

October 12: Columbus Day Or Indigenous Peoples' Day?

The Bethlehem Gadfly Columbus monument October 5, 2020

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

“Can’t the monuments and holidays born of our past be reimagined to represent
new values for our future?”

John M. Viola, National Italian American Foundation

“We worship together on land that was originally the land of the Lenape
people.”

Joyce Hinnefeld, clerk of the Lehigh Valley Meeting (Quakers)

October 12 a week away. National holiday. Whoopee!

Time to take advantage of the blow-out tire sale. Or to get a free hot dog.

Hot dog!

Not much attention paid to Columbus.

Maybe it’s time for a city *looking at the ways that we as a community can end systemic racism and create an equitable city* to reimagine that holiday.

What do we have to mark the Indigenous people that we displaced?

I guess we can count the **Museum of Indian Culture** as part of our extended city.

But we should think about where and how in this city that values history so much that we mark our indigenous people the Lenape.

How are you going to spend next Monday?

Maybe this discussion of Columbus should spur some reimagining of that holiday, perhaps inaugurating rituals of reconciliation and healing.

Maybe it could even be part of the “settlement” of the Rose Garden monument issue.

Selections from Leila Fadel, “Columbus Day Or Indigenous Peoples’ Day?” NPR, October 14, 2019.

On Monday in the nation’s capital, there is no Columbus Day. The **D.C. Council voted to replace it** with Indigenous Peoples’ Day in a temporary move that it hopes to make permanent. Several other places across the United States have also made the switch in a growing movement to end the celebration of the Italian explorer in favor of honoring Indigenous communities and their resiliency in the face of violence by European explorers like Christopher Columbus.

There’s no comprehensive list of places that have switched, but at least 10 states now celebrate some version of Indigenous Peoples’ Day on the second Monday in October, like Hawaii’s Discoverers’ Day or South Dakota’s Native Americans’ Day. Many college campuses have dumped Columbus Day for Indigenous Peoples’ Day as have more than 100 cities, towns and counties across the country.



The shift isn’t happening without some pushback. For many Italian Americans, Columbus Day is their day to celebrate Italian heritage and the contributions of Italian Americans to the United States. It was adopted at a time when Italians were vilified and faced religious and ethnic discrimination. The first commemoration came in 1892, a year after a **mass lynching** of 11 Italian Americans by a mob in New Orleans. Italian Americans latched onto the day as a way to mainstream and humanize themselves in the face of rampant discrimination. It became a national holiday in 1934 to honor a man who, ironically, never set foot in the United States. Columbus anchored in the Bahamas. For many Italian Americans, Columbus Day isn’t just about the man but about what the

day represents: a people searching for safety and acceptance in their new home.

Speed says she recognizes the importance of celebrating the history and contributions of Italian Americans, but there has to be another way to honor them. “There are a lot of Italian Americans who very much support the shift to Indigenous Peoples’ Day because they don’t want to feel themselves associated with a man who is known to have committed terrible crimes against humanity,” she said. “Italian Americans were greatly discriminated against in this country, and it’s incredibly important to have a day to celebrate that heritage. It just shouldn’t be around the figure of Columbus.” Celebrating Columbus, she said, not only whitewashes a violent history but also discounts the further trauma that honoring him inflicts on Indigenous people.

Indigenous peoples first proposed the day during a 1977 United Nations conference on discrimination against them. But it wasn’t until 1989 that South Dakota became the first state to switch Columbus Day to Native Americans’ Day, celebrating it for the first time in 1990. And then Berkeley became the first U.S. city to switch to Indigenous Peoples’ Day. The Pew Research Center says Columbus Day is the **most inconsistently observed national holiday** in the United States.