

The “history” of the Columbus monument discussion

The Bethlehem Gadfly Columbus monument September 16, 2020

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

For all Gadfly knows, the committee that the Mayor formed to discuss the issue of removing the Columbus monument from the Rose Garden has met and concluded its business. Gadfly hopes he hears not only what conclusion is reached but also what the nature of the back-and-forth was. That will be so interesting. And, again, Gadfly says that this relatively little visible issue raised by a petition with a 120+ signatures on it relates to our much more visible conversation about systemic racism.

Our mole in City Hall has provided the minutes of the discussion about the monument at City Council in 1992. You know that Gadfly loves the quality of our resident commentary and lives to amplify it. Even commentary done almost 30 years ago. Once again Gadfly says (with a smile) that the residents Joris Rosse and Michael Laughton are more “with it” than the members of Council.

Gadfly particularly notes Mr. Rosse’s suggestion of a statue for the Indigenous (mentioned in these pages recently by Peter Crownfield) and his invocation of sustainability and Mr. Laughton’s revelation that the selling of Columbus as an *American* hero is a relatively recent phenomenon. Gadfly wishes we had audio/video, for both Rosse and Laughton exhibit deep connection for the “little guy” in a sharp tone deserving of a Gadfly tip o’ the hat.

The Councilors exhibit the common arguments for erecting such monuments and, these days, for maintaining them: it was another time, everybody has flaws, we’re not focusing on the bad stuff, you can’t change history. Gadfly smiles at the image of Mr. Calvo — long, long time Council member and a bit of a “character” — gathering opinions as he ambles through town.

You might find this following bit of history interesting.

from the minutes of the City Council meeting August 4, 1992:

Joris Rosse, Creek Road, Bethlehem, took the podium to address the installation of a Christopher Columbus statue in the Rose Garden. Advising that 1993 has been declared by the United Nations as the Year of the Indigenous People, Mr. Rosse expressed the hope that it would be an appropriate counterpoint to the celebration of Columbus Day and Columbus, in particular, as a hero and as a famous person to be held up as an example. Mr. Rosse felt that one has to be extremely careful about who is held up to society as a role model. Mr. Rosse commented that Mr. Columbus' fame came not just from the fact that he was a discoverer but that his name is associated with extreme atrocities. Observing that history books did not really delve into the matter, Mr. Rosse felt that there is no way Christopher Columbus should be held up as an example of somebody to be emulated, Mr. Rosse said he finds it totally inappropriate to foster the idea of having a statue of Christopher Columbus on public property. He continued on to say that, if the Knights of Columbus would like to promote Christopher Columbus, they have their own properties on which to place the statue. Mr. Rosse commented that, if Council were to approve a statue of Christopher Columbus to be located in a public park, they would also be ready to approve an alternate statue that would honor the original people who were on this continent prior to Christopher Columbus. Mr. Rosse expressed the feeling that, by installing a statue, it would be especially ironic since it would be promoting a man who exemplifies colonialism, racism, slave trading, atrocities, at a time when one should be thinking about how to live in a sustainable way on the planet. Mr. Rosse concluded it is his earnest hope that Council will think carefully about the Resolution on the Agenda this evening.

Michael Laughton, 2614 Shakespeare Road, Bethlehem, stated that Columbus left a trail of theft, rape, murder, and was personally responsible for 2 million deaths. He noted that, for nearly 400 years after Columbus set foot in the Americas, no one celebrated his memory. Mr. Laughton related that, for the Chicago World Fair about 1892, the myth of Columbus was generated in order to create a figurehead behind which to celebrate the European expansion, and the character of Columbus was romanticized which myth, he commented, has been perpetuated to this day. Mr. Laughton noted that, as the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus approaches this October, many people across the country are trying to set the record straight regarding the historical truth of

Columbus' character and the things he perpetuated against the indigenous people of America. Mr. Laughton proposed that it is insensitive and ignorant to be proposing erecting a statue of Columbus at this time. Quoting James Joyce who said "history is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake", Mr. Laughton said as we approach the new millennium, the human race is trying in many ways to awaken from the nightmares of its history. Mr. Laughton felt that, to erect a statue to one of the most barbaric predecessors, could only serve to prolong our "fevered sleep."

Mr. Rosse said he cannot "pretend to be not disappointed in the kind of support you people have displayed for criminal behavior." Mr. Rosse said he cannot believe that Council can go on record supporting criminal behavior in a public park. Mr. Rosse said there is "not a single comment, not a single little alibi, not a single little sign of compassion for the people who have been wronged in this over all of these years."

Mr. Loupos, stating that he respects Mr. Rosse's concern, explained he does not think the issue was about Christopher Columbus and his human faults but it was for the contributions that he made. Mr. Loupos noted that, as one goes through history, weaknesses can be found in many individuals. Exemplifying that Thomas Jefferson had slaves, Mr. Loupos noted one could pick out individuals throughout history who made great contributions but who had faults. Mr. Loupos commented that "we would not be here today if the contribution was not made that Columbus found the new world. Mr. Loupos continued on to observe that Council members gave the matter a lot of thought but there was no need for further discussion, as the matter had been discussed at the Committee meeting.

Mr. Rosse stressed that Christopher Columbus was carried back to Spain in chains because of the violence he committed against indigenous people and to his own people. Mr. Rosse said it does not make sense "to make this man into a hero."

Mr. Ehram explained that the matter of the Christopher Columbus statue was discussed in Committee, and the statue will represent the discovery aspect of Columbus' work, and the navigation that was involved. Mr. Ehram further observed that it was a different time frame,

and that part of history cannot be changed. Mr. Ehram commented that the City is not alone in honoring the accomplishments of the man.

Mr. Calvo, stating that he respects Mr. Rosse's serious feelings, said that he and other members of Council talk to the citizens of Bethlehem about directions and issues facing the City. Mr. Calvo stressed that he talked to many Bethlehem citizens about the Columbus statue and 95% of them supported the idea of the statue. Mr. Calvo noted he communicates with many residents in grocery stores, other stores, walks through town, and so forth, which is where he gets much of his input from citizens of Bethlehem on the directions that the City should be taking.