

HISTORY'S GREATEST PARADOX

Why do we celebrate Christopher Columbus?



[Time Magazine](#) in their October 8, 2021, article asked, how did Christopher Columbus, who sailed on behalf of Spain and never even came to the land that's now the United States, become seen as an Italian-American in the first place?

For some background, [thehabittat.com](#) reported Columbus was born in the Italian seaport of Genoa in 1451. At an early age he began working on merchant ships and at the age of 25 was working on-board a ship traveling the Portuguese coast. This ship was attacked and sank by French pirates.

Columbus managed to swim ashore, eventually making his way to Lisbon. It was there he studied mathematics, cartography, and astronomy while working as a chart maker.

Among scholars of the time, it was widely believed the world was round. [History.com](#) reports although Columbus and his contemporaries understood the world was round, they didn't know the American continent, or even the Pacific Ocean existed. Columbus set sail in August 1492 in hopes of finding a western route to Asia rather than navigating around the massive African continent. His search for gold and spices took place with the financial backing of Spain's King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. Today, we know he landed in what is present-day Bahamas on October 12, 1492. As part of his agreement with Spain, Columbus was promised 10% of all of the riches he found and governorship of any lands he discovered.

Because of Columbus's voyage, the "New World" was ready for European exploration. And between 1492 and the 1700's, America was quickly colonized by Europeans seeking a new land, full of hopes and promises.

Although Great Britain did not discover North America, it came under British rule. Soon, the American colonies would come together declaring their independence. The Revolutionary War raged on for seven years and less than a decade after the end of Revolutionary War, colonists were trying to create a national history and a story for the new American republic. By using the upcoming 300th anniversary of Columbus's exploration it would allow Americans a way of creating a national past and story, apart from their British rule.

During the next 100 years of American history, immigration to the United States continued to grow and between 1880-1924 it is estimated that 4 million Italians, immigrated to the United States. Unfortunately, the Italian immigrants coming to America encountered widespread discrimination. Especially in the workplace where many employers didn't consider Italians "white" enough. Even the U.S. House Committee on Immigration debated whether Italians could be considered "full-blooded Caucasians." Sadly, this treatment of our ancestors wouldn't change until it became a national disgrace.

[America Donani](#) describes the greatest violence Italian immigrants faced was on March 14, 1891, when eleven working-class Italian immigrants were lynched in New Orleans. It was the largest mass lynching in the American South and took place nine days after the men had been acquitted in the murder trial of the New Orleans police chief. Italian Americans and leaders of the Kingdom of Italy expressed outrage and Italy severed diplomatic relations with the United States. In turn, the United States removed their delegation from Rome.

President Benjamin Harrison didn't publicly speak about the matter until 9 months later in his address to Congress. President Harrison called the murders, "a most deplorable and discreditable incident" and an "offense against law and humanity."

President Harrison wanted to show the world a different side of America. That America was not a land of violence and hostility. He took action in two ways: first, he agreed to pay each family who's loved one was lynched \$25,000; a payment equal to about \$760,000 in today's dollars. [Wikipedia](#) claims in reality payments were only \$2,211.90. Next, he used his presidential powers to acknowledge the contributions of Italians and Italian Americans, and by Presidential Proclamation announced he would honor a prominent Italian.

President Harrison considered a list of notable Italians and choose Christopher Columbus since 1892 marked the 400th anniversary of Columbus' voyage to the new world. Columbus Day was proclaimed as a one-time holiday repairing diplomatic tensions with Italy. The Kingdom of Italy gave the United States a Columbus statute in response to their grand gesture. Although the intent was for Columbus Day to be a one-time holiday, the day grew in popularity to become an annual observance. In 1937, congress and President Franklin D. Roosevelt made Columbus Day, October 12th, a national holiday.

Recently, however, Columbus Day has come under attack.

The OSDIA and our Commission for Social Justice are fighting hard to save Columbus Day. Some people want to change history and wish to examine every action of Christopher Columbus's life blaming him for European expansion and colonization. Some are defacing Columbus statutes or removing them altogether. Some refuse to accept or acknowledge the hardships and discrimination Italians faced when choosing to immigrate to America.

Could Christopher Columbus be history's greatest paradox? His name was used in America's early history to help give America a national past and a story for the new American republic outside of British rule. His name was used to honor Italian contributions to America in the wake of the worst mass lynching in the American South. And his name has been used to carry the responsibility of all European colonization, slavery, and Columbus was described by Representative Nydia Velazquez of New York a "genocidal maniac." Is Columbus now responsible for all violence against Indigenous people? Columbus, a man who never stepped foot in North America?

To answer Time magazine's question, how did Christopher Columbus, who sailed on behalf of Spain and never even came to the land that's now the United States, become seen as an Italian American in the first place? The answer is easy, Italians didn't choose Christopher Columbus, President Benjamin Harrison did. And he chose Columbus to symbolically honor the lives of the eleven working-class Italian immigrants who were lynched in New Orleans. Here are the men no one talks about:

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Join together to remember the forgotten origins of Columbus Day, the largest lynching in U.S. history...