

NEW ORLEANS APOLOGIZES FOR MASS LYNCHING OF ITALIAN AMERICANS IN 1891

One of the largest lynchings in American history took place in New Orleans in 1891. In April 2019, The Mayor of New Orleans issued a formal proclamation apologizing for the mass lynching of 11 Italian immigrants, an event that was one of the darkest in Italian American history.

It was a time when anti Italian feelings were at their height in the United States. During the late 19th century and early 20th Century more than 50 Italian Americans were lynched across the United States. Italian Americans were second only to Black Americans in the number of lynch victims during this period.

In the late 19th Century, thousands of Italian immigrants, mostly Sicilian, arrived in New Orleans and the city was home to more southern Italians than other southern States. Between 1884 and 1924, 300,000 Italians settled in New Orleans and many lived in the French Quarter earning it the nickname "Little Palermo." Italian immigrants were often recruited to the south after the civil war to replace the slaves on the plantations.

Anti-Italian feelings peaked in New Orleans in 1891 when a vigilante mob organized by the city's political and economic leaders stormed the city jail chanting "Who Killa The Chief" and "We Want The Dagos." The mob then shot and lynched 11 Italian immigrants who had been found innocent in court after it was alleged "The Dagos" had killed the city's police chief. Their bodies were hanged to lampposts and mutilated. Across the city the Italian community was attacked and homes, shops and boats were ransacked and Italians were assaulted and beaten.

It was a period of fierce prejudice and discrimination against Italians. The lynchings were generally applauded and justified in the media. Editorials in the New York Times in 1891 used ugly stereotypes and anti Italian rhetoric to legitimize the hatred toward these immigrants in the public's mind which lasted for decades. Even the Washington Post justified the hangings.

Theodore Roosevelt called the mass lynching of Sicilians in New Orleans "... a rather good thing." "Its high time someone gave the race what it deserved." The Detroit Plaindealer, an African American newspaper, in 1891, said: "the Italian ... does not make a good American."

Italy cut off diplomatic relations with The United States over the incident for not protecting its immigrants. There were rumors of war between the two countries.

The incident left a lasting prejudice and anti- Italian hostility in America and contributed to shaping the Italian image as undesirable second class citizens. For much of their history in this nation Italians were not treated as a desirable race of people by more established ancestry groups. Southern Italians were not considered members of the white race at the time.

In the following decade 50 more lynchings of Italians took place in states as diverse as Colorado, Florida, Kentucky, Illinois, Louisiana, Mississippi, New York and Washington State.

In 1891, several Italians were lynched in West Virginia. In June, 1892, 4 Italians were lynched near Seattle, Washington. In 1892, a group of Indians lynched an Italian near Guthrie, Oklahoma. In 1893, several Italians were murdered in Denver, Colorado. In 1895, 6 Italian workers were killed and lynched by a mob in the Colorado coal fields. In 1899, 3 Italians were lynched in Hahnville, Louisiana. In 1899, a mob lynched 5 Italians in Tallulah, Louisiana. Three were Italian shopkeepers who had permitted Negroes equal status with whites in their shops.

The list goes on! In July, 1901, Italians were attacked by a mob in Mississippi. In 1901, an

Italian was lynched by a mob in Erwin, Mississippi. In 1901, four Italians were driven from Marksville, Louisiana. In 1906, a mob in West Virginia killed several Italians. In 1906, in Marian, North Carolina, 2 striking Italians were killed, and five wounded. In 1910, 2 Italians were attacked in Tampa, Florida and lynched. In 1910 an Italian was killed by a mob in Willisville, Illinois. In 1911, another Italian met the same fate in Illinois. In August 1920, mobs invaded the Italian neighborhood of Frankfort, Illinois dragging people from their homes, beating them and burning their homes. The Italians fought back turning the small neighborhood into a battleground. It took 500 state troopers 3 days to end the fighting. In the end, hundreds of Italians were left homeless. And the list goes on!

“ The Italian American saga is filled with chapters of unbounded rage and unfettered bigotry against them, lynching’s at the hands of mobs, condemnations from the pens of leading intellectuals, quota laws to restrict Italian immigration, miscarriages of justice by prejudicial courts and the internment and relocation of innocent Italian Americans during World War II”

This quote is from a New York case by Justice Dominic Massaro of the New York Supreme Court. In the case, Judge Massaro concluded that Italian Americans have been subjected to a long and painful history of purposeful unequal treatment and that instances of discriminatory treatment abound.

In 1892, the year after the New Orleans lynching occurred, Italians through out the United States 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 immigrant sentiment that raged in the country. Columbus Day helped the Italians forge a needed sense of national identity and pride in the face of the unbridled hatred toward them.

Columbus Day was officially recognized as a national holiday in 1892 by President Benjamin Harrison as a national day of unity for both the newer and the earlier immigrant peoples including the earlier migrants from Asia. The United States was a divided nation after the Civil War and Columbus Day was seen as a symbol of bringing a nation of diverse ethnic and religious peoples together in a day of national unity for all immigrant groups.

While Columbus Day is an American holiday, Italian Americans, along with other Americans, adopted Columbus Day as a day they could celebrate their immigrant heritage and presence in America. And tens of millions of Americans celebrate the holiday.

Columbus day has come under assault in recent decades by native Americans who resent the immigration and settlement of the Americas by immigrants from Europe and beyond.. The native American movement seeks to erase Columbus day from the History books and replace it with a Indigenous Peoples day , But Indigenous peoples day is not an American holiday. It is a global day of protest against the European immigration and settlement around the world.

For Italian Americans the challenge to Columbus day is another painful chapter in their story. Their adopted national holiday, Columbus day, is under assault by native Americans and other groups who seek to erase Columbus Day from the history books. And in the process erasing the Italian American heritage. These groups do not know us or the Italian American experience nor do they know or care why Columbus Day matters to Italian Americans and why we celebrate and need this holiday.

These groups espouse the same hatred and bigotry against Columbus and Italian American aspirations as those we have faced before. Let us not forget who we are and where we came from and why Columbus Day and our heritage needs to be protected.