



Why Columbus Day Matters To Italian-Americans

FOR GENERATIONS, ITALIAN-AMERICANS HAVE EMBRACED COLUMBUS DAY AS A SYMBOL OF THEIR IDENTITY, PRIDE AND UNITY.

Columbus Day was recognized in 1892 by President Benjamin Harrison as a national holiday to mark the 400th anniversary of the discovery by Columbus. In fact, The holiday was recognized in part to address the fierce prejudice, widespread discrimination and the lynching's Italian Americans faced in the America of the time. The mass lynching of 11 Italian Americans in New Orleans in 1891 prompted creation of the holiday. Italian Americans were the second largest ethnic group to be lynched in the United States.

Columbus Day is an integral part of the American and Italian American heritage. It was created to affirm the United States as a "nation of immigrants." The Pledge of Allegiance was written to honor the day. While it is not exclusive to Italian American's they have adopted it as their own day when they can freely and openly celebrate their American lives. Columbus Day allows Italian Americans to **collectively** celebrate their coming to America.

Columbus Day stands as a reminder to all immigrants that their unique history and culture will be recognized and to affirm the United States as a nation of immigrants. **PHOTOS:** (Top) Columbus Statue, Genoa, Italy. (Bottom) Columbus Statue at Coit Tower, San Francisco.



Indigenous Peoples Day Is No Excuse To Take Columbus Day From Italian-Americans

The people who claim they are indigenous are the descendants of earlier migrants from Asia and are included in Columbus Day celebrations. One of the most important ideas to come out of the creation of America was that every person be judged as an individual, not when their ancestors arrived on these shores.

It would be a shame if Indigenous Peoples Day were used as an excuse to take Columbus Day away from Italian Americans. There is no good reason to take away one group's day of celebration and replace it with another group's day of protest. The movement to replace Columbus Day puts Italian Americans and native Americans on a collision course. While Native Americans want to eliminate Columbus Day and take the day for their own, Italian Americans are urging them to choose a different day to conduct their protest movement.

Indigenous Peoples day is already recognized as an established international Day on August 9 by the United Nations. California also recognizes Native American Day in September of each year and the federal government recognizes Native American Day in November. There is no good reason to add Indigenous Peoples Day on the same day as Columbus Day since it is already recognized internationally on a different day. Attempts by Italian Americans across the nation to work with Native Americans to establish Indigenous Peoples Day on a different date than Columbus Day have been met with disdain and there have been many confrontations between the two groups across the country.



Columbus Day is observed on the second Monday in October in California and at the national level, and in most cities and states in the nation. The Italian American community celebrates the holiday with Columbus Day parades, dinners and activities in virtually every city in America where they live. The celebrations are part of their heritage. Italian Americans worked hard to gain recognition of Columbus Day as a holiday and adopted it as their own. Now those gains by earlier generations are threatened. To rip this holiday from Italian Americans denies them this historical legacy. **PHOTO:** Italian Cultural Society Folk Dancers and Singers at the Statue of Isabella and Columbus in the California State Capitol Rotunda on Columbus Day in Sacramento (1994).

Indigenous Peoples Day is viewed by Italian Americans and other Americans as anti-Columbus Day. It is a day of race based political and social protest against the European and immigrant roots of America. It is not a Day of celebration of Native American culture but rather a day aimed against the European immigrant roots of the nation.

To erase Columbus Day deprives Italian-Americans of their place in American history and totally disregards their struggles and the many contributions they made to America. The attack on Columbus Day is offensive to Italian Americans and seen as an attack on their heritage. To deny them their day of celebration is to punish and marginalize one ethnic group to appease another.

The Founder of the American Indian Movement (AIM), Russell Means, pronounced **"For America to live Europe must die."** In his speech he urged 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.

The Judgement Of History

Those who would deny the contributions of Columbus miss the point of the story of the creation of America and the story of the many immigrants who arrived after him. We cannot change the judgement of history about what happened to the earlier migrants from Asia, nor can we rectify that history. The contributions that America has made to the world and that Italian-Americans have made to America should not be denied to make reparations for injustices that any single group has suffered.

The Italian-American experience muddies the waters of racial indignation. Italian-Americans have suffered fierce prejudice and discrimination at the hands of mobs, the media, leading newspapers and intellectuals and politicians. They have had their share of painful experiences in the Italian American experience.



On the eve of World War II in 1941 Italian-Americans were the largest immigrant group in the nation and in California. At the outbreak of war their loyalty was questioned. They were interned and relocated from the West coast and more than 600,000 were restricted nationwide. Their language and heritage were suppressed and their personal property seized. **Their only crime was being of Italian ancestry.** At the same time an estimated one million Italian-Americans served in the armed forces. After the war it was not popular to be too Italian. Many Italians changed their names and hid their ethnicity out of shame and fear. **These events occurred within our living memory.** **PHOTO (Above): Their ONLY crime was their Italian ancestry.**

Injustice cannot be quantified. It is absolute. While many groups in society vie for whose pain is greater than the other to gain advantages, the injustices experienced by Italian Americans are real and deserve the same recognition as those suffered by others.

Columbus Day and the story of the Italian-Americans are just as important, just as deserving, as that of Indigenous Peoples. Erasing Columbus Day and replacing it with Indigenous Peoples Day is an attempt to rewrite American history as a history of a single oppression. **PHOTO (Below Right): Balliamo! Folk Dancers performing at Columbus Day Parade, San Francisco, 2017**

Columbus Day is both an American and an Italian-American holiday and an inspiration to millions who celebrate it across the country. In 2019, the Columbus Day Proclamation made by the President of the United States recognizing the Holiday fittingly stated, "Columbus took pride in the fact that he was a citizen of Genoa, Italy. The celebration of Columbus Day is an appropriate opportunity to recognize the more than 16 million Americans of Italian heritage and the legacy of generations of Italian-Americans who helped shape our nation."



In Defense Of Columbus

COLUMBUS IS NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ACTS OF THOSE WHO CAME AFTER HIM.

Columbus is an important historical figure. His voyage of discovery in 1492 is one of the greatest events in world history and changed the course of history. He sailed across an uncharted Atlantic with three trading ships as a navigator and explorer to set up new trade routes not as a conqueror. The fall 1997 edition of Life Magazine ranked his discovery as one of the two most important events of the millennium and Columbus as one of the two most important persons who lived during the past 1000 years. With ranking and national recognition of Columbus that high one can begin to understand why Italian Americans would have a difficult time coming up with a replacement, nor should they have to.



Italian-Americans view Columbus as one of their own whose voyages led to the creation of America and their voyages to these shores. While non-Italians may not understand the importance of Columbus Day to Italian-American's they cannot deny he played an important role in history and is widely celebrated by millions of Americans.

Italian-Americans are proud that it was an Italian explorer from Genoa, Italy that discovered the new continent for Europe. And they are proud it was named America –a great Italian name –after another Italian explorer, Amerigo Vespucci. Yet another Italian explorer, Giovanni Caboto, commonly known as John Cabot, discovered North America.

While others have claimed to have discovered America before Columbus, they did not leave a record of historical significance. Although inhabited, the New World was a discovery to the rest of the world. To say it was not a discovery is akin to saying that a gold miner does not discover gold in the ground because it was already there.

There are many myths and misrepresentations made about Columbus by his enemies. Native American activists and their revisionist allies have spread ideologically motivated falsehoods about Columbus but he deserves an honest representation of the facts rather than false accusations. He is often blamed for the acts of those that later followed him to this continent.

When Columbus Landed the native tribes were in a constant state of warfare and practiced widespread slavery and subjugation of other tribes and human sacrifice, cannibalism and torture. Columbus was a restraining force upon the Spanish settlers. Columbus did not bring slavery to the Americas and he forbid it among his men. The African slave trade began more than a hundred years after his death. Columbus also banned child trafficking and forbid his men to steal from or harm the natives.



Columbus established friendly relations with the first tribes he encountered and allied with them against cannibalistic tribes who had been raiding their lands and enslaving them. His actions against more warlike tribes were taken in self-defense.

He is sometimes blamed for the deaths of native Americans who died of diseases brought by European animals and settlers, but these were unintended consequences that occurred years after he died. In 1348, more than one-third of Italians died in the Black Plague. Columbus should not be held responsible for the acts of those who came after him. That is like holding the carpenter who builds a door responsible for the actions of those who walk through the door.

Had all Europeans who followed in Columbus' wake embraced his compassionate lead history would be different.
PHOTO (R): Columbus And Isabella – statue in the Rotunda of the State Capital Building, Sacramento CA.

Claiming Our Heritage And Fighting Bigotry

To Italian-Americans, Columbus is a hero, an Italian-American icon. Continuing attempts to trash Columbus try to make him the scapegoat for injustices committed by other people. **The movement to replace Columbus Day is viewed as anti-Italian American by the Italian community.**



Recent attacks to tear down statues of Columbus in the United States also tear down our history and illustrate the unappeasable ire of the forces arrayed against Columbus the man, Columbus Day the symbol and against Italian Americans who stand in their way. **PHOTO: (R, Top) Italians in Mokelumne Hill, CA, on a ship float in a Columbus Day Parade, California Gold Country, c. 1890**

Italian-Americans have faced bigotry in many forms and the attack on Columbus Day is another face of that bigotry, Just another form of discrimination. In light of the magnitude of Columbus accomplishments, and the emotional stake the Italian-American community has in the holiday named after one of their countrymen, the campaign of rage and misinformation to demonize Columbus is much the same kind of prejudicial treatment and false characterizations that Italian-Americans have experienced throughout much of their history. The bruising ethnic conflict over Columbus Day is another painful episode in the Italian-American experience.

This ethnic struggle has been ongoing since before the 500th anniversary of Columbus Day in 1992. The goal of Indigenous activists and their partisan supporters is to eliminate Columbus Day altogether and they are well on their way to accomplishing their goal. Italian-American's stand in their way. Their movement of victimization over truth and over history has been conducted under the radar by casino tribes, sovereign tribal nations and Native American activists to avoid the spotlight that they are waging a national organized campaign against Columbus Day across the nation. Italian-Americans have organized their communities in response to 'Save Columbus Day.'



Four million Italian Americans arrived in America during the great wave of immigration around the turn of the 20th Century. They represented one quarter of the 16 million immigrants and the largest group of immigrants from Europe who passed through Ellis Island during this period. Today, Italian Americans constitute one of the largest ancestry groups in America, Yet, they are poorly represented in contemporary history books that they too were here and part of the Story of America. **Not even a Footnote.** The confrontation over Columbus Day symbolizes the aspirations of Italian Americans to be recognized and included and treated as equals. **PHOTO: (Above) Italian American children's dancers perform at a San Francisco Giants Italian Heritage Night Game in 2017.**

The Italian American vision of ethnicity promotes group pride and mutual appreciation. It is a vision where our past is honored and in which we can celebrate our common legacy. Italian Americans have relied on their cultural heritage and common traditions to make important contributions to the well-being of the nation. It is up to Italian Americans to claim fair history coverage in the school curriculum for them, for Columbus, and for political support for Columbus Day as a condition of their vote.

Italians in California have been celebrating Columbus Day since their arrival with the Gold Rush and were instrumental in its adoption as a Holiday. The 'Father of Columbus Day,' Angelo Noce an Italian immigrant, arrived in California at age 18 in 1858. He is buried in the Catholic cemetery in Jackson (Amador County) in the foothills of the California Gold Country. He is credited with obtaining recognition of Columbus Day as a legal holiday in 35 states.

PHOTO: (R) The "Father Of Columbus Day," Angelo Noce



Celebrations of Columbus Day are one of the most important and vital building blocks of Italian American identity. It is essential that the Italian American community act to protect Columbus Day, celebrate it, and claim it as part of their Italian-American heritage. Recent polls show that most Americans support Columbus Day.

Protecting our heritage and our holiday is a personal matter for Italian Americans. In a sea of loud and angry voices Italian American voices need to be heard. It is not in quiet assimilation that we become stronger but only in noisy celebration of our past. **Let us not forget where we came from and why Columbus Day matters to us.**