

WHY COLUMBUS MATTERS

by Dona De Sanctis, Ph.D.

Columbus was a hero to the people who founded America more than 200 years ago. They admired and respected him for his explorations that connected their brand-new nation to the history, culture, and achievements of Europe, giving it greater prestige and “standing” in the world.

Over the years, Columbus became a patriotic icon, included in the pantheon of the Founding Fathers of America. Our nation’s capital was named for him. Our Pledge of Allegiance was written in 1892 during the celebration of the 400th anniversary of his first voyage, and over the past nearly two and a half centuries, many cities and states have honored him with statues and other tributes. In fact, the United States has more monuments to this 15th century Italian than any other nation in the world, according to The Christopher Columbus Encyclopedia.

Columbus’s reputation came under attack in 1992 on the 500th anniversary of the first of his four voyages. To further their own political and social agendas, special interest groups defamed Columbus, his character, and his legacy. They made him the poster boy for every injury indigenous people in North and South America experienced at the hands of the other Europeans, who followed him to the newly discovered continents.

Since then, the movement to erase Columbus from our history has gained momentum. Today, these activists would remove Columbus monuments and change the name of the federal holiday named for him as well. Sadly, many cities and states have joined this attempt to rewrite history and forget the man our nation has honored for more than 200 years.

Today Columbus is falsely charged with slavery and genocide. Largely ignored is evidence in Columbus’s own logs stating he admired the Taino tribes and defended them against the warlike Caribs and Canibs, who captured, enslaved, and even ate their prisoners. Columbus was a blood brother to one of the Taino chiefs, Guacanagari. He never brought any slaves to the newly discovered continents or owned any himself. Instead, as a deeply religious man, he hoped to bring Christianity to the indigenous people he encountered.

People also have been led to believe that the land Columbus explored was a Garden of Eden. The truth is that long before Columbus’s voyages, most indigenous people did not live past the age of 29 because of disease, poor nutrition, and warfare. They fought each other, practiced torture, slavery, and the ritual murder of their own women and children as well as their prisoners of war. The Aztecs, for example, slaughtered thousands of people in ritual sacrifice by cutting out the beating hearts of their prisoners of war.

So it is ironic that many American cities and states want to change the name of Columbus Day to Indigenous People’s Day. To date, about 50 American cities have already done so. Elsewhere, statues of Columbus are being defaced and removed from the parks and city squares where they have stood for more than a century.

We realize it will be challenging to restore Columbus's reputation, but just as it has changed over the years, so has the meaning of his holiday. Today, Columbus Day is an opportunity for millions of Americans who share his Italian heritage to celebrate their traditions and contributions to the United States. Columbus Day has become Italian American Heritage Day.

It is the day that Italian Americans celebrate their presence in America. It is the day they remember their immigrant ancestors' early struggles here, which included poverty, discrimination, exploitation, and even lynching. It is the day that marks their journey from impoverished immigrants to successful citizens of our nation.

At the turn of the last century, more than five million Italian immigrants came here, not to find a better life, but to earn it. They and their descendents have become one of our nation's greatest success stories – living proof of America's willingness to give people who want to work opportunities that their own countries deny them.

Today, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that two-thirds of the Italian Americans in the workforce are in white-collar positions as executives, doctors, lawyers, teachers, and entrepreneurs. Italian Americans are in classrooms and boardrooms; in police cruisers, fire stations, and the military; in state and federal governments; and in science, medicine, and the arts.

So let's be clear about what Columbus Day really stands for. In 21st century America, it is no more only about Columbus than Thanksgiving is only about the Pilgrims, or the Fourth of July only honors Thomas Jefferson. Instead, these holidays are occasions for us to celebrate America, her history, her achievements, and her promise.

Columbus Day celebrates the successful immigrant experiment. It is the day that the nation's fifth largest ethnic group celebrates its heritage and says "Thank you" to the land of opportunity.