

Racism in America is older than we normally think

The Bethlehem Gadfly Uncategorized September 9, 2020

🦋 Latest in a series of posts on the Columbus monument 🦋

*Columbus' legacy has been shaped by a Eurocentric education system that has promoted false information, the erasure of Indigenous stories, and the devaluing of Indigenous life.
petition to the Mayor and City Council*

America, Johannes Stradanus (c. 1575-1580)



This is the **third Gadfly post** on a request by a sizeable number of Bethlehem residents to remove a 1992 (500th anniversary of the “discovery”) monument to Christopher Columbus in the Rose Garden. In the **letter to the editor** published here yesterday, there are 80+ signatures, but we understand the number now is about 120.

The Mayor and Council have soft-pedaled this request. It was mentioned only briefly and cryptically by the Mayor at a recent City Council meeting. The reason is obvious. The issue of historical monuments is — the term is getting good use this morning — a political hot potato. Controversies over historical monuments are a key aspect of the current

culture wars, as any of us who only cursorily follow the national news know. The Mayor has apparently done the right thing, has done — ha! — the “politic” thing. He’s handed the issue off to a committee. Gadfly wishes he knew who is on it.

120 resident names on a petition is not chopped liver, but Gadfly doesn’t sense wider attention to or engagement in the issue. After all, the City has a lot on its plate: discussing public safety, the police chief mess, starting a Community Engagement Initiative, battling systemic racism, and — oh, yes — the budget. Gadfly is anxiously waiting for an update on how the budget is faring as a result of the bludgeoning effect this pandemic is having on the economy. Lots for us to think about.

But Gadfly doesn’t want the Columbus issue to slide by. He sees it organically tied to the attention we’re focusing on systemic racism and the ideal expressed by Councilman Reynolds of mitigating its presence here.

The petition asks us to see Columbus through other eyes. As the petition says, “Columbus’ legacy has been shaped by a Eurocentric education system that has promoted false information, the erasure of Indigenous stories, and the devaluing of Indigenous life.” Our mainstream heroic image of Columbus ignores his role in genocide. He is a much more complex figure for cultural adoration than our histories, until quite recently, have rendered him.

Gadfly would have you widen your racist lens beyond slavery in the United States to racism’s roots here in our European ancestral tradition at the moment of “discovery” in 1492. Our education in how to think about discovery — and ultimately about ourselves — that the petition references in the quote above goes back to a letter Columbus wrote October 12/13, 1492, the very day of touchdown, which Gadfly will share with you in a later post if he can find it.

For now, Gadfly would have you consider as representative of the centuries-old education of the public about the nature of America the above depiction of the origin moment less than a century after discovery. In *America* Dutch engraver Johannes Stradanus (1523-1605) depicts a very European Americus Vespucci awakening and bestowing his name

on a very naked Sleeping Beauty of a Native American. “Americus rediscovers America,” his motto reads, “He called her but once and thenceforth she was always awake.” This erotic image of the first contact of European Self and American Other demonstrates that America was **produced** for Europe as a passive vulnerable female waiting for her lover/conqueror. This is our inaugural naming moment.

In the early 19th century, Washington Irving — he of “Rip Van Winkle” fame — asked what he called the “gigantic question”: “What right had the first discoverers of America to land, and take possession of a country, without asking the consent of its inhabitants, or yielding them an adequate compensation for their territory?”

The Stradanus image provides the visual justification. America was a naked woman asleep till “we” from the powerfully masculine Europe came. America is a beautiful woman ready to be taken, to be had — and thus to be canceled, erased by the *New Spain*, by the *New England*, by the *New Amsterdam*, and the like. America would be nothing without “us.” There was no value in Indigenous culture. The Indigenous people had no worth except to serve and support without consideration of their own needs. And ultimately they were discardable. This is our history.

Gadfly, who knows his history, can only cringe when he hears People of Color counseled to be patient, to work hard, change is coming, the violence is literally history, you will soon have equal opportunity, we’re working on it.

Gadfly cherishes the thoughtful reminder **Joyce Hinnefeld**, Clerk of the Lehigh Valley Meeting (Quakers), softly gives each Sunday morning that “we worship together on land that was originally the land of the Lenape people.” It’s important that we remember what we’ve destroyed and do better.

*For a more elaborate analysis of the Stradanus image, see Gadfly’s “**America as Sleeping Beauty**,” done 20-25 years ago in the very first class in Lehigh’s Digital Media Studio. Please forgive the creaky technology and amateurish presentation as pedagogy entered the digital age.*