

Columbus Statues & Parades a Tribute to the Italian American Story

Why, in 1892, America began to celebrate Columbus Day, which in turn led to the creation of more than 100 Columbus statues, is a tragic example of the mistreatment of immigrants that needs to be shared.



Editor's note: ISDA hosts the annual Columbus Day Parades in Cleveland (<https://orderisda.org/culture/news/clevelands-blaine-griffin-named-grand-marshal-of-2024-columbus-day-parade/>) and Pittsburgh (<https://orderisda.org/culture/news/pittsburghs-italian-american-columbus-day-parade-marches-on/>), and will be participating in the Chicago and New York City parades.

By Basil M. Russo (<https://orderisda.org/about/officers/>), National President, ISDA

The legacy of Christopher Columbus is making headlines in Ohio's capital, and, on the federal level, with President Joe Biden's release this past Friday of the 2024 Columbus Day Proclamation (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2024/10/11/a-proclamation-on-columbus-day-2024/>).

In Columbus, Ohio, the Parks and Recreation Department was sued by an Italian American (<https://www.dispatch.com/story/news/courts/2024/09/09/renaming-of-italian-village-park-from-citys-namesake-sparks-lawsuit-columbus-ohio-christopher/75144969007/>) who says the city demonstrated undue bias when it renamed Columbus Square to Warren Square in 2022. The lawsuit contends that the change violates city rules and taps into an undercurrent of intolerance toward Italian American iconography.

The irony? Few are aware of Italian Americans' connection to Columbus — a connection that, when explored, often reshapes perspectives on the navigator's place in American history.

In President Biden's proclamation, a passage begins to paint the picture — in stark detail:

“For many Italian Americans, the lives of their ancestors in this country were not always easy. In addition to the challenges of starting life in a new land, they also faced discrimination. Columbus Day was founded by President Benjamin Harrison in 1892 in response to the horrific, xenophobic attack that took the lives of 11 Italian Americans the year before. In the face of hate, Italian Americans persisted — advancing our Nation and challenging us to live up to our highest values.”

Rarely in agreement, it's worth noting that Biden and Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump both support Columbus Day.

In the past six months, judicial and legislative leaders also have sided with pro-Columbus advocates.

In April, a Pennsylvania appeals court voted 7-0 (<https://orderisda.org/culture/news/pa-judges-unanimously-revive-lawsuit-that-would-prevent-the-removal-of-pittsburghs-christopher-columbus-statue/>) to reinstate a lawsuit that was filed to preserve a 30-foot Columbus statue in Pittsburgh; in August, Massachusetts lawmakers retreated (<https://orderisda.org/culture/news/columbus-advocacy-prevails-in-boston-pittsburgh-and-philadelphia-testing-politicians-resolve/>) on a proposal to abolish Columbus Day statewide; and in September, the New Hampshire governor approved a law mandating Columbus Day recognition (<https://www.dispatch.com/story/news/state/2024/09/13/nh-law-columbus-day-indigenous-peoples-day/75182176007/>) in all municipalities and public schools across the state.

Why the sudden shift across governmental branches and within wide segments of public opinion? It all comes down to primary sources and a narrative that stands on its own merits.

Here's our Italian American history...

When Italians came to America

Between 1880 and 1920, some four million Italian immigrants left impoverished towns throughout southern Italy to seek a better life for their families in the U.S. Upon their arrival in America, they were subjected to

violence and hostility unlike anything they had experienced in Italy.

Many of these immigrants arrived through the port of New Orleans to provide cheap labor needed in the sugar cane fields. They took the place of emancipated slaves.

One of the worst episodes of racial violence in our country's history occurred in New Orleans in 1891, when the city's police chief, David Hennessy, was shot. As he lay dying in a dark street, when asked to identify the gunmen, he allegedly said, "The Dagos."

Some 200 Italian immigrants were taken into custody, and nine of them were tried before a jury. None were found guilty. Despite that finding, they were all returned to jail.

Political and business leaders in the community inflamed the deep-seated anti-Italian immigrant sentiment that existed in New Orleans. A mob in excess of 5,000 people gathered in the town square, stormed the jail, and beat, shot and lynched 11 Italian immigrants.

This was the largest mob to ever participate in a mass lynching in American history. Yet, you will not read a single word about it in any of our school's history books.

To fully understand how despised the immigrants were, *The New York Times*, and many other newspapers throughout the country, actually applauded the lynchings in their editorials. Future president Teddy Roosevelt stated that the lynchings "were a rather good thing."

Tragically, the New Orleans lynchings were not an isolated incident. Over the next 30 years, 40 more Italian immigrants were strung up by angry mobs.

The beginning of Columbus Day

In an effort to encourage more tolerance and acceptance of Italian immigrants, President Benjamin Harrison declared a national celebration of Columbus Day in 1892. From that day to this, Columbus, who was regarded as a national hero of Italian heritage, was embraced by Italian immigrants as a symbol that they would someday be accepted in America.

But injustice again befell our community in 1920, when immigrants Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were arrested and ultimately executed for allegedly killing a shoe factory paymaster and guard. Their trial was another example of a corrupted justice system.

The trial was conducted by a bigoted judge who expressed his contempt for Italian immigrants publicly. Protests in support of Sacco and Vanzetti were held throughout the world to no avail.

Anti-Italian hysteria again reached a fever pitch in WWII when 600,000 Italians living in our country were designated as Enemy Aliens and were subjected to curfews, confiscation of property, loss of jobs, relocation from their homes, and in some cases internment camps. The tragic irony of this situation is that while they were being treated as criminals, one million of their sons were fighting and dying to keep our country free.

Many well-intentioned but misinformed Americans vilify Columbus because of allegations not supported by primary source material. Many books have been published in recent years that debunk the lies and misinformation.

These include “[Columbus and the Quest for Jerusalem \(https://www.amazon.com/Columbus-Quest-Jerusalem-Religion-Voyages/dp/1439102376\)](https://www.amazon.com/Columbus-Quest-Jerusalem-Religion-Voyages/dp/1439102376),” by Carol Delaney, a book Harvard historian Gordon S. Wood called “a remarkable work of history” and which the Times Literary Supplement named one of its 100 best books of the year; “[Debunking Howard Zinn \(https://www.amazon.com/Debunking-Howard-Zinn-Exposing-Generation/dp/1684511526/ref=sr_1_1?dib=eyJ2IjoiMSJ9.NrOr-GOPbnVmXvMul9VXtUo2_KXLManjsTYzyQXM5IKRiY4y54vK6pwLtf0waZjb7M6QDTgIWQTlzJ57_A4iti--wPnChkGvfcEZ4Vkbaso.keGCVet92gP1vDifL_tpUHM3B6tJyiMI3Uwjq69B0io&dib_tag=se&hvadid=590014020810994351623&hydadcr=21693_13345184&keywords=mary+grabar+debunking+howard+zinn&qid=1726409101\)](https://www.amazon.com/Debunking-Howard-Zinn-Exposing-Generation/dp/1684511526/ref=sr_1_1?dib=eyJ2IjoiMSJ9.NrOr-GOPbnVmXvMul9VXtUo2_KXLManjsTYzyQXM5IKRiY4y54vK6pwLtf0waZjb7M6QDTgIWQTlzJ57_A4iti--wPnChkGvfcEZ4Vkbaso.keGCVet92gP1vDifL_tpUHM3B6tJyiMI3Uwjq69B0io&dib_tag=se&hvadid=590014020810994351623&hydadcr=21693_13345184&keywords=mary+grabar+debunking+howard+zinn&qid=1726409101),” by Mary Grabar; and “[Christopher Columbus the Hero \(https://www.amazon.com/Christopher-Columbus-Hero-Defending-Revisionism/dp/1548738123\)](https://www.amazon.com/Christopher-Columbus-Hero-Defending-Revisionism/dp/1548738123),” by Rafael (no last name).

Pride and gratitude

Through decade after decade of hardship, hostility, persecution and prejudice, the statues, parades and days created in Columbus’ honor were the outlets through which Italians in America expressed their pride in their heritage and their gratitude to their new homeland.

This unique and inseparable bond helped our community overcome the bias and violence we encountered in our long journey to assimilation into America’s mainstream culture.

-Basil M. Russo is president of the Conference of Presidents of Major Italian American Organizations (COPOMIAO (<https://copomiao.org>)) and national president of Italian Sons and Daughters of America (ISDA (<https://orderisda.org>)). Russo worked directly with White House staff in 2022 (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2022/10/07/a-proclamation-on-columbus-day-2022/>) and 2023 (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2023/10/06/a-proclamation-on-columbus-day-2023/>) to help develop Columbus Day Proclamations that properly reflected Italian Americans’ history and connection to the navigator.

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