

The following information was retrieved from several resources, the majority gathered from a study done on Christopher Columbus in 2005, undertaken by the Commission for Social Justice, the anti-defamation arm of the Order Sons of Italy in America (OSIA) in response to growing concerns about the celebration of Columbus Day in America. The material has been condensed for distribution purposes, in order to educate and open up a dialogue among those who are interested in this subject matter. ~ Ann Potenza, President of The Federated Italo-Americans of Southern California; 2013.

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS: FACT VS. FICTION

For much of its history, the United States considered Columbus a man worthy of admiration. Columbus Day is one of America's oldest patriotic holidays, first celebrated in the 18th century. America has more monuments to Columbus than any other nation in the world. Generations of American school children studied his life and accomplishments. Teachers held him up as an example of a person of character, who overcame strong opposition and great disappointment but never gave up trying to prove what he believed to be true.

Since 1992, however, the reputation of Columbus has suffered at the hands of special interest groups who have used this 15th century Renaissance navigator to further their 21st century political and social agendas. As a result, today Columbus is often depicted as a slave trader, racist, and even "the Hitler of the 15th century." A small but vocal number of historians, journalists, text-book writers and teachers have helped spread these charges despite their questionable foundation in historical fact. They have done so principally by judging a quintessentially Renaissance man and his actions by contemporary values. It bears noting that England did not outlaw slavery in its colonies until 1833; the United States until 1865 and Brazil in 1888. Some nations in the Mid-East, Asia and Africa continue the practice today.

Despite this controversy, Italian Americans continue to hold Columbus in high regard both for his historic achievements and also because Columbus Day is the only day our nation recognizes the heritage of an estimated 16 to 26 million Americans of Italian descent, who are relentlessly stereotyped by the entertainment, news and advertising industries the other 364 days of the year. Increasingly, however, Italian American communities are finding their Columbus Day celebrations marred by demonstrations and their First Amendment rights denied by special interest groups who sometimes turn violent as has been happening in Denver since 2000.

What Columbus Accomplished and Why We Should Celebrate Columbus Day:

1. Columbus Day recognizes the achievements of a great Renaissance explorer. Columbus proved that it was possible to safely cross the Atlantic Ocean. He was the first European to realize the full importance of the Atlantic wind pattern called the prevailing Westerlies, which blew steadily west to east. This convinced him it was possible to sail west with the Trade Winds to the New World and return to Europe with the Westerlies. During his four transatlantic voyages, Columbus chartered the route for what today are the islands of Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, the Lesser Antilles and the coasts of Panama, Honduras and Venezuela. His trans-Atlantic route lay the foundation for future navigation in the region and his maps were used by Amerigo Vespucci (after whom the American continent takes its name), whose maps were used by later explorers of South America. The route across the Atlantic Ocean that Columbus charted in the 15th century is still used by sailors today. Columbus introduced the principle of compass variation (the variation at any point on the Earth's surface between the direction to magnetic and geographic north) and observed the rotation of the Pole star.

2. Columbus Day commemorates the discovery of America. In every significant way, Columbus "discovered" America. Even if others visited the continent sporadically before he did, their voyages had no historical significance. Columbus' voyages, however, mark the end of thousands of years of isolation between the Western Hemisphere and the rest of the world and mark the beginning of recorded history of the Americas and the Carribean, with more than 500 years of cultural, economic and political relations between Europe and the Americas beginning with his arrival in 1492. Columbus founded the first permanent European settlement in the Western Hemisphere, Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic) and was the first to open relations between Europe and the Western Hemisphere. While Columbus may have not been the first European to reach the Western Hemisphere, he was the first European to stay. His voyages directly initiated a permanent presence of Europeans in both North and South America, which led to the influx of ideas and people of Western Europe on which America was founded and still rests.

3. 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 men are created equal. The **Columbian Exchange**, also known as the **Grand Exchange**, was a

dramatically widespread exchange of animals, plants, culture, human populations and ideas between the American and Afro-Eurasian Hemispheres. The contact between the two areas circulated a wide variety of new crops and livestock which supported increases in population in both hemispheres. One of the first European exports, the horse, changed the lives of many Native American tribes on the Great Plains, allowing them to shift to a nomadic lifestyle based on hunting bison on horseback. Explorers returned to Europe with maize, potatoes, and tomatoes, which became very important crops in Eurasia by the 18th century. Similarly, Europeans introduced manioc and the peanut to tropical Southeast Asia and West Africa, where they flourished and supported growth in populations on soils that otherwise would not produce large yields.

4. Columbus Day is one of America's oldest holidays. The tradition of observing Columbus Day dates back to the 18th century in this country. It was first celebrated on October 12, 1792, when the New York Society of Tammany honored Columbus on the 300th anniversary of his first voyage.

5. Columbus Day is a patriotic holiday. The original Pledge of Allegiance, "I pledge allegiance to my flag and the Republic for which it stands -- One nation indivisible -- with liberty and justice for all," was written in September of 1892 by Francis Bellamy for "The Youth's Companion" magazine in Boston. The phrase was printed on leaflets and sent to schools throughout the United States. The first organized use of the Pledge of Allegiance came on Oct. 12, 1892, when some 12 million American school children recited it to commemorate the 400-year anniversary of Columbus' voyage. That same year, President Benjamin Harrison declared Columbus Day a legal holiday.

6. Columbus Day also commemorates the arrival on these shores of more than 5 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 U.S. Census Bureau.

What Columbus Did NOT Do:

1. Columbus was NOT a slave-trader. He never owned any slaves or brought any to the Western Hemisphere from Africa. During his first voyage in 1492, Columbus landed on the island of Hispaniola. There, with the help of a tribe of friendly Taino Indians, he built a fort called *Navidad* and left 40 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 with these Indians, capturing about 2,000 and in 1495, sent 500 of these prisoners of war (POW) to Spain to be sold as slaves, as was the custom in 15th century Europe. He sent another 30 Indian POWs to Spain the following year, but the Spanish monarchs ordered him to stop the practice and he never again sent Indians to Europe to be sold as slaves. **It is important to note that slavery was not unique to Europe. Columbus found it practiced in the Caribbean by the Caribs and Canibs who made slaves of the tribes they conquered and also ate their victims. (Hence the word "cannibal".)** Later Spanish explorers in Mexico and Central America found that even the more advanced civilizations of the Aztecs, Incas and Mayans kept slaves. These civilizations also practiced torture, ritual murder and the human sacrifice of their own women and children as well as of prisoners of war. Such practices horrified the Spanish and caused them to look down on native cultures. In fact, the Spanish arrival in the New World was the decisive factor that eventually ended human sacrifice and cannibalism there.

2. Columbus did NOT find and destroy sophisticated native civilizations. Most of the native tribes Columbus found were hunter-gatherers who engaged in bloody tribal wars and, in the case of the Arawaks, Caribs and Canibs, slavery, torture and cannibalism. To survive, the native populations depended on "slash-and-burn" cultivation of the land along with hunting, fishing and collecting edible wild plants, seeds and shellfish. They had no written language, history or literature. In their struggle for survival, these peoples were not the champions of the environment that they are often portrayed as today.

3. Columbus was NOT a racist. There is no evidence indicating that Columbus thought the islanders he met were racially inferior in any way. In fact, in the journal of his first voyage, Columbus describes the Tainos and other tribes as "*well-made with fine shapes and faces...their eyes were large and very beautiful...straight-limbed without exception and handsomely shaped...*" He praises their generosity, innocence and intelligence, saying they could "*readily become Christians as they have a good understanding.*" Initially, Columbus had friendly relations with the five Taino tribes he met during his first voyage. These relations soured with four of the five tribes after he found the colony of men he had left behind in the fort *Navidad* had been slaughtered. **He became good friends, however, with one tribe of Tainos led by Chief Guacanagari, who helped Columbus build his fort and fought alongside Columbus against the Taino tribes that wanted to kill the Europeans.** Guacanagari paid heavily for his friendship with Columbus. His village was burned; he was wounded in battle and fled to the mountains where he died.

4. Columbus did NOT commit genocide. The destruction of the 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. The numbers vary from 8 million to 145 million. Many researchers believe the number to be around 40 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.** Responsibility for the deaths of many thousands of natives can justly be attributed to the Spanish conquistadors and other Europeans who followed Columbus here. But even in this case, since there were more natives than Europeans, the loss of millions of lives could not have been caused by the Spaniards' warfare and forced labor alone. **In fact, most of the native populations perished because they lacked immunity to such diseases as small pox, typhoid and diphtheria as well as the non-fatal childhood diseases of measles and mumps that they caught from the Spanish explorers. These diseases were not transmitted deliberately and cannot be considered a tool of genocide.** Scholars estimate that 80% of those who died were infected without ever seeing a white man. Tragic as this epidemic was, it also bears remembering that prior to the Europeans' arrival, the Western Hemisphere was no Garden of Eden. **New medical research on pre-Columbian mummies in Peru, Chile and remote areas far from the early European colonies reveals that tuberculosis, long thought European in origin, was rampant among the Indian tribes before the arrival of Columbus. Arthritis, periodontal disease and significant bone erosion also afflicted the native populations well before the voyages of Columbus and other Europeans.** Most adults, only in their 20s and 30s, had terrible teeth or none at all. Very few lived past age 40. **The native populations gave the early explorers syphilis, which they brought back to Europe.** Clearly, blaming Columbus for the extermination of the native populations is as fair as blaming the native populations for killing people who die from using tobacco and cocaine, which the natives introduced to the Europeans.

5. Columbus did NOT destroy the balance between man and nature. Columbus and the other Europeans brought with them Old World agricultural techniques, including crop rotation and animal breeding. They also introduced new tools (including the wheel) as well as new plants and domesticated animals, including the horse. **These imports led to improved farming methods, a greater diversity of crops and a more dependable food supply that benefited the native populations.** Perfected over the centuries, they have helped make the nations in the Western Hemisphere a significant source of food for the rest of the world.

6. Columbus and Europeans did NOT steal the natives' land. A sad fact of human civilization is 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. They did what Egypt, Persia, Rome and China did before them in the Middle East, Europe and Asia. They also did what the Aztecs, Mayans, Incas and many North American Indians did in the Americas. "The Iroquois Federation in North America subjugated so many Indians," writes Richard Gambino, "that historian Francis Parkman calls them 'the Romans of the New World.'" But Columbus himself had no part in this. It is worth pointing out that the Europeans brought considerable benefits to Latin America. Their arrival gave the entire continent a common language, while in North America, land taken from the Iroquois and other tribes eventually became **the United States, a haven for the poor and oppressed from all over the world, who find opportunities and freedoms here that their own countries deny them.** And it all started with Columbus.

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