Columbus Day – Waning Observation Over Time

By

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Columbus Day, one of the most debated civic observances in American history, emerged from a long, intertwined legacy of European exploration, immigrant identity formation, and political decision-making stretching from the fifteenth century to the present, and its meaning has shifted dramatically as historians, lawmakers, and communities have reinterpreted the voyage of Christopher Columbus and its consequences. The holiday's origins lie in the profound influence that Columbus's arrival in 1492 would eventually have on world history, as well as the symbolic importance he came to hold for Italian Americans seeking cultural legitimacy during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Over time, the holiday assumed multiple layers of significance from national pride to cultural heritage to historical trauma and these layers remain visible in the continuing debates, commemorations, protests, and educational reforms surrounding the second Monday in October. The complexity of Columbus Day stems from the wide range of forces that shaped it: colonial history, immigrant struggles, presidential proclamations, federal legislation, local government actions, and, eventually, a national reckoning over Indigenous history and rights.

Christopher Columbus himself was born in 1451 in the Republic of Genoa, in what is now modern-day Italy, and his early life was marked by exposure to maritime trade, shipbuilding, and navigation in the bustling Ligurian coastal region. Though little documentation survives regarding his childhood, historians agree he developed a passion for the sea at an early age and spent his youth learning navigation, mapmaking, and languages while absorbing the developing scientific knowledge of the Age of Discovery. By his twenties he had sailed extensively, including voyages along the African coast, and had become familiar with prevailing geographical theories influenced by classical writers and Arab scholars. His belief that Asia could be reached by sailing west was considered radical because most navigators understood the Earth's circumference more accurately than Columbus did his calculations underestimated the distance across the Atlantic and overstated the size of Asia but his persistence, ambition, and ability to appeal to political leaders drove his eventual success in securing royal backing. After years of rejection in European courts, he finally persuaded King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain to fund his expedition, promising wealth, Christian conversion, and a new trade route that would allow Spain to compete against Portugal's dominance on the African coast.

Columbus's first voyage in 1492 resulted in his landing on lands in the Caribbean inhabited by Taíno and Arawak peoples, whom he mistakenly believed were close to Asia. Although celebrated in later centuries as a moment of "discovery," the encounter was in fact the beginning of a profound cultural collision that reshaped the world and bore devastating consequences for Indigenous societies, including forced labor, cultural suppression, disease epidemics, and centuries of colonial expansion. Columbus made four voyages in total, exploring parts of the Caribbean, Central America, and Northern South America, but he never realized he had encountered continents separate from Asia. His later years were marked by political conflict, accusations of governance abuse in Hispaniola, and declining health.

He died in 1506 and was buried in the Spanish city of Valladolid, unaware of the vast historical significance his voyages would later hold. Over time, European writers reinterpreted his life, casting him variously as a heroic explorer, a visionary navigator, a flawed colonial administrator, or a symbol of European expansion and domination. These conflicting interpretations became the foundation for modern debates over whether Columbus should be publicly celebrated and, if so, in what manner. His funeral was held at the Santa Maria La Antigua and body interred in the Convent of San Francisco. In 1509, his son ordered the transfer of his remains to the Monastery of Santa Maria de las Cuevas in Seville. In 1536, his remains were moved again under royal order to Santo Domingo cathedral in the Dominican Republic. In 1795 his remains (ashes) were moved again, this time to Havana. Controversy arose in 2024 when researchers from the University of Granada conducted DNA forensic analysis of the research done between 2003 and 2005 and confirmed there were bones in the Seville Cathedral belonging to Christopher Columbus and upon request to the Dominican Republic to test the remains they had to prove "some" of his bones may be there are being denied by the government.

The earliest American celebrations of Columbus began long before the United States formally recognized the holiday, originating in the late eighteenth century with civic organizations seeking to link the new republic to a figure they viewed as embodying exploration, progress, and Western civilization. In 1792, New York City held the first major recorded celebration marking the 300th anniversary of Columbus's voyage, organized by the Society of St. Tammany. Throughout the nineteenth century, Columbus's symbolic value expanded dramatically among Italian American immigrants facing widespread discrimination, labor exploitation, and xenophobic violence. For Italian American communities, Columbus became not simply an explorer but a cultural and political emblem of belonging a celebrated Italian figure whose accomplishments could counteract negative stereotypes. Organizations such as the Order of the Sons of Italy and, most notably, the Knights of Columbus played pivotal roles in promoting Columbus as a national

cultural hero, sponsoring parades, school programs, and lobbying efforts aimed at gaining official recognition of his achievements. These identity-driven celebrations became the foundation for state and federal adoption of Columbus Day as a legal holiday.

The first state to formally recognize Columbus Day was Colorado in 1907, due to the efforts of Italian American leaders who organized statewide campaigns and lobbied legislators to pass a commemorative bill. Other states gradually followed, adopting the holiday through legislative resolutions or gubernatorial proclamations. These early recognitions typically framed Columbus as a symbol of American progress, courage, and discovery, and many states incorporated school programs emphasizing patriotism, exploration, and national unity. In California, celebrations began emerging in the early twentieth century through civic groups, Italian American organizations, and local governments, with events in cities like San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Sacramento. Over time, the holiday gained momentum in other counties throughout the state, including Santa Clara County, where community groups hosted parades, flag ceremonies, cultural festivals, and educational activities that tied Columbus's expedition to immigration, civic pride, and historical heritage. By the early twentieth century, Columbus Day had become an important cultural anchor for Italian Americans facing social marginalization and remained so for over a century.

Federal recognition of Columbus Day came through a combination of cultural advocacy and political negotiation. The transformation of Columbus from an early modern navigator into a unifying symbol for Italian Americans became one of the driving forces behind the establishment of Columbus Day. Italian immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries experienced intense discrimination across the United States from job exclusion and housing segregation to violent mob attacks, most notably the 1891 lynching of eleven Italians in New Orleans, one of the largest mass lynchings in U.S. history. In response to such hostility, Italian American organizations such as the Order of the Sons of Italy and the Knights of Columbus sought figures of historical stature who could represent the dignity and contributions of Italians. Columbus, widely celebrated in American textbooks as the "discoverer of the New World," filled that role. Italian American communities across the country began celebrating the anniversary of the 1492 voyage through parades, banquets, school programs, and civic ceremonies. These events laid the groundwork for political action as the Knights of Columbus began lobbying congresspeople and presidents to formally recognize the holiday, arguing that Columbus was not simply an explorer but a cultural icon whose recognition would elevate Italian American status. Beginning in the 1890s, the Knights of Columbus intensified their push for national recognition of Columbus, using their political influence to petition Congress and presidents to formalize the observance.

Their lobbying eventually reached the White House, where President Benjamin Harrison first issued a special proclamation in 1892 to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the voyage. Harrison's proclamation encouraged schools, communities, and civic organizations to host patriotic events focusing on national unity and historical education, setting a precedent for later observances. It was not until 1937, however, that Columbus Day became a federal holiday under President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who responded to sustained advocacy from Italian American organizations by issuing a presidential proclamation establishing October 12 as Columbus Day. For decades thereafter, the holiday remained a fixed-date observance until the Uniform Monday Holiday Act of 1971 shifted Columbus Day to the second Monday in October, aligning it with other Monday federal holidays and standardizing its national implementation. This created an immediate ripple effect across counties, including Santa Clara County, where schools then heavily influenced by standardized national curricula incorporated lessons on Columbus, European exploration, and the Age of Discovery. For several decades, elementary students in Santa Clara County routinely produced artwork themed around Columbus's ships, reenacted the voyage in classroom plays, and read simplified stories portraying the explorer as a heroic figure. Local newspapers from mid-century routinely published Columbus Day announcements, community notices, and occasional letters praising the holiday's patriotic value. Meanwhile, civic institutions such as libraries and veterans' groups sometimes held Columbus-themed displays or public programs, linking the voyage to broader themes of American migration, ingenuity, and expansion. These programs aligned with federal messaging that framed Columbus Day as a celebration of American progress and unity, a message that resonated across diverse California communities during the mid-twentieth century.

Throughout the twentieth century, Columbus Day celebrations expanded widely across states and counties, becoming fixtures of civic life in many American communities. Parades, school assemblies, historical reenactments, and cultural festivals shaped public memory of Columbus and reinforced narratives of exploration and discovery. Italian American neighborhoods in cities such as New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, and San Francisco developed large-scale Columbus Day parades that became defining features of local identity and political visibility. County-level celebrations often followed state traditions, integrating local history, immigrant experiences, and civic participation. In California, counties including Santa Clara, Alameda, Contra Costa, Los Angeles, and San Francisco regularly incorporated Columbus Day into school schedules, civic programs, and ethnic heritage celebrations. Santa Clara County, with its diverse immigrant history, occasionally hosted Italian heritage events and educational programs tied to Columbus Day, though its celebrations were smaller in scale than those in major Italian American

population centers. Still, the holiday held periodic significance in local civic calendars, appearing in school lesson plans, municipal proclamations, and occasional cultural gatherings hosted by Italian American clubs and community groups.

At the same time, Columbus Day also existed alongside and sometimes in competition with other regional or cultural observances that highlighted various aspects of heritage, including Native American history. By the late twentieth century, increasing scholarly attention to the impact of European colonization on Indigenous peoples began reshaping public discourse around Columbus and the meaning of the holiday. Historians, Indigenous leaders, educators, and advocacy organizations argued that traditional celebrations obscured or omitted the suffering caused by colonization including forced labor, disease epidemics, cultural suppression, the encomienda system, and early transatlantic slave trading involving Indigenous captives. These critiques intensified during the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, when Indigenous activists called for recognition of Native history and resistance. The American Indian Movement (AIM) led protests drawing attention to the harms associated with Columbus's legacy, including symbolic acts such as the 1970 National Day of Mourning in Plymouth. Such activism catalyzed public debate and laid the groundwork for eventual shifts in how communities approached the October holiday.

By the 1980s and 1990s, Santa Clara County became a significant regional hub for discussions about cultural identity, equity, and historical accuracy, in part due to its dynamic academic environment, including institutions such as San José State University, Santa Clara University, Stanford University, and De Anza College, which all hosted lectures, teach-ins, and student-led critiques of traditional Columbus narratives. Indigenous students in the region many from tribes across California and the Southwest worked alongside faculty to highlight the negative impacts of European colonization on Native nations, connecting these historical realities to the modern observance of Columbus Day. Activists argued that traditional celebrations ignored or minimized the suffering inflicted on Indigenous communities through forced labor, disease introduction, land seizure, and the beginnings of the transatlantic slave trade involving Indigenous captives. The academic climate of Santa Clara County facilitated engagement with emerging scholarship in anthropology, archaeology, and Indigenous studies, enabling critiques of Columbus Day to gain traction far earlier than in some other regions of the country. These conversations helped position Santa Clara County as a leader in the movement toward one of the most significant developments in the modern history of Columbus Day has been the nationwide movement toward replacing or supplementing the holiday with Indigenous Peoples' Day in California.

The first city to take this step was Berkeley, California, in 1992, when the city council voted to establish Indigenous Peoples' Day in place of Columbus Day during the 500th anniversary of Columbus's first voyage. Berkeley's decision reflected years of advocacy by Indigenous groups and academics affiliated with Bay Area universities who sought to reframe historical narratives and promote public understanding of Indigenous cultures. Following Berkeley's example, dozens of cities and counties across California began adopting Indigenous Peoples' Day through resolutions, proclamations, and school district decisions. This landmark action influenced civic leaders, school boards, and advocacy groups across the Bay Area. Santa Clara County, situated just south of Berkeley and intimately connected through academic networks, student organizations, and regional activism, began witnessing calls for similar recognition soon after. Student groups at San José State University organized alternative celebrations, public forums, and marches drawing attention to Indigenous histories often absent from local school curricula. Community organizations representing the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe whose ancestral lands include much of what is now Santa Clara County also began participating in discussions about how historical observances should reflect Indigenous presence and resilience. The juxtaposition between Columbus Day celebrations and the lived heritage of the Ohlone people created a uniquely local dimension to the debate, grounding the issue not merely in national history but in the very land and communities of Santa Clara County.

By the early 2000s, Santa Clara County began moving steadily toward the recognition of Indigenous Peoples' Day through city-level proclamations and school district initiatives. San José, Mountain View, Palo Alto, and other cities held public hearings in which residents voiced support for replacing Columbus Day. These hearings often featured testimony from educators, Indigenous leaders, local historians, and Bay Area residents who argued that honoring Columbus perpetuated inaccuracies that failed to reflect California's multicultural identity. The Santa Clara County Office of Education encouraged school districts to adopt more inclusive history lessons that examined multiple perspectives, particularly emphasizing the experiences of Indigenous peoples in California under Spanish colonization an especially important topic in a region where mission history is central to local identity. In classrooms across Santa Clara County, teachers began balancing traditional narratives of exploration with critical examinations of its consequences, using primary sources, archaeological findings, and tribal histories from California's Native communities. These changes reduced Columbus Day classroom celebrations and gradually shifted educational focus toward Indigenous heritage, land acknowledgment, and discussions about early encounters between European and Native peoples.

The social impact of Columbus Day today reflects the tension between its historical significance to Italian American communities and the broader movement toward recognizing Indigenous history and addressing the legacies of colonialism. For many Italian Americans, Columbus Day remains a symbol of cultural pride and immigrant resilience, representing a moment when mainstream American society acknowledged their contributions and heritage. Some continue to view efforts to replace Columbus Day as an erasure of ethnic identity and an undervaluing of the struggles of Italian immigrants who faced discrimination, violence, and exclusion in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In response, several cities and states maintain Columbus Day celebrations while also hosting Italian Heritage Month activities, cultural events, and historical exhibits that preserve heritage while reframing the holiday away from Columbus himself. At the same time, the movement to adopt Indigenous Peoples' Day has accelerated rapidly, driven by teachers, tribal leaders, scholars, students, activists, and civic organizations advocating for historical truth, reconciliation, and recognition of ongoing Indigenous presence and rights. Across the United States, many school districts have revised curricula to teach Indigenous history more accurately, incorporating lessons on the effects of European colonization, the diversity of Native cultures, and the resilience of Indigenous communities.

Today, Columbus Day remains a federal holiday, observed by government offices, banks, and some institutions, but the landscape of October observances has changed dramatically. Dozens of states no longer formally recognize Columbus Day, instead adopting Indigenous Peoples' Day, Native American Day, or other culturally inclusive alternatives. California, while recognizing Columbus Day in federal scheduling, places far greater emphasis on Indigenous Peoples' Day and Native American Day (the latter observed statewide in September). Santa Clara County and many of its cities including San José, Santa Clara, Milpitas, Mountain View, Palo Alto, and Gilroy have adopted Indigenous Peoples' Day through official proclamations that highlight local Native history and modern tribal communities. These shifts reflect broader cultural trends toward re-examining historical narratives and promoting equity, understanding, and reconciliation. The ongoing debate over Columbus Day illustrates how civic holidays serve not merely as ritual observances but as reflections of evolving social values, contested histories, and the struggle to shape a more inclusive national identity.