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Christopher Columbus Statue Removed From California State Capitol Rotunda

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Tuesday, July 7, 2020 | Sacramento, CA



Crews started removing a statue of Christopher Columbus from its prominent position in the California state Capitol rotunda Tuesday.

Andrew Nixon / CapRadio

Updated 2:29 p.m.

Crews removed a statue of Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella Tuesday, which has occupied a prominent position inside the California state Capitol rotunda but has also triggered protests during a time when several historical figures are being scrutinized for their roles in the exploitation of communities of color.

It comes on the heels of a weekend protest where demonstrators tore down a statue of Catholic missionary Junipero Serra on the east side of the state Capitol grounds. That demonstration was originally organized with the goal of demanding the removal of the Columbus statue.

Last month a statue of John Sutter was removed by Sutter Health near the organization's Midtown Sacramento campus.

KCRA 3 News reports crews started building a ramp early Tuesday morning to move the large statuary group titled "Columbus' Last Appeal to Queen Isabella."

The statue has been on the first floor of the Capitol rotunda since 1883.

(<http://www.capitolmuseum.ca.gov/exhibits-and-collections/queen-isabella>) Edgar Mills, brother of donor Darius Ogden Mills, said at the statue dedication ceremony that "California, more than any other state in the American Union, fulfills [Columbus'] visions of marvelous lands beyond the setting sun."

Elementary schools have long taught lessons about the 15th-century Italian colonizer. More recently, critics have pointed out Columbus' violent treatment of indigenous people and the forced conversion of these communities to Christianity.

Dr. Vanessa Esquivido, a Native scholar and visiting professor at California State University Chico, was at the Capitol Tuesday to see the statue removed. She said the removal was a "beautiful moment," and a step toward changing how the legacy of Columbus and other colonizers is taught.

"This moment right here, this moment is for us," Esquivido said. "This is for our ancestors, this is for my daughters. My daughter is 6 years old and she will know, she will know that these are murderers."

The Statewide Coalition Against Racist Symbols and other groups have been holding events to "de-Sutter, de-Serra and de-Columbus Sacramento" in recent weeks. Morning Star Gali, a Pit River Tribe member working with the coalition, said Monday that the Columbus statue has been a point of frustration.

"Why is it that when we're in a time of truth-telling, where we're addressing the complications and asking these questions for why these statues are still standing, why is there such an effort for these statues to stay in place?"

Democratic leaders Senate President pro Tem Toni Atkins, Assembly Speaker Anthony Rendon and Assembly Rules Committee Chair Ken Cooley announced the statue would be removed last month.

"Christopher Columbus is a deeply polarizing historical figure given the deadly impact his arrival in this hemisphere had on indigenous populations," the lawmakers said in a press release. "The continued presence of this statue in California's Capitol, where it has been since 1883, is completely out of place today. It will be removed."

But Patrizia Cinquini Cerruti, Director of the Italian Language School in Sacramento, said Columbus' legacy still matters to Italian-Americans and that removal of the statue "strips away the recognition that Italians fought so hard to earn."

"The destruction, defacement, loss, and removal of the Columbus statues is a day of mourning for all Italian Americans who care about their history," Cerruti said. "These statues are a symbol of our history, our heritage and our contributions. Their removal diminishes us. It is part of a larger effort to marginalize us and erase Italian Americans from history. Italian Americans deserve better, they deserve to be remembered."

The city of Sacramento has stepped away from officially marking the holiday that honored Columbus. City Council members voted in 2018 to declare the second Monday of October as Italian-American Heritage Day, after Italian-Americans worked on a resolution to have a traditional holiday recognized by the city.

Sammy Caiola contributed reporting to this story.