officer, **Col. Luigi Palma di Cesnola** received one of the first Medals of Honor. He later became the first director of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- Italian immigrant **Attilio Piccirilli** and his five brothers carved the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. They also carved the lions on the steps of the New York Public Library and the facade of the Brooklyn Museum among many other works.
- In 1978, at age 38, **A. Bartlett Giamatti** (1940-1989) became the youngest president of Yale University in 200 years and the first president not of Anglo Saxon heritage. He served until 1986, leaving to become president of the National League and later commissioner of major league baseball.
- **Ed McBain** (1926-2005), a master of the police novel, was born Salvatore Albert Lombino in New York's East Harlem, but changed his name when a publisher told him it was "too hard to pronounce." Over 50 of his novels were published, some under the name "Evan Hunter." Many focused on the work of beat cops and forensic detectives.
- The only enlisted Marine in World War II who earned the nation's two highest military honors, the Navy Cross and the Medal of Honor, was **John Basilone**, a U.S. Marine sergeant, who died at the Battle of Iwo Jima in World War II. He received the U.S. Medal of Honor in 1942 and was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross for heroism at Iwo Jima during February 1945. He was honored with a commemorative stamp in 2005.
- **Robert Gallo, M.D.**, a research scientist and virologist, co-discovered the AIDS virus in 1984 and developed a blood test to screen for the disease. In 1978, he discovered and isolated the virus that is linked to leukemia.
- **Susan Sarandon, Bruce Springsteen** and **Georgia O'Keeffe** are of Italian descent.

*Source: The National Italian American Foundation*

# The Order Sons of Italy in America

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- The **Order Sons of Italy in America (OSIA)** is the largest and oldest national organization in the United States for Italian American men and women.
- Founded in 1905 in New York City's Little Italy, OSIA has grown to 600,000 members and supporters in all 50 states and two U.S. territories and a network of more than 700 chapters.
- Its mission encouraging the study of Italian language and culture in American schools and universities; preserving Italian American traditions, culture, history and heritage; and promoting closer cultural relations between the United States and Italy.
- **The Sons of Italy Foundation (SIF)** is a private, grant-making philanthropic institution established by OSIA in 1959. To date, the **SIF has given more than \$91 million** to scholarships, medical research, cultural preservation, disaster relief and other projects.
- **The Commission for Social Justice (CSJ)** is the anti-defamation arm of OSIA. The CSJ is committed to fighting racism, prejudice and the stereotyping of all races, religions and cultures.



*Founded June 22, 1905*



# COLUMBUS DAY IN THE UNITED STATES



Italian Americans like these in Denver, Colorado, celebrate their heritage on Columbus Day with parades and festivals. [photo: Mike DeLeo]



Activists like this one at a recent Columbus Day Parade in Chicago blame Columbus for actions that happened long after his death in 1506. [photo: Walter Santi]



Columbus Day is a federal holiday often celebrated with a White House ceremony. Here President George W. Bush congratulates Italian American leaders on Columbus Day 2003.

# Columbus: Fact vs. Fiction

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