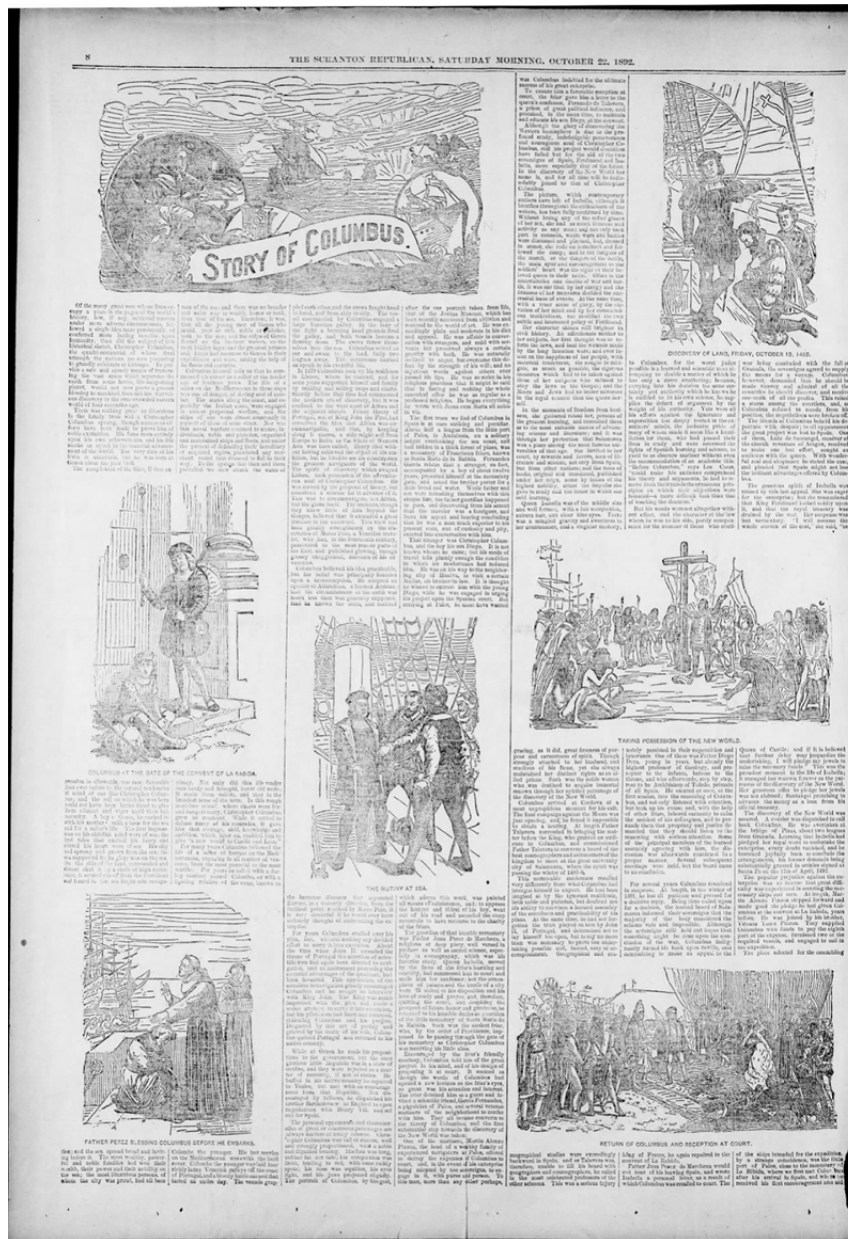


How Do You Solve a Problem Like Columbus?

September 16, 2020 • by [Melissa E. Marinaro](#)

MAKING HISTORY

THE HEINZ HISTORY CENTER BLOG



Newspapers published the "Story of Columbus" as a part of the nation's celebration of Discoverer's Day in October 1892. This page from The Scranton Republican is typical of what papers ran at the time, and these accounts

became the basis for how we once taught the history of Columbus in public schools.

On Oct. 12, 1958, a monument of explorer Christopher Columbus was unveiled to the public in Pittsburgh's Schenley Park. This event marked the first of many bicentennial festivities celebrating the city's 1758 founding when a twenty-something George Washington helped establish Fort Pitt.

The dedication ceremony was attended by 2,000 people, including top leaders from the local Italian American community, the City of Pittsburgh, the Catholic church (the Diocese and the Vatican), diplomats representing Italy and the United States, and the artist, famed Italian sculptor Frank Vittor. According to newspaper accounts, orators remarked that the statue represented faith and courage for the community.

Fast forward more than 60 years later – our society is engaged in debates about symbols in America, their meaning and public display. Symbols are subjective and their interpretation can be influenced by personal experience. Symbols are especially complicated when they are made in the image of a historical figure. Columbus is one such case. Is it possible to both publicly laud and protest the same person? This is where we find ourselves today. But how did we get here?

If you are a product of the American public-school system as I am, your education in U.S. history began with Christopher Columbus and the Age of Exploration in the late 15th century. Why do we begin our country's narrative in this historical moment? Why not begin with Jamestown in 1607 or the landing of Pilgrims in 1620? Why turn the clock back to 1492 and start more than 100 years before the first permanent European settlement in the continental U.S.? The answer lies in the founding of our nation in the late 18th century.

Long before the Italian American community aligned itself with the "Great Discoverer," our country's leaders used the narrative of Christopher Columbus to teach ideas of American patriotism. Similar to figures such as

George Washington, Columbus's origin story appealed to early Americans who were in the process of constructing a national identity: he wasn't of noble birth; he did not sail on behalf of the British crown; and his success was attributed to his talents and effort. This is when Columbus first enters the American consciousness as a symbol and, with this action, is embedded in our nation's history.



In the 1950s and 1960s, Italian Americans petitioned for immigration reform in the United States. Recent scholarship has revealed that their efforts to open migration to their fellow Italians led to the elimination of the Immigration Quotas in 1965. The Mastroianni Family emigrated from Calabria in 1956 through the help of American family members who could sponsor them as non-quota immigrants. Gift of Joseph Mastroianni



By the 1970s, Italian Americans had not only assimilated into American society, but embraced their hybrid identity in displays of pride for Italy and America. The Pasquale family of Beechview decorated their car for the American Bicentennial, 1976. Gift of Angela Pasquale



Frank Vittor sculpted this model of Christopher Columbus for the creation of the monument, which was carved at Pittsburgh's Donatelli Granite Works. Vittor, a famed artist from Milan, was commissioned by the Sons of Columbus to create the explorer's likeness. Gift of Carla Scatena

A little more than 100 years later, another shift occurs in Columbus's legacy

in America. In the early 1880s, immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe entered the U.S. in increasingly large numbers. This population shift upset some Americans; unlike previous waves of immigrants, the customs, languages, and religions practiced by these foreign-born groups stoked Nativist sentiments.

Discrimination experienced by non-Anglo-Saxon, non-Protestant immigrants led to intolerance in many communities. One event, in particular, got the attention of the American government and the Italian government. On March 14, 1891, a mob of vigilantes murdered 11 Italian men in a New Orleans prison after they were acquitted of shooting the city's chief of police (18 men and a 14-year-old boy were originally arrested for the crime). And, while the tragedy in New Orleans seems unconnected to the veneration of Columbus, the diplomatic solution was, in part, for American leaders to exalt a figure of Italian heritage to assuage Italy's anger (for more on this history, see the analysis done by sociologist Charles Seguin and doctoral student Sabrina Nardin on the impact of protests initiated by the Italian government in the wake of the New Orleans lynching).

A year and a half later, in 1892, the nation embarked on a very public national embrace of the navigator for the 400th anniversary of his landing in San Salvador. His accounts were trumped louder than ever before: his life was published in full-page spreads in newspapers across the nation, churches and synagogues held services, and public-school students participated in patriotic exercises.

The activities acknowledging Columbus were steeped in American symbols – flags, Uncle Sam, and red, white, and blue bunting. There wasn't a celebration of this magnitude in 1792 for Columbus's 300th anniversary. What had changed in 100 years, and what did this effort to celebrate "Discoverer's Day" achieve?

Consider this statement made by U.S. Congressman Benjamin Franklin Meyers in Harrisburg, "If Christopher Columbus had been an American,

native and to the manner born, his career could not have illustrated more singularly the character of a self-made man risen to greatness and honor through his own unaided efforts. Notwithstanding his foreign birth, and his fealty to monarchical institutions, his whole life is a lesson that may be studied with profit by the youth of our country." Meyers' statement, which echoed the sentiments of other politicians, was made at a time when America's foreign-born population had risen to 15 percent. Columbus was offered as an American hero that both old stock Americans and foreigners of all classes could admire, emulate, and heroicize.

The national overhaul of Columbus was successful. From 1892 forward, the Italian American community embraced the explorer and celebrated him annually in October with beneficial societies, small businesses, and community stakeholders taking the lead. By the mid-20th century, Columbus celebrations were synonymous with celebrations of Italian pride as well as American patriotism. Given the demographics of Pittsburgh, it's natural that veneration of Columbus took root as the community looked for ways to show native-born citizens they were "good Americans." Demonstrations of loyalty to the adopted homeland were important to the Italian American community and, in part, explain how Columbus's image became monumentalized in the U.S. But, what's the story with the statue in Pittsburgh? Most importantly, what does it mean? To understand, one must consider who made it and why.

The statue was gifted to the city by the Columbus Monument Committee, a group sponsored by the Sons of Columbus of America, in a multi-year process where the organization fundraised for the creation of the statue, acquired the plot in Schenley Park, and participated in the democratic process of approval through the city of Pittsburgh's Art Commission and Public Works Department. It was vetted as all public art is in the City of Pittsburgh. The only public criticism at the time was a letter to the editor complaining that the \$100,000 raised for the monument could have been used for other civics projects. Based on the few surviving documents related to the monument's creation (which reside in the Heinz History Center's Detre

Library & Archives), it's clear the committee believed they were giving something back to their community.

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette
SECOND SECTION MONDAY MORNING, OCTOBER 13, 1958

2,000 Honor 'Discoverer' in Schenley Park
Columbus Statue Unveiled



HONORED—The Federation of the Sons of Columbus honored the explorer yesterday when they unveiled a 30-foot statue (at right) in Schenley Park. Participating were, left to right, Reverend Charles Ceradini, Monsignor Renato Luisi, Mayor David L. Lawrence, Manlio Brosio, Rocco Siciliano, and State Supreme Court Justice Michael A. Musmanno.

Church, Civic Dignitaries Present At Ceremonies at New Work of Art

Even Christopher Columbus would have been impressed yesterday, if he could have seen the crowd of approximately 2,000 people who paid him honor, when a 30-foot statue with a plaque reading "Discoverer of America, 1492," which was unveiled in Schenley Park, opposite Carnegie Library.

The ceremonies preceding the unveiling of the \$100,000 statue, made by sculptor Frank Vittor, were sponsored by the Federation of the Sons of Columbus which convened here during the week-end.

"We have waited more than 50 years for this moment," said national president Charles G. Notari. "Now let us see this remarkable piece of art."

To the accompaniment of a 21-gun salute, "Miss Columbia, 1958," Toni Trimarchi, of McKees Rocks, pulled the cord which revealed the statue.

Additional solemnity was added to the occasion by the presence of Monsignor Renato Luisi, Chamberlain of His Holiness, the late Pope Pius XII.

Monsignor Luisi brought with him a scroll, bearing a special blessing to the Federation and the people of Pittsburgh from the Pontiff.

In his dedicatory speech, State Supreme Court Justice Michael Musmanno said, "Columbus not only gave us a new world, but he gave us something equally precious—renewal of faith in God and self. He taught man that no matter what be the opposition, if his cause is just, he will achieve the port of his ambitions."

Mayor David L. Lawrence commended the Federation for its work and on the completion of the monument.

Participating in the festivities which opened with a mass in St. Paul's Cathedral, celebrated by the Reverend Charles J. Ceradini, were Manlio Brosio, ambassador from Italy, and Rocco Siciliano, representative of President Eisenhower. Mr. Siciliano is special assistant to the President for personnel management.

The dedication of the Columbus monument in 1958 was an event attended by civic and religious leaders including Mayor David L. Lawrence and Vatican envoy Monsignor Renato Luisi.



At the time of its dedication in 1958, Pittsburgh's Columbus monument was the second largest in the country. Records in the collection show that the site for the statue in Schenley Park was secured in 1955, though community conversations around the project had been going on for decades. Gift of Joseph D'Andrea

In 1965, landmark immigration legislation, known as the Hart-Cellars Act, opened our country to new migrants, expanding our nation's foreign-born populace once again. For many in the Italian American community, the passing of this legislation, which eliminated the racist quota system, was the final barrier to acceptance into mainstream American society. In the following

decade, Americans of all backgrounds embraced their racial and ethnic heritage in displays of pride. For Italian Americans, it's fair to say that after more than a century of trying to find our place in this great nation, we've succeeded – our patriotism is no longer in question; we hold positions of power in government, business, and industry; slurs for our ethnic group have fallen out of everyday use; we did what our ancestors dreamed of. But, what about our fellow citizens, our peers, our neighbors, and our friends? Do Pittsburghers of all backgrounds feel the same confidence with their status in America? And what does this have to do with Columbus?



Pittsburgh's Columbus monument has been the target of vandalism since the 1990s. Members of the local Italian American community, many of whom are descended from the funders of the statue, continue to work with the city to keep the monument in its original condition. Gift of Joseph D'Andrea

Just prior to the 500th anniversary of Columbus's landing in 1992, historians

began to reevaluate the legacy of Columbus in light of the impact his voyages had on indigenous communities in the Americas. For centuries, we focused on the explorer narrative part of Columbus's record. At the end of the 20th century, historians and American Indian activists helped us learn more about the full picture – yes, he was still a great navigator, but he was a poor administrator and, by his hand or not, atrocities were committed in his name. He opened the door for Conquistadors and the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, both of which devastated populations, destroying languages, customs, and culture. This part of the history upsets many Americans (as it rightfully should) and it has angered some to the point of vandalism and forced removal, actions that go beyond our right to protest, the freedom of assembly, and the freedom of speech. As citizens, we have laws that protect our ability to petition our government, and vandalism disregards the part of our democratic process where we debate and discuss controversial issues before passing a judgement.

Our country's political ideology is based on a system that allows for progress, refinement, and, most importantly, a voice for the people; like our laws, our symbols and their public display can be brought into a process of consideration. The people of the United States have pushed our great experiment of democracy forward for nearly 250 years, an incredible feat when one considers we are working with documents crafted at the end of the 18th century. No matter how far forward we move on the timeline, we must remember to go back to foundation to inspire wise actions for the future. This is a challenging moment in our history, and we will debate anytime the public takes umbrage with the symbols we have inherited from previous generations.

Here in Pittsburgh, we are fortunate there is a process laid out by the city's Art Commission where we can exercise our civic duty and share our concerns with the commissioners. If we can move forward with open hearts and respect, we will surely find common ground, allowing us to work together to find a solution.

As for the History Center's Italian American Program, we continue to document all sides of the Columbus story: the background of the statue, and the veneration and the vilification of the historical figure. The History Center's collection includes the model of the monument made by artist Frank Vittor and the archives from the 1950s related to the statue's creation and dedication. Our resources are available to the public. We will continue to field questions from the community, directing them to relevant collections, articles, and books. Our mission is to not only preserve the past, but provide interpretation so future generations may understand what has happened and how it impacts us today. Toward this end, we will present a free virtual screening on Sunday, Oct. 4 of the film "Columbus on Trial" which imagines the ghost of the 15th century Genovese explorer being interrogated by the ghost of 18th century American political activist Elizabeth Willing Powel, a confidante of President George Washington, and culminating in a 21st century conversation over controversies surrounding Columbus's voyages.

From the Archives: Columbus...

This video from our archives shows a Columbus Day Parade in Pittsburgh, Pa. in 1939. Please note that this video has no sound.

From the Sons of Columbus of America Records and Photographs, MSS 904, Detre Library & Archives at the Heinz History Center.

On Sunday, Oct. 4, join the History Center's Italian American Program and filmmaker Marylou Tibaldo-Bongiorno for a screening and discussion of the film, "Columbus on Trial." [Learn more about this program.](#)

<https://www.heinzhistorycenter.org/blog/western-pennsylvania-history/how-do-you-solve-a-problem-like-columbus>