

GRAND LODGE OF NEW YORK
ORDER SONS & DAUGHTERS OF ITALY IN AMERICA
COMMISSION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE



*The True Legacy
of
Christopher Columbus*



October 31, 1451 - May 20, 1506

*By prevailing over all obstacles
and distractions, one may unflinchingly
arrive at his chosen goal or destination*

— Christopher Columbus

The great Renaissance explorer Christopher Columbus founded the first permanent European settlement in the New World. The arrival of Columbus in 1492 marked the beginning of recorded history in the Americas. For much of its history, the United States considered Christopher Columbus a man worthy of admiration. *Columbus Day* is one of America's oldest patriotic holidays, first celebrated on October 12, 1792, when the New York Society of Tammany honored Columbus on the 300th Anniversary of his first voyage. The Pledge of Allegiance was written in 1892 in honor of the 400th Anniversary. That same year, President Benjamin Harrison declared *Columbus Day* a legal holiday.

In 1905, Colorado became the first state to declare *Columbus Day* a holiday. In 1971, *Columbus Day* became a federal holiday in all fifty states after Congress passed a law declaring the second Monday in October *Columbus Day*.

Columbus Day celebrates the beginning of cultural exchange between America and Europe. After Columbus, millions of European immigrants brought their art, music, science, medicine, philosophy, and religious principles to America. These contributions have helped shape the United States and include Greek democracy, Roman law, Judeo-Christian ethics and the belief that all persons are created equal.

Columbus Day also commemorates the arrival on these shores of more than five million Italians beginning in 1880. Today, the children and grandchildren of these early Italian Americans constitute the nation's fifth largest ethnic group, according to the US Census Bureau.

Like all of us, Christopher Columbus may not have been a perfect person but there is no doubt that he accomplished extraordinary things during his life. These are undisputed "facts" that no reasonably minded person can deny.

- Columbus proved that it was possible to safely cross the Atlantic.
- Columbus was the first European to realize the full importance of the Atlantic wind pattern called the prevailing Westerlies, which blew steadily east.
- Columbus's transatlantic route lay the foundation for future navigation in the region. His maps were used by Amerigo Vespucci (the Italian explorer for which America is named).
- The route across the Atlantic Ocean that Columbus charted in the 15th century is still used by sailors today.
- Columbus introduced the principles of compass variation (the variation at any point of the Earth's

surface between the magnetic north and true north). We currently live in an age where there are those who rebuke and dismiss the extraordinary accomplishments of Columbus. They choose to promote a false and deceptive narrative with accusations of opportunism, ruthlessness, greed, cruelty, and an all consuming thirst for glory. We cannot sit in silence and watch and listen to any political or social agenda of the 21st century that serves to tarnish and undermine the reputation of this great man. Simply stated, a true knowledge and understanding of the "facts" will better enable us to provide and cascade the truth and eradicate the fiction concerning Columbus's legacy. The following "facts" serve to provide that path.

- *In every significant way, Columbus discovered America.* Even if others visited the continent sporadically before he did, their voyages had no historical significance. It was Columbus's voyages that marked the end of thousands of years of isolation between the Western Hemisphere and the rest of the world. The recorded history of the Americas and the Caribbean starts with Columbus.
- *Columbus was not a slave trader.* He never owned any slaves nor did he bring any slaves to the Western Hemisphere from Africa. During his first voyage in 1492, Columbus landed on the island of Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic). There with the help of a tribe of friendly Taino Indians, he built a fort called Navidad and left thirty-nine of his crew there when he returned to Spain in January 1493.

On his return to Hispaniola in November 1493, he learned that all his men had been massacred by another Taino tribe. Columbus and his men fought these Indians, capturing approximately two thousand, and in 1495 sent five hundred of these prisoners of war to Spain to be sentenced by the sovereign, as was the custom in 15th century Europe. Columbus sent another thirty Indian prisoners of war to Spain the following year, but the Spanish monarchs ordered Columbus to stop the practice and he never again sent Indians to Europe to be sentenced.

Columbus found slavery practiced in the Caribbean by the Caribs/Canibs who made slaves of the tribes they conquered and also ate their victims. Such practices horrified the Spanish and caused them to look down on these native cultures. An important point of fact is that the Spanish arrival in the New World was the decisive factor that eventually ended human sacrifice and cannibalism.

Many of the native tribes Columbus encountered were hunters-gatherers who engaged in bloody tribal wars, and in the case of the Arawaks and

Caribs/Canibs, slavery, torture, and cannibalism existed.

- **Columbus did not destroy the balance between man and nature.** He and the other Europeans brought with them Old World agricultural techniques, including crop rotation and animal breeding. They introduced new tools (including the wheel) as well as new plants and domesticated animals, including the horse.

The native population depended on “slash-and-burn” cultivation of the land along with hunting, fishing, and collecting edible wild plants, seeds, and shellfish. In their struggle for survival, they were not the champions of the environment that they are often portrayed today.

- **Columbus did not steal the natives' land.** It is a sad fact of human civilization that powerful nations usurp the land of the vanquished. The Spanish conquistadors who followed Columbus in the 16th and 17th centuries were establishing an empire through military conquest.
- **Columbus was not a racist.** No evidence indicates that Columbus thought the islanders he met were racially inferior in any way. In the journal of his first voyage, Columbus describes the Tainos and other tribes as well-made people with fine shapes and faces. He noted that they had large and very beautiful eyes. They were straight limbed without exception and handsomely shaped. He praised their generosity, innocence, and intelligence, saying that “they would readily become Christians as they have a good understanding.”
- **Columbus did not commit genocide.** The destruction of native populations of North and South America over the centuries is a complex historical tragedy. No one knows exactly how many people were here when the Europeans arrived. Many researchers believe the number to be around forty million. Columbus made four voyages to the Caribbean in a twelve-year period (1492-1504), spending from only seven months to two years and nine months (including the year he was shipwrecked on his fourth voyage). It is inconceivable that he could have killed millions of people in so short a time.

Prior to the Europeans' arrival, the Western Hemisphere was no paradise. New medical research on pre-Columbian mummies in Peru, Chile, and remote areas far from the early European colonies reveals tuberculosis, long thought European in origin, was rampant among the Indian tribes before the arrival of Columbus. Arthritis, periodontal diseases, and significant

bone erosion also afflicted the native populations long before the arrival of Columbus.

Blaming Columbus for the extermination of the native population is as fair as blaming the native population for killing people who die from using tobacco and cocaine, which the natives introduced to the Europeans.

In 2016, the National Education Association issued a press release encouraging school districts nationwide to celebrate the second Monday in October as “Indigenous Peoples' Day” on the same day of the traditional federal holiday, *Columbus Day*. It also stated it would provide access to funds in order to accomplish this mission.

Many Americans, especially Italian Americans, have protested this action. If it is run simultaneously or as a substitute for *Columbus Day*, it is obvious that the legacy of Columbus will be cast aside with the eventual intent of obliterating the recognition of his achievements and accomplishments.

The Grand Lodge of New York Order Sons & Daughters of Italy in America Commission for Social Justice (CSJ) has been at the forefront of phone call and letter writing campaigns throughout the country, that has delayed or stopped this attempt. While we have been successful in several states, the campaign to eliminate *Columbus Day* continues and New York State is the now a prime target.

CSJ has delayed a change in some of the school districts in upstate New York and will continue its fight to preserve the memory of Christopher Columbus and the significant part he played in the history of the Americas. We believe in diversity and tolerance by ADDITION, *not* by SUBTRACTION or SUBSTITUTION.

Columbus Day represents not only the accomplishments and contributions of Italian Americans, but also the indelible spirit of risk, sacrifice, and self-reliance of a great Italian icon that defines the United States of America. Once again, we should demonstrate tolerance by ADDITION, *not* by SUBTRACTION or SUBSTITUTION!



References and Suggested Reading

Steve Byas. *History's Greatest Libels:*

A Challenge to Some of the Great Lies of History

Carol Delaney. *Columbus and the Quest for Jerusalem*

Tommy De Seno. *The Truth About Christopher Columbus*

Rich DiSilvio. *Tales of Titans*

Rafael. *Christopher Columbus the Hero*

Columbus: *Fact vs Fiction*. Available at www.nyscsj.org



The Commission for Social Justice (CSJ) is the anti defamation arm of the Order Sons & Daughters of Italy in America, the biggest and oldest national organization for men and women of Italian descent in the United States. The CSJ was founded in 1979 to fight the stereotyping of Italian Americans by the entertainment, advertising, and media industries. It also collaborates with other groups to ensure that people of all races, religions, and cultures are treated with dignity and respect.

GRAND LODGE OF NEW YORK
ORDER SONS & DAUGHTERS OF ITALY IN AMERICA
2101 Bellmore Avenue • Bellmore, New York 11710
1 (800) 322-OSIA • Fax: (516) 221-OSIA
www.nyscsj.org • osiajohnf@gmail.com

This document is the property of the Grand Lodge of New York Order Sons & Daughters of Italy in America