

NEW ORLEANS APOLOGIZES FOR MASS LYNCHING OF ITALIAN-AMERICANS



New Orleans' Monument to the Immigrant in Woldenberg Park, French Quarter.

One of the largest lynchings in American history took place in New Orleans in 1891. During this dark episode mobs across the city attacked the Italian community and ransacked homes and shops. In April of 2019, the mayor of New Orleans issued a proclamation apologizing for the lynching of 11 innocent Italian immigrants who had been falsely accused of a crime.

After the Civil War Italian immigrants were recruited to the South to replace the slaves on the plantations and large numbers had settled in New Orleans and with it came anti-Italian sentiment. It was a period of fierce prejudice and discrimination against Italians in the U.S. The lynchings were applauded and justified in the media; editorials in the New York Times and Washington Post justified the lynchings and inflamed hatred toward the immigrants. The Detroit Plainsdealer, an African-American newspaper, claimed: "the Italian does not make a good American." Theodore Roosevelt called the lynchings "a rather good thing."

Italy cut diplomatic relations with the U.S. over the incident, but the extreme anti-Italian prejudice it unleashed lasted for decades. The following decade 50 more lynchings of Italians took place across the nation. As late as 1920, mobs invaded the Italian neighborhood in Frankfurt, Illinois dragging people from their homes, beating them and burning their houses. The Italians resisted but after 3 days of violence, hundreds of Italians were left homeless. Italian-Americans are the second largest group of Americans to be lynched in our nation.

In 1892, the year after the New Orleans lynching and in response to it, President Harrison declared Columbus Day a national day of unity to unite a divided nation. It was also the 400th anniversary of Columbus' landing in 1492; the Pledge of Allegiance was written in honor of the occasion. It was a time when the nation was divided between north and south after the Civil War and by religious and ethnic divisions between the earlier Protestant immigrants and the new Catholic immigrants. Columbus Day was seen as a symbol for bringing together a nation of diverse peoples and the millions of immigrants who found inspiration in Columbus.

Italian-Americans began celebrating Columbus Day in earnest as a way to restore a sense of dignity and self worth to themselves in light of the rampant anti-Italian and anti-Catholic sentiment of the time. Columbus Day helped the Italians forge a needed sense of national identity and pride in the face of the hostility toward them. They viewed Columbus as one of them; the explorer from Genoa, Italy, whose voyages led to the creation of America and their voyages to these shores.

While Columbus Day is an American holiday it has been adopted by Italian Americans as an ethnic holiday they could celebrate their American lives and came to be a vital part of the Italian American heritage. And tens of millions of Americans from many backgrounds celebrate the holiday each year in communities across the country.

In recent decades there have been attempts to replace Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples Day, but that is not an American holiday, rather it is an international day of protest, one aimed against the immigrant heritage of the nation that Columbus Day was meant to celebrate. Replacing Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples day is a slap in the face to the immigrant roots of America and to the contributions of Italian Americans. It is a purposeful and mean spirited attempt to erase and expropriate our American and our Italian American heritage. Recent actions to tear down the Columbus statues also tears down our history. The elimination of Columbus Day is a matter of social injustice against the Italian American community.

Let us not forget who we are and where we came from and why Columbus Day matters to us. Italian-American communities across the United States are standing up to protect our heritage - you can too, by celebrating Columbus Day.